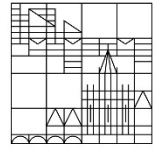




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FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE?

—

WHY CORONA PROTESTERS KEEP GOING IN RURAL AREAS

MASTER'S THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Research on corona protests has largely focused on protests in capital cities while neglecting rural areas. I argue that this limitation is not only an inappropriate constriction of this phenomenon itself but also underestimates the spread of the protests. Moreover, leaving out rural areas might omit important general motives and underlying issues of the protesters.

This study's objective was to analyse the personal factors and group characteristics that motivate the rural corona protesters to continue despite little press coverage and political attentions. For this, I carried out a typical case study of the rural village of Ottersberg in Germany. Specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews with protesters at the weekly demonstrations between May 16th and June 13th, 2022.

This study has found that, with respect to personal factors, the perceived violation of individual norms holds greater weight than the perceived violation of group norms. Intrinsic motivation arises from experiencing a sense of agency and is of particular importance to the protesters. This drives them to take the group's goals and convictions into the public, which presents another important factor. Nonetheless, the protesters only partially believe in the group's capacity to bring change.

Turning to the group characteristics, overarching vague group values and a sense of shared disadvantages are key. Further, a sense of belonging to the group is fundamental for participation and the protest's continuation. It is based on the individual experience of added emotional value from the group, which provides a space for reassurance and protected self-expression.

The findings highlight the Ottersberg protest group's individualistic nature, suggesting another route for groups taking collective action. Additionally, they contribute to a more nuanced understanding of German protests against corona containment measures in understudied rural areas. Finally, these findings have direct implications for communication about future health crises, which should concentrate on taking these anxieties and motives into account. This could contribute to lessening political apathy in addition to reconciling a polarised society.

Key words: *COVID-19, protest motivation, rural areas, qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews, corona containment measures*

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1 INTRODUCTION: A CASE FOR INCLUDING RURAL VILLAGES WHEN INVESTIGATING CORONA PROTESTS

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests against containment policies¹ have started (Plümper et al., 2021, p. 2247). Looking at Germany, a livid and prolonged demonstration environment against those measures has developed since 2020. Disagreement with corona policies led to the formation of several groups, of which the *Querdenken*-movement² is the most famous (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2021). The demonstrations against containment policies are widely seen as a sign of societal polarisation, especially given the fierceness of the opposing views and the longevity of these protests (see Roßmann, 2022; see, for example, SZ.de, 2021). While one group, representing the majority of society, complied with the containment measures, the other group explicitly did not, coming together to defy and protest against the containment measures.

This development is rather unexpected as Germany is commonly regarded as being unsusceptible to polarisation due to its political and media systems (Hutter & Weisskircher, 2022; Schieferdecker, 2021). Thus, the currently experienced societal polarisation in times of the COVID-19-pandemic is surprising for Germany, which makes it an interesting case. Accordingly, the main demonstrations in Germany's and the Länder' capitals had received extensive press coverage and political attention. In general, demonstrations against COVID-19 containment measures became a melting pot of hippies, people who believe in alternative medicine, parents, right-wing extremists, and conspiracists (dpa, 2020; Grande et al., 2022). The state takes these protests seriously. The German domestic intelligence service created a new category to observe the demonstrations' organisers (and their milieu). This category is named "Verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates [Delegitimization of the state relevant to constitutional protection]" (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2021), which is in line with the organisers' self-perception as being neither left nor right.

Further, these protests elicited much research on their structure and their connection to far-right extremists (Fücks, 2021; Neuber, 2022; Vieten, 2020). As a new phenomenon, the primary concerns were to investigate the online and offline structure of the anti-COVID-19-containment measures groups (e.g., Jarynowski et al., 2020) and to analyse the demonstrators' characteristics (Nachtwey et al., 2020). Although these aspects are fundamental for understanding the phenomenon of protests against

¹ Throughout this paper, the terms 'COVID-19 protests', 'corona containment protests', 'COVID-19-measures protests', 'containment-measures protests', and 'corona protests' are used interchangeably to refer to the protests against the COVID-19-containment measures.

² The movement has been initiated by the group *Querdenken-711*. Founded in 2020, this group wants to express their doubts about both the corona containment measures' restrictions on fundamental rights, their negative societal effects, and their opposition to mandatory vaccinations (*Querdenken-711*, n.a.).

corona measures, the focus of research is narrowed down to central cities and major demonstrations. To my best knowledge, no research has been conducted on protest movements in small villages or rural areas.

The corona protests continue, although the corona measures have softened over time. Figure 7 exemplifies this by showing a visualisation of a selected time window that depicts the protests against Corona measures in Germany. The protests' longevity, especially in rural areas, is puzzling. It is surprising that, despite rural protesters' assumed low impact on national COVID-19 governance and low media coverage, the protests in rural areas keep on going over time (see, for example, Bischoff, 2022; Freie Niedersachsen, 2022; mrc/dpa, 2021). I argue that overlooking the periphery might omit important motives, emotions, and underlying issues of the protesters. Further, it is surprising that there is little research on the link between rural areas as "places of origin" for populist, anti-democratic attitudes and the demonstrations' public perception as populist or right-wing (Jarynowski et al., 2020).

This leads to the following research question:

Which personal factors of corona protesters and group characteristics contribute to prolonging the corona protests over time in peripheral areas?

Group characteristics and dynamics constitute structural factors that create a guiding framework for individuals. In contrast, personal factors are used to describe personal characteristics or other similar factors that relate to the individual, such as the individual's belief in the group's efficacy or moral beliefs. To investigate the research question, I selected the rural village of Ottersberg for my typical case study and conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the local protest group.

Results show that regarding personal factors, the following contribute in particular to prolonging the corona protests: First, the perceived violation of individual norms, which has more significance than the perceived violation of group norms. Then, the protesters are motivated intrinsically by the aspect of experiencing a sense of agency. This also helps them to publicly convey the group's goals and convictions, which is also an important factor. It is complemented by the individuals' belief that the group may be able to bring a limited change. Regarding group characteristics, the creation of overarching vague values is key. Drawing on this, the sense of belonging to the group is fundamental. It is based on the individual experience of emotional added value from the group, which provides a space for reassurance and protected self-expression. Finally, the sense of shared disadvantage fuels the protests over time. Not only because it sustains the need for a "safe space", but also because it perpetuates their anger. In conclusion, the individualistic nature of this group differs from conventional theories on why groups form and engage in collective action.

The findings should both advance the understanding of the specific protests against corona containment measures and, on a more fundamental level, of politicisation and protest participation. In particular, differing opinions about the dangerousness of the pandemic and the containment measures have led to a social polarisation that is spurring the Corona protests. As Packer et al. (2021, p. 312) highlight, the resulting norms within these opposing groups and the conformity to the norms may have deadly consequences and hinder the overall success of the fight against COVID-19. Even though the corona pandemic appears to be fading away³, understanding people's behaviour during this pandemic may aid in designing political and societal responses to future public health crises. However, although the containment measures are becoming less restrictive (Ismar, 2022), the pandemic is not over yet, and incident rates and hospitalisation cases might flare up again.

The results of this work, however, also provide more general insights. Irrespective of the COVID-19-virus, this work contributes to the research field's understanding of why people decide to protest. This is especially enlightening as we learn about protest dynamics in places we know little about so far, namely rural areas. Furthermore, we gain insights about the mobilisation and politicisation of people who had no or very little involvement in expressing their political views prior to this work.

The rest of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides an overview of existing research on corona protests and continues with a theoretical framework for protest participation. Following this, the case selection for this study (Chapter 3) and my approach to data collection (chapter 4) will be explained. Chapter 5 presents and discusses the results. Chapter 6 outlines possible limitations. Finally, conclusions are drawn in Chapter 7.

³ This perception of the pandemic situation can be linked to the public perception of the seriousness of an infection. While the infection rate has again increased drastically (Robert Koch Institut, 2022a, 2022b), the currently prevalent virus mutations are less lethal than the original virus at the beginning of the pandemic (Robert Koch Institut, 2022b).

2 COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES, COLLECTIVE ACTION, AND RURAL AREAS – THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND OPERATIONALISATIONS

During the corona pandemic, much research has focused on the accompanying containment measures and their public acceptance and societal consequences (El-Far Cardo et al., 2021; Georgieva et al., 2021; Guglielmi et al., 2020; Naumann et al., 2020). While most of the research focused on central cities and major demonstrations, there is no research on corona protests in rural⁴ villages to the best of my knowledge.

In times of loosening containment measures, the longevity of this movement is puzzling. Despite low media coverage and a low impact on COVID-19 governance, the protest movement continues in rural areas (see, for example, Bischoff, 2022; Freie Niedersachsen, 2022; mrc/dpa, 2021).

In the last two years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the corona pandemic and its impact on protests (Grant & Smith, 2021; Kowalewski, 2021; Pleyers, 2020). As my study focuses on rural corona protests in Germany, the literature on Germany and its significant protest environment of the *Querdenken* movement⁵ is of particular interest in this regard. Studies and literature on social movements and protest in rural areas, however, are scarce. Nevertheless, since this study examines corona protests in villages, it is relevant in this respect to consider the literature on political geography, which examines the relationship between geographical spaces and their socio-economic and political impact.

To discover the underlying cause of this puzzle, it is further useful to look into literature on protests and on social movements in general. In particular, the latter one might prove useful as social movements normally continue over a prolonged period of time. Figure 1 illustrates the four necessary steps described in the literature that lead to protests.

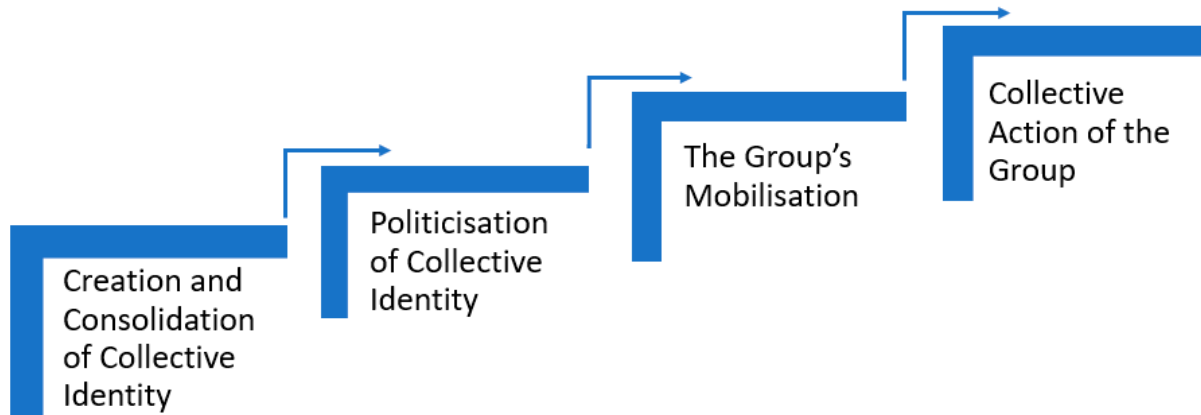
The first step is that a group creates and consolidates a collective identity. Then, this collective identity must be politicised. These two steps may lead to a group's mobilisation, the third step, and subsequently to the final step, collective action.

⁴ The terms "rural" and "peripheral" are used interchangeably in this thesis.

⁵ The *Querdenken* movement was initiated in 2020 by the group *Querdenken-711* as a protest movement against COVID-19 policies (Querdenken-711, n.a.).

Figure 1

Overview: Steps from Collective Identity to Collective Action



Note. Visualisation by the author, derived from Andits (2018), Bos *et al.* (2020), Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (2020), McKay *et al.* (2021), Polletta and Jasper (2001), and Turner-Zwinkels and van Zomeren (2016).

The following chapter first gives an overview of the underlying theoretical dimensions that explain how collective identities can be turned into collective actions, such as protest. Next, it lays out how political geography could influence protests in rural areas. Finally, this chapter focuses on the current environment of corona protest in Germany, focusing first on the findings of urban corona protest studies before turning to rural areas.

2.1 WHAT ARE COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES?

A group's *collective identity* is crucial for establishing and mobilising groups. Despite the term's common usage in literature on social movements and protests, various definitions are found. Leaning on social movement literature, this thesis follows Polletta and Jasper's (2001, p. 285) definition of collective identity as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution". In addition, the definition used here takes into account that a collective identity has distinct and shared symbols, rituals, beliefs, and values (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 3).

In addition, collective identities are constructed on the basis of shared "pre-existing bonds, interests, and boundaries" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 298). Interactions among group members are crucial for building collective identities because collective identities are relational and fluid. These interactions also enable the collective to make claims, to legitimise demands, and to take action. Moreover, collective identities establish categories for members through which they can bring order to their social world (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 298).

Collective identity is closely related to the individual's *embeddedness within* and *identification with* a group (see Figure 3). While *embeddedness* describes both the individuals' number and tightness of relationships within a group, *identification with a group* captures the degree to which an individual perceives themselves as a part of the group⁶. These factors strongly influence the individual's commitment to the group. Overall, it is evident that collective identity hinges on individuals who share common traits and symbols, and individuals' commitment to a group varies depending on their interpersonal connections with it.

2.2 THE LINK BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS IDENTIFYING WITH A GROUP AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Having defined group identity⁷, it is important to go a step further and assess how this facilitates protest participation (see Figure 3). While early research focused on the participants' costs and benefits of protesting, it became clear that this approach was insufficient to explain why people participate in protests (Moore, 1995; Sturmer & Simon, 2004; Whiteley, 1995).

Identification with a group influences individuals' determination to participate in protests (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 11). The stronger this identification, the more likely individuals are to participate in collective action on behalf of the group (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, 11–14). In this line of reasoning, strong identities are not only less susceptible to context, but also “more likely to politicize” (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 5) in general.

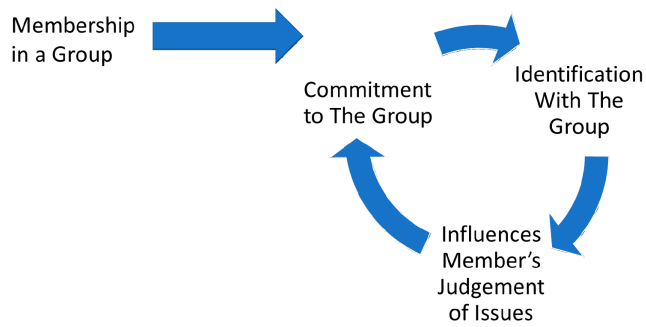
People who frequently gather around common issues are more likely to build “strong norms, trust, emotions and [common] interpretive frameworks” (Nicholls, 2008, p. 845). Membership *in* and identification *with* a group influences its members' judgement of issues, which, in turn, influences their commitment *to* and identification *with* a group. This self-reinforcing process is depicted in Figure 2. Likewise, the group members' judgements contribute to collective norms. As a consequence, the group creates a shared worldview (Bos et al., 2020, p. 7). All of these steps are essential for creating and consolidating collective identities, as Figure 3 illustrates. These factors affect the group members' relationships with each other, so they are likely to “perform collective tasks with greater ease, efficiency and expertise” (Nicholls, 2008, p. 847). To conclude, individuals' identification with a group is fundamental to building a group identity and preparing the ground for collective action.

⁶ Individuals can identify with several distinct groups at the same time (Huddy, 2001). For example, one can be female, European, a student, and part of the local swimming team at the same time.

⁷ “Collective identity” and “group identity” are used interchangeably.

Figure 2

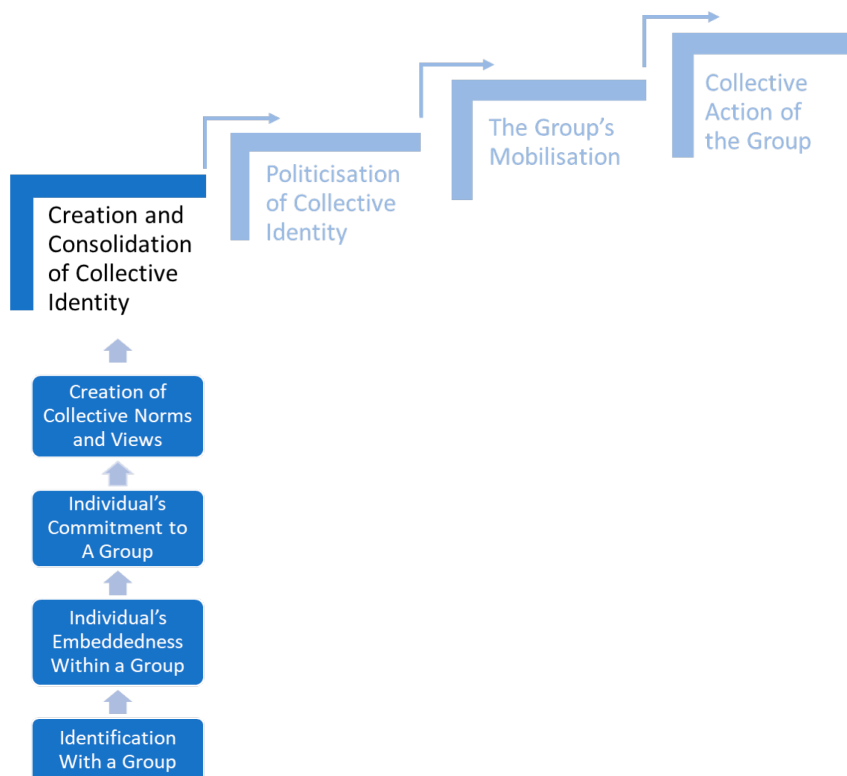
Link Between Membership In a Group and Shared Views



Note. Visualisation by the author, derived from Bos et al. (2020, p. 7) and Nicholls (2008, p. 845).

Figure 3

Steps to Create a Collective Identity



Note. Visualisation by the author, derived from sources mentioned in Figure 1.

2.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICISING COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

As laid out in Figure 3, identification with a group is necessary to create a group identity. Its politicisation then leads to the mobilisation of collective identities. This mobilisation results in collective action (Bos et al., 2020; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 20). Having explained how group identities are formed, this subchapter will describe how these collective identities are politicised.

Common struggles and grievances are essential for a group's politicisation. Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (2020, p. 3) provide a comprehensive overview of the various definitions of the *politicisation* of collective identities. They all share the same key characteristics: politicisation occurs when a collective identity "becomes the focus of a struggle for power (... .) to establish, change, or defend a power structure" (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 3). This can be illustrated briefly by the most well-known power structure of the corona containment measures that corona protesters are struggling against. The group's *awareness of a common struggle or grievance* is a precondition for a collective identity's politicisation (see Figure 4), which leads people to engage in collective action (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Turner-Zwinkels & van Zomeren, 2016).

This is exemplified in the study by Borbáth et al. (2021), who investigated such struggles and grievances. Focusing on the impact of the corona pandemic's first wave on European citizens' political and civic engagement, they tested *political ideology, perceived health and economic threats*, as well as *egotropic and sociotropic threats* as drivers of individuals' engagement. Doing charity work or helping neighbours falls into civic engagement, whereas political engagement entails "'signing a petition,' 'contacting a politician,' and 'posting/sharing political content on the internet'" (Borbáth et al., 2021, p. 314). *Egotropic threats* are "threats that are perceived to be personal" (Borbáth et al., 2021, p. 316), such as a COVID-19 infection. *Sociotropic health threats* are threats that individuals perceive "for society as a whole" (Borbáth et al., 2021, p. 316). For example, individuals fear that they might contract the virus when they meet people. The study finds that *egotropic threats* and *economic-related threats* seem to be the main drivers for mobilisation while *sociotropic health threats* demobilise regarding political engagement but mobilise in terms of civic engagement.

As Borbáth et al.'s (2021) study does not exclusively focus on participants in containment-measure protests but on citizens in general, the latter result might not be too surprising. Nonetheless, their results support the assumption that corona protesters rate economic and social threats, like lockdowns causing children to lack social competencies, as more important than potential health threats during the pandemic. In addition, the findings support the assumption that societal and political anxieties are the main motivational factors for the protesters.

This *awareness of a shared struggle or grievance* in the form of allegedly threatened or violated group values as well as relative deprivation is the first step in a gradual transformation process towards the mobilisation of a group (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, pp. 3–4). In the next step of Klandermans and van Stekelenburg's (2020, pp. 3–4) model of politicisation, one or more political actors are identified who are made responsible for the group's perceived suffering (see Figure 4). A presumed clear picture of an out-group or person who is to blame might constitute an important structural factor for the continuation of protests. Typically, the group also demands compensation from this political actor for the (supposed) harm it has suffered (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, pp. 3–4).

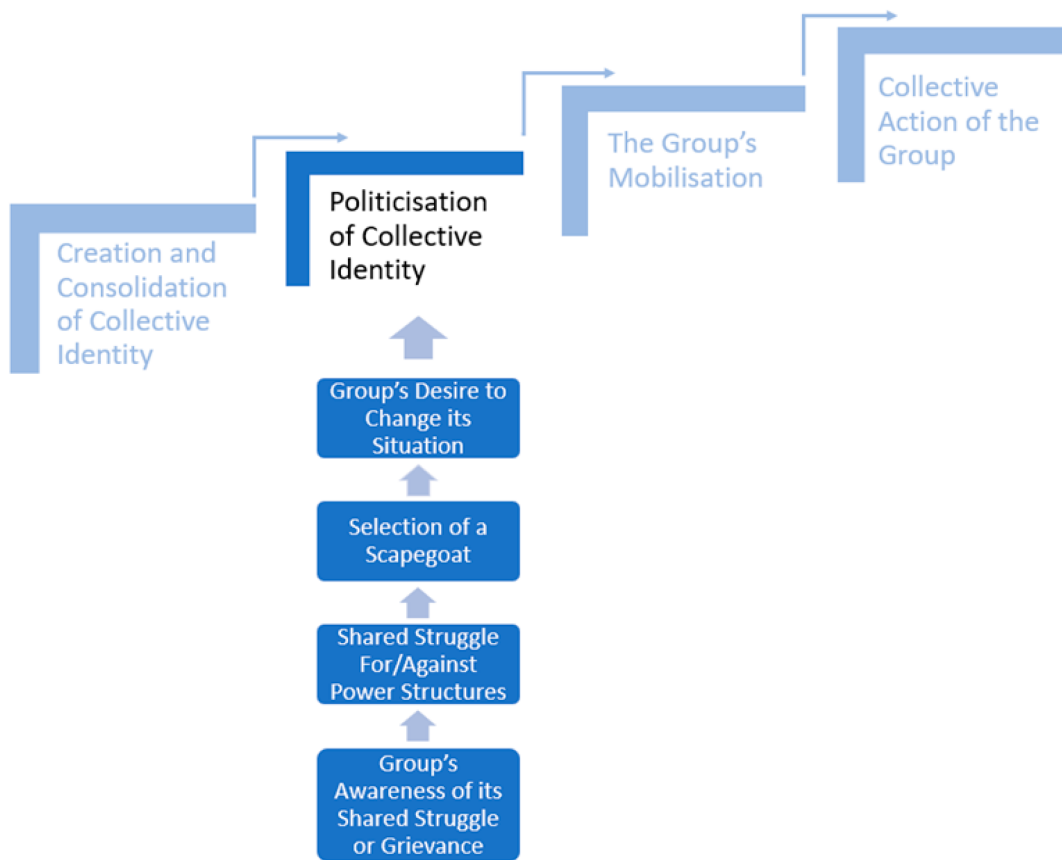
Then, the group develops the desire to change its situation or status. This desire is continually fuelled by an outgroup that threatens the ingroup's values (Bos et al., 2020, p. 6), i.e., politicians who implement and support corona containment measures. Finally, over time, the group seeks either support from the public or other political authorities. This last step is crucial because politicisation invariably "implies a cognitive restructuring of the social environment into opponents and (potential) allies" (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 4).

More generally, Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (2020, p. 5) propose two potentially concurrent underlying processes for politicising collective identities. On the one hand, collective identity gets politicised via a top-down mechanism by organisations. For this, organisations must exist prior to the collective actions that mobilise participants (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 5). On the other hand, the interacting participants can form and politicise their collective identity through a bottom-up mechanism (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 1).

To conclude, *grievances* are key for collective identities to become politicised (Figure 4). This politicisation is necessary to mobilise collective identities. Figure 5 illustrates how group members are mobilised through their collective identity with the objective of changing power structures or achieving compensation.

Figure 4

Steps to Politicise a Collective Identity



Note. Visualisation by the author, derived from sources mentioned in Figure 1.

2.4 THE LINK BETWEEN THE MOBILISATION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Having described the process of politicising a collective identity, this subchapter explains how a group can get mobilised. A group's mobilisation is based on its *feeling that its values and status are endangered or violated*, or a *group's feeling of being treated unfairly* (Figure 5). Such motives encourage people to defend their groups' interests but are also crucial to identifying with one's fellow demonstrators to strengthen group identity and cohesion (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 8).

Expressive motives describe the desire to let other people know that one is upset about an issue (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020). This reflects the group's desire to take their anger to the public. Such stressors may be grievances that take the form of relative deprivation. The feeling of deprivation or unequal treatment relates to the contrast between one's own group and the out-group and leads to a negative perception of one's own group identity. Relative deprivation describes the feeling

of a group or individual that an out-group is better off than the group or individual themselves in terms of social, economic, or political status (Bos et al., 2020).

McKay et al. (2021, p. 4) link the concept of relative deprivation to *social marginality*. The feeling of being “less socially central” (McKay et al., 2021, p. 4) is associated with the belief of those affected that politics sees them as unimportant. In general, feelings of relative deprivation lead to anger and resentment against a broader system, according to McKay et al. (2021, p. 4). Anxieties and grievances stemming from relative deprivation are, thus, associated with political discontent. As Nachtwey et al. (2020) have indicated, the motivation of corona protesters is presumably more related to social and political than to economic deprivation.

THE GROUP’S DESIRE TO ACHIEVE A COMMON GOAL: REDRESSING THEIR SITUATION

The subsequent *desire to improve their situation* (Bos et al., 2020, p. 6; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 8) leads to the next step in a group’s mobilisation. Driven by *instrumental motives*, the group decides on an *objective to achieve*. These instrumental motives are aimed at accomplishing an external goal through group action, for example, the abolition of relative deprivations or attaining financial compensation for a grievance (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 8). Generally, the literature suggests two instrumental goals of mobilisation. *Consensus mobilisation* refers to disseminating the group’s viewpoints among their target audiences (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 7). The second form, *action mobilisation*, describes the “transformation of sympathizers into participants” (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 7).

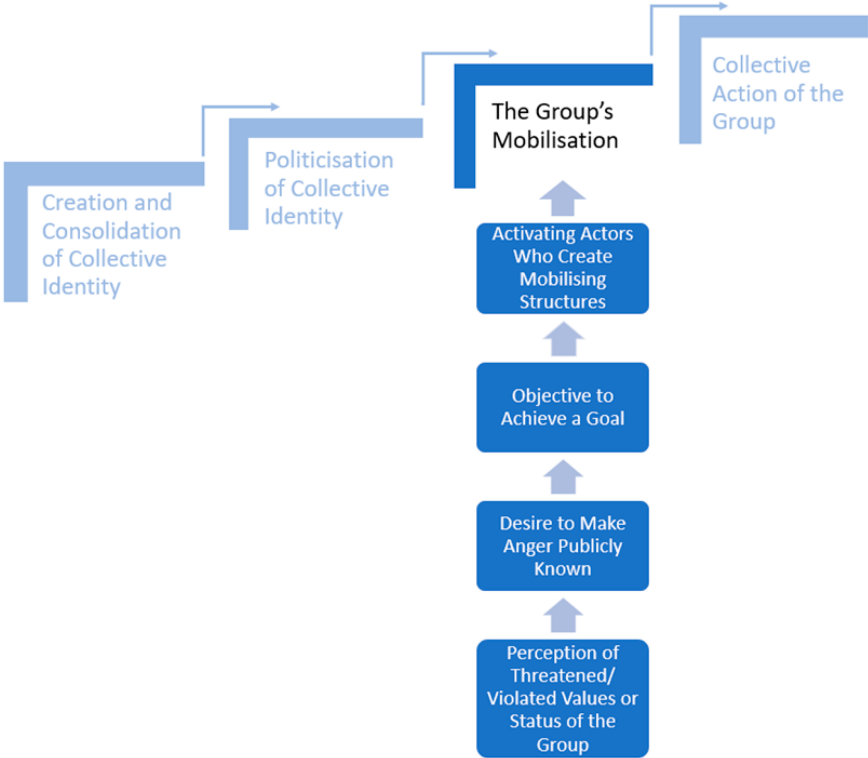
The desire to improve the group’s situation makes individuals more susceptible to mobilisation when collective action represents an effective means to redress the situation (Bos et al., 2020). For example, by ameliorating the negative image through self-empowerment. This aspiration arises from grievances that pose a “severe threat to the well-being of the group” (Bos et al., 2020, p. 6). *Anger and determination to participate* amplify the intensity of the other motives. These two motivations also justify why people participate in demonstrations (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, pp. 6–8).

MOBILISING STRUCTURES AND ACTIVATING ACTORS

Finally, individuals who “create mobilizing structures, and seize opportunities to protest” (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 20) are important for a group’s mobilisation. The underlying assumption is that individuals who strongly identify with an actor are more likely to conform to the actor’s point of view. Therefore, these actors’ calls for action resonate more strongly with people who identify with them (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 8). Consequently, these actors are more likely to elicit higher levels of participation and create mobilising structures.

To summarise, feeling that the group’s norms are violated or threatened is fundamental for a group’s mobilisation. This violation motivates the group’s desire to take their anger to the public. Subsequently, the group sets a goal that they pursue that leads to an improvement in their situation. Finally, in order to be able to transform the basic mobilisation of the group into collective action in the next step, the group requires an actor who creates or activates mobilisation structures for the group (Figure 5).

Figure 5
Steps From Politicisation to Mobilisation



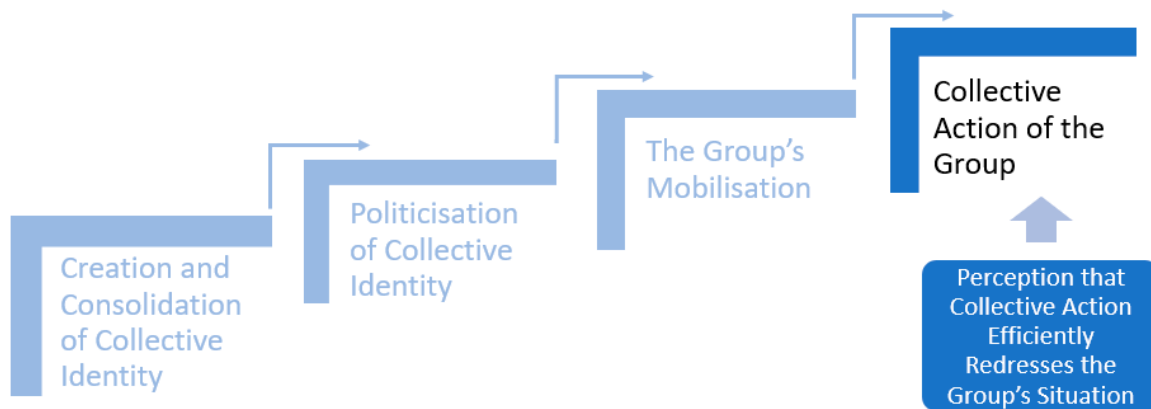
Note. Visualisation by the author, derived from sources mentioned in Figure 1.

2.5 THE OBJECTIVES FOR WHICH A GROUP TAKES COLLECTIVE ACTION

As Figure 6 illustrates, the group members’ perception of the group’s efficacy is instrumental in their decision to engage in collective action. Group members mobilise to achieve one of three objectives they have set for themselves, as described in the previous subchapter. In the case of *instrumental objectives* (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, pp. 6–8), the group seeks to accomplish an external, tangible goal for the group through collective action. When the group attempts to attain *expressive objectives* (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 6), its members strive to spread awareness of their anger and grievances. The third objective is to *express and perform their group identity* (Andits, 2018).

Figure 6

Steps From A Group's Mobilisation To Collective Action



Note. Visualisation by the author, derived from sources mentioned in Figure 1.

Andits (2018) complements Klandermans and van Stekelenburg's (2020) approach. She moves beyond collective action as a means to improve the relative disadvantage(s) of a group. Her research found that the act of participating in a demonstration and expressing and performing one's own identity can be sufficient for the group's feeling of success. Investigating a demonstration of an Australian-Hungarian community in Melbourne in 2005, the results showed that the protesters deemed the demonstration successful despite failing to achieve their goals. Describing the prior bashing and attacking of the protest's organisers by parts of their community, Andits (2018, p. 441) concluded that the participants took the demonstration as "an opportunity (...) to display courage, master fear, and enact a sense of agency". *Expressing and performing the group identity* despite an adverse atmosphere was seen as a success by the demonstrators. Although this study is investigating a different context and geography, I assume that the corona containment protests in rural areas might experience similar emotions. Instead of the internal differences within an immigrant community, protesters in rural areas have to face their neighbours and community members who might oppose their views.

Overall, these studies outline *three* potential objectives for collective action: First, the group wants to achieve an external goal. Second, the group wants to draw attention to their anger or grievances. Third, the group's actions are an outlet to perform its identity. In addition, egotropic threats and economic-related threats seem to be important drivers for mobilisation during the corona pandemic.

Taken together, these studies provide important insights into possible underlying reasons both for why the protests occur and why they continue over a prolonged period of time. Yet, the question arises whether these insights also hold true for rural areas. Most studies in the field of social movements and protests have focused only on urban areas. However, this focus obscures the geographic diversity of

social movements and protests. Therefore, it is necessary to also consider literature on political geography for this study. In the following subchapter, I will argue why geographical differences should not be ignored when examining political protests.

2.6 POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY: PROTESTS IN RURAL AREAS

After investigating why groups protest, we now turn to the question of the peculiarities of protests in rural areas. An increasing number of studies have utilised a political geography approach to investigate the link between people's political attitudes and behaviours and the places they live in (Cutler, 2007; Johnston, 1986; Kenny & Luca, 2021; McGrane et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2020; Walks, 2004).

The existing literature concentrates predominantly on the economic polarisation between rural and urban areas. This "geography of discontent" thesis describes the association between high interregional inequality and high nationwide interpersonal inequality (McCann, 2020, p. 257). These views are amplified by people's awareness of other regions' working and living conditions. Those inequalities can result in profound political discontent, which might pose "a challenge to a country's institutional and governance structures" (McCann, 2020, p. 264).

The described relative deprivation may help with the politicisation of groups. It is important for a group's politicisation that the group is aware of its members' shared struggles and grievances (Turner-Zwinkels & van Zomeren, 2016). As relative deprivation is based on an individual's or a group's feeling of being worse off than another group, a group's awareness of this factor is very likely to facilitate politicisation. Consequently, this could result in the group's mobilisation to collectively take action in order to struggle against power structures (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 3). Furthermore, relative deprivation based on interregional inequality as a factor for group mobilisation may hint towards different motivations for corona protests in urban and rural areas.

The common focus on economic polarisation is criticised by McKay et al. (2021, p. 2) who suggest broadening this interpretation to integrate "a broader social conflict cutting across class and wealth gaps" (McKay et al., 2021, p. 2). Oftentimes, the "geography of discontent" thesis is tested in highly unequal countries like the US or the UK.

McKay's (2019) study of Britain has concluded that living in areas with a low population density and lower income is associated with the locals' perception that they are not listened to. In these so-called 'places that don't matter' prevails a sense of *social marginality* that negatively effects citizens' political trust. Because population density is linked to feelings of social marginality and political trust, a low population density is taken as a proxy for rurality (McKay, 2019; McKay et al., 2021). In contrast, Jennings and Stoker (2016), for example, found that peripheral areas, with lower levels of access to high-

skilled jobs and a lower connectedness to the global economy, did *not* display a higher level of *political discontent*. Therefore, there is mixed evidence for a “geography of discontent”.

Such a sense of social or political marginality could establish or reinforce an individual’s identification with a group. Similar to relative deprivation, these feelings could help a group find someone supposedly to blame for its situation. This, in turn, contributes to the group identity’s politicisation.

In addition, a small body of literature investigates the *periphery’s political trust* in countries that do *not* display high inequality. Stein et al.’s (2021) research on Norway, for example, showed that the trust in the periphery is lower and that third variables like economic performance could not explain the result. Thus, it can be reasonably assumed that rural areas’ lower trust and feelings of social marginality hold true across various settings. Mistrust and feelings of social marginalisation are related to the corona protest as those are two of the common themes of the protests (Nachtwey et al., 2020, pp. 14–15). Feelings like social or political relative deprivation facilitate collective identity and, subsequently, collective action mobilisation. In particular, feelings of social marginality are more pronounced in rural areas (McKay et al., 2021). Such feelings of relative deprivation might add to political discontent and, in turn, could fuel corona protests. Therefore, those factors will be included in this study.

Overall, political geography has slowly gotten more attention. The studies highlight low population density as a proxy for political discontent and point out the influence of relative deprivation on political attitudes, especially in rural areas. Although extensive research has been carried out to link political geography with political attitudes, few authors take other fields, such as protests, into account. Therefore, rural areas are slowly drawing broader academic attention, although much research needs to be done.

2.7 GERMANY’S CORONA PROTESTERS IN CITIES AND BEYOND WHO, WHERE, AND WHEN?

The critique of underutilised political geography can be transferred to the abundance of research on the corona pandemic and corresponding protests. As expected, there is a vast amount of literature on corona measure protest in various countries (Brubaker, 2021; Neumayer et al., 2021; Reicher & Stott, 2020; Vidmar Horvat, 2021). Nonetheless, Germany is of particular interest for this study as it is theoretically less prone to polarisation (see Chapter 3). While some studies focus on Germany as a whole (e.g., Plümper et al., 2021), research predominantly focuses on corona measure protests in urban areas or in the federal states’ capitals (Reichardt, 2021; Virchow & Häusler, 2021).

This subchapter first lays out a general political logic of the corona protests’ occurrence in Germany. These insights will be used in Subchapter 3.1 to select a typical village. Then, it will discuss the studies’

findings that indicate four key features of the protests: First, the *heterogeneity* of the protest participants, which links to the creation of a collective identity. Second, *ingroup and outgroup dynamics* that reinforce the protesters' collective identity and which may play a role in the group's politicisation. Third, the studies point to *shared grievances* and *feelings of relative deprivation*, which are linked to the politicisation of collective identities. Fourth, the protesters' *belief in their groups' capacity to bring change*, which is linked to the group's engagement in collective action.

THE POLITICAL LOGIC BEHIND THE OCCURRENCE OF CORONA PROTESTS

Plümper et al.'s (2021, p. 2247) study on the occurrence of corona protests in Germany is one of the first to investigate the *political logic* of these protests. Looking at German counties, they show that protests are "more frequent in [central] districts with a large population" (Plümper et al., 2021, p. 2247). This accessibility, combined with "participation and media attention" (Plümper et al., 2021, p. 2247) and their mutual reinforcement, explains the high mobilisation potential of the protests (Plümper et al., 2021, pp. 2247–2248).

There are two underlying logics that determine the *timing and location of anti-corona measures protest events*, according to Plümper et al. (2021). First, as the participants are overwhelmingly critical or opposed towards the political establishment, districts with a weak representation of mainstream parties facilitate mobilisation. Second, organisers can relatively easily mobilise "those who believe that measures are more stringent than necessary" (Plümper et al., 2021, p. 2237) when stringent containment policies are in place while there are relatively low incidence rates.

This perception of unfairness against a group corresponds to two steps in the politicisation of a collective identity (Figure 4). A group develops an awareness of its shared grievance(s). Then, a group collectively struggles against power structures that they perceive as discriminating or at least disadvantaging. In conclusion, when determining a typical village, it is important to consider the population of the villages, their political landscape, and the number of incidents and associated containment measures.

HETEROGENEITY OF THE PROTESTERS

Turning to studies on public opinion on corona containment policies in Germany (Reinemann et al., 2020; Viehmann et al., 2020; Wolling et al.), the first key feature indicated in them is the heterogeneity of the participants. Investigating specifically public opinion on COVID-19 containment policies in Germany, Reinemann et al. (2020) discovered four distinct groups of corona protesters based on their beliefs and attitudes: The group of concerned believers in science constitutes the biggest group. It largely supports the measures while acknowledging "disagreement within the scientific community" (Reinemann et al., 2020, p. 17). Further, it is more likely to distrust traditional media. The second-

largest group, science-sceptic supporters, shows scepticism both towards scientific information and media. Nonetheless, they are still “worried about the pandemic” (Reinemann et al., 2020, p. 21). The third group, politics-skeptic doubtful, views the containment measures as excessive. In addition, they tend to strongly distrust traditional media and politics. Finally, the smallest and most skeptical group, anti-elite deniers, has the most negative attitude towards media, politicians, and scientists. Further, it uses “more alternative media” (Reinemann et al., 2020, p. 25).

This study demonstrates that the corona protesters are *not* a homogenous group. Although the corona protests are united by their opposition to the corona measures, the protesters hold varying views. This may hint at the fact that the protest participants differ in their awareness of particular struggles and grievances, which may affect the creation of shared norms and views connected with the group identity. This line of research highlights that German society *cannot* be distinguished clearly into two opposing camps and confirms the heterogeneity of the protesters. Differences between protesters might be due to personal factors; thus, my research not only enhances the field’s knowledge of the *Querdenken* milieu but also greatly enhances its knowledge of their (long-term) motivations.

IN- AND OUTGROUP DYNAMICS

The second key feature indicated in the studies on Germany’s corona protests is the importance of *ingroup and outgroup dynamics* that could be relevant for both consolidating group norms and politicising the group. In general, the perception of the in-group could be valuable when looking at group-specific characteristics that motivate demonstrators to continue protesting over a prolonged period of time. In particular, this could be relevant when assuming that protest groups in rural areas tend to be smaller.

People categorise themselves as part of a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This group, the in-group, is a collection of people who categorise themselves as part of a “same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 15). The membership is connotated with certain values, which the members use to compare their group to other groups that are perceived as relevant “in terms of value-laden attributes and characteristics” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16). In the case of corona protests, as an example, taking part in these protests expresses that the protesters are part of the ingroup. Their general disregard of social distancing and face-masks is an especially visible characteristic (Packer et al., 2021, p. 312) with which they differentiate themselves from those who do not protest and follow official guidelines. The latter group of people constitutes a general outgroup.

Schieferdecker (2021) describes how the two camps of proponents and opponents of the containment measures formed stereotypes of each other's groups, leading to mutual avoidance of discussion. This case describes dynamics *between supporters and opponents* of COVID-19-containment policies. Distinctive interpretations of the crisis led to an estrangement of the two camps. Schieferdecker (2021, p. 319) indicates two underlying processes that reinforce the estrangement of the two camps. On the one hand, people who had institutional mistrust prior to the pandemic became radicalised during the pandemic. On the other hand, the generalised public treatment of critics as radicals leads to the alienation of moderate opponents.

The entrenchment of these two camps may contribute to reinforcing the group's sense of social and political relative deprivation. First, societal polarisation might result in a greater identification with a group, which is then reinstated by drawing boundaries between ingroups and outgroups. Second, the two camps might sharpen a group's awareness of its shared struggles and grievances, which might increase its desire to express itself by showing its anger publicly. Further, the creation of the two camps might constitute a possibility for selecting an allegedly responsible actor in the phase of mobilising the group. Groups may blame politicians for the group's situation and a schism in society. The group may also extend its attribution of blame to the outgroup as it supports or opposes the politicians responsible for the corona measures.

SHARED GRIEVANCES AND RELATIVE DEPRIVATION

After emphasising the role of ingroups and outgroups in protests, the third feature is the shared grievances and the sense of relative deprivation. These feelings are also linked to the politicisation of collective identities.

In their timely study, Nachtwey et al. (2020) present preliminary findings on the character traits and attitudes of the protest participants. On the one hand, Nachtwey et al. (2020) provide insights into the protesters' perceptions regarding the economic consequences of the pandemic. Most of the protesters see themselves as middleclass (Nachtwey et al., 2020, p. 9). Interestingly, the respondents are split over whether the containment measures threatened their economic existence (Nachtwey et al., 2020, p. 16). Therefore, it seems these economic grievances are not the main motive for demonstrating. This may potentially hint at parts of the group feeling economically disadvantaged, although this account should be treated with caution as half of the respondents do *not* share the feeling that they are economically threatened by the pandemic's effects. However, such shared views might constitute possible help to consolidate a collective identity and the group's consequent mobilisation if the group chooses to bring their anger into public.

On the other hand, we gain insights about the demonstrators' political reasons for protesting. When assessing the respondents' opinions towards the government, their mistrust, and a feeling that the government is inefficient become clearly visible. Not only do they overwhelmingly feel that the government would cause unnecessarily anxious feelings regarding COVID-19 (97%), but also that the containment measures are arbitrary as well (80%) (Nachtwey et al., 2020, pp. 14–15). These results might point towards the group's collective struggle against power structures and the selection of the government as a "scapegoat", which are necessary factors for the politicisation of the group. Further, the perceived violation of the group's values may correspond to the group's mobilisation.

Regarding their stance towards the media, the participants seem to hold the same views. Nearly all of the respondents (96%) feel like the media would portray the protests in a biased and pejorative manner (Nachtwey et al., 2020, p. 12). Likewise, the overwhelming majority of the respondents (96%) perceive democracy and the freedom of free speech as threatened in the context of containment measures (Nachtwey et al., 2020, p. 17). Furthermore, the majority (80%) harbours the feeling that people who do exercise their freedom of speech are punished for doing so (Nachtwey et al., 2020, p. 25). The corona protesters feel that their values are violated or threatened, and their political status is aggravated by the corona measures. The awareness of their shared grievances and struggles could be potential reasons to continue protesting to represent the core values of protesters.

GROUP MEMBER'S BELIEVE IN THE GROUP'S EFFICACY

The last indicated key feature in the studies is the *protesters' belief in their group's efficacy in bringing change*. This belief is essential for the group's engagement in collective action. Research by Nachtwey et al. (2020) has indicated that the corona protesters feel like collective action is able to exert influence on politics. In general, their study offers surprising insights about the protesters' mobilisation in terms of their previous political engagement. Nachtwey et al. (2020) show that the majority of the protesters did not or did little engage politically prior to the corona protests. Regarding the corona pandemic, the respondents' key political engagement prior to their participation in corona protests took place in the digital space. This shift towards street activism indicates that the containment measures activate and politicise people. Street demonstrations as collective action reflect the respondents' predominant feeling that together they are able to influence politics. (Nachtwey et al., 2020, pp. 42–43). This attitude corresponds to the assumption that group members are more likely to engage in collective action if they believe that the group is able to effectively redress their discontent (Figure 6). Therefore, the feeling that actions by the group can change its situation is a crucial preceding factor for the group's *actual* collective action (Figure 5 and Figure 6).

In conclusion, initial work on the corona protests focused primarily on the *protesters' characteristics*. While the protesters exhibit heterogenous characteristics, some similarities can be detected. Both a feeling of efficiency and a feeling of being threatened seem to be motivational drivers for them. When looking at encounters with the outgroup, the role of shared norms within the group becomes evident. However, such studies remain narrow in focus, dealing only with corona protest characteristics and the protesters' behaviour online and offline, especially when running across people belonging to the outgroup. Nonetheless, not much is known about the corona protest dynamics or characteristics in rural areas. There is little research on corona protests on different political and geographical levels than urban ones. This underscores that much research is still needed in this regard.

Although the literature on social movements and protests provides important insights into the mobilisation and motivation of protest participants, the literature also reveals a number of gaps and shortcomings. Together, these studies outline a critical role for grievances and in- and out-group dynamics as a necessary basis for *forming collective identities*. Describing the process from forming a collective identity to collective action, the studies outline a critical role for *collective identity* and both *individual* and *group-based motivations* for the continuation of collective action over time. Furthermore, research on German corona protests clearly indicates core protest characteristics such as political mistrust, a shared feeling of threatened values, and a societal polarisation that reinforces a strong in- and outgroup feeling. At the same time, the heterogeneity of the participants is highlighted. This study will build upon these insights.

In general, research on protest dynamics in rural areas has received limited attention in the literature. It remains unclear whether the previously outlined motives and protest dynamics for corona protests in urban areas can be directly transferred to corona protests in rural contexts. For example, rural protest groups have less national media coverage and less influence on national legislation regarding the pandemic. Thus, investigating corona protests in rural villages allows to advance the understanding of these protesters' politicisation and motivation for participating. Up to now, very little is known about the *personal factors* and *group characteristics* that contribute in particular to the persistence of corona protests in the countryside over a sustained period of time. This is where my study adds to the external validity of previous findings and provides a new potential explanation that may complement existing explanations in this context

2.8 OPERATIONALISATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

The following subchapter operationalises the key concepts used in this study to explore the protesters' motivations to continue with the demonstrations (for an overview, see Table 1). For this, this subchapter starts by outlining *collective identity*. This concept entails two dimensions that are group characteristics. First, the *consciousness for a group membership*. Second, the *perception of a shared status*. Then, this subchapter introduces the concept of *motivation*. It includes the following dimensions: First, *group-based anger* as a group characteristic. Next, *social marginality* is defined, followed by the *individuals' belief in the group's efficacy*, with both of them being personal factors. Finally, this subchapter sets out the dimension of *moral beliefs*, which is also a personal factor.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

This study follows Polletta and Jasper (2001, pp. 284–285) who outline the various definitions of the concept of *collective identity*. They criticise that these variations water down the concept. Moreover, it would obscure important questions such as whether collective identities precede protests or the other way around. The authors themselves define collective identity as “an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285). This relationship might also be expressed in shared narratives and symbols. Finally, collective identities entail “positive feelings for other members of the group” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285). This study follows Polletta and Jasper's (2001) definition.

Based on Taylor and Whittier's (1992) work, van Stekelenburg (2013, p. 2) develops two components of collective identity. First, a group draws boundaries between their own and another group. Although these boundaries “are not clear-cut, stable, and objectively given” (van Stekelenburg, 2013, p. 2), they are constructed through “the shared meaning attributed to group membership by group members” (van Stekelenburg, 2013, p. 2). Second, both awareness of group membership and of “the group's position within society, in comparison to other groups” (van Stekelenburg, 2013, p. 2). In order to politicise the group membership, the group's position must be perceived by its members as disadvantaged or unjust. Consequently, the concept of *collective identity* (Table 1) comprises 1) consciousness for a group membership; 2) the perception of a shared status; and 3) the perception of boundaries between the own group and other group(s) as dimensions.

The dimension of *consciousness for group membership* constitutes a group characteristic as it depicts the group's core characteristics. It is captured through the following two subdimensions: On the one hand, a *perceived shared relationship* and, on the other hand, the *individuals' involvement and*

commitment. The subdimension of a *perceived shared relation* is based on similar values and norms, as internal discussions and negotiations about the group's shared norms and convictions increase mobilisation and therefore facilitate collective action (Louis et al., 2020). Thus, one indicator is shared values, norms, and orientations. Further, frequent gatherings such as protests do not only result in strong norms but also mutual trust. These close inter-group relationships are likely to go hand in hand with a higher identification with fellow protesters, so collective actions are done with greater ease (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020; Nicholls, 2008). This is hinted at in the subdimension of *individuals' involvement and commitment*. It includes the indicator of existing active relationships between the protesters and the indicator that the individuals feel like being part of the protest group.

As previously shown, shared common traits are crucial for collective identity, which leads to the dimension of a *perceived shared status*. Engagement in collective action is dependent on the group's politicisation, which hinges on the group's awareness of a shared grievance or struggle (Turner-Zwinkels & van Zomeren, 2016). Therefore, the subdimensions are the respective feelings of the group members sharing an *economic, political, or social disadvantage* that connects them.

The last dimension is the *perception of boundaries between the own group and other group(s)*, because groups define themselves in relation to other groups and may seek compensation from them at a later point in time (Bos et al., 2020; van Stekelenburg, 2013). As the protests are against corona measures, the key outgroups for corona protesters are probably pro-vaccination and pro-corona measurements groups.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF MOTIVATION

Turning now to the concept of *motivation*, it is necessary to include both group characteristics and personal factors. In this study, motivation is defined as factors that drive people to act, such as emotions, grievances, and desires. On an aggregated level, these motivating factors strongly influence the intensity, direction, and content of the motivations (Müller, 1974, p. 478; van Stekelenburg et al., 2011, pp. 92–93). Motivation is therefore a broad category that encompasses the following dimensions: *group-based anger, social marginality, moral beliefs, and the individual's belief in the group's efficacy*.

Beginning with the group characteristics, I included the dimensions of *group-based anger* to capture the anger and resentment within the group that motivates them to stand up against the cause of these feelings. As anger is frequently based on *feelings of relative deprivation* or the *misfit between a group's values and the dominant societal ones* (van Zomeren et al., 2018), both of them constitute subdimensions. In addition, based on an expressive motivation (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020), group-based anger might cause the desire to *bring the group's anger into the public*, which is the last subdimension.

The next dimension used in this regard is *social marginality*, a personal factor that describes the personal feeling of being “less socially central” (McKay et al., 2021, p. 4) and therefore being of little importance to politicians (McKay et al., 2021). To ascertain whether this feeling also holds for different levels, I follow the approach of McKay et al. (2021) and examine this sentiment at both the *local and state levels*, which constitute subdimensions.

The dimension of *moral beliefs* captures not only individuals’ perceptions but also their intrinsic motivations. This dimension is based on the assumption that people are politicised and mobilised when their *values and principles are being threatened, violated*, or when they feel like they have been *treated unfairly* (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020). Research has found that such intrinsic motivation leads to both more sustained actions and resistance to adverse environments (Louis et al., 2020). Consequently, the abovementioned factors constitute the subdimensions of moral beliefs.

The last dimension for the conceptualisation of motivation is the *individuals’ belief in the group’s efficacy*. This is a personal factor because this belief is grounded in individual assessments. Based on the instrumental objective of reaching an external, tangible goal (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020), one subdimension is the *belief in the group’s capability to achieve its goals through collective action*. Additionally, the perception of shared grievances results in the *group seeking compensation* for their situation (Bos et al., 2020). This is the second subdimension.

The next dimension, *expressing and performing the group identity*, is based on the expressive objective to take their anger and grievances into the public (Andits, 2018; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020). Its subdimensions are therefore the *communication of what the group stands for to the public*. Closely linked is the final dimension of *self-empowerment*, which can be a powerful means of feeling effective (Andits, 2018). The corresponding indicators are *showing courage* and *experiencing a sense of agency*.

The following pages contain a tabular overview (Table 1) of the applied concepts from theory, their (sub)dimensions, and the corresponding indicators, as well as a brief description of them. In addition to the categories derived from theory, some additional indicators were inductively identified in the interviews. For these, refer to Chapter 5 and Appendix A.9.

Table 1*Operationalisation of Key Concepts*

Concept	Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Further Information
Collective Identity	Consciousness for Group Membership ^G	Shared Relation	Shared Values, Norms, and Orientations	For example, the group acts peacefully
		Involvement and Commitment	Active Relationship With Other Protesters	Group members have an active, direct relationship with each other. This entails actively seeking out contact with fellow protesters to create a substantive, meaningful bond with them. The protesters feel connected to fellow protesters.
			Feeling as Part of the Group	Group members developed a sense of belonging to the protest group. Further, the group thinks of the protest group as a community.
		Perception of Shared Status ^G	Economic	Feeling of Group's Common Economic Disadvantage
Political	Feeling of Group's Common Political Disadvantage		No explicit references to comparator groups. Reference to, e.g., the perception that their political views would cause exaggerated police actions.	
Social	Feeling of Group's Common Social Disadvantage		No explicit references to comparator groups. For example, if protesters are socially marginalised.	
Boundaries Between Own and Other Groups ^G			Expression of Distinctions From Other Groups	Protesters are aware of differences from other groups (outgroups) and refer to them to delineate their own group.

Concept	Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Further Information
Motivation	Group-Based Anger ^G	Feelings of Relative Deprivation	Feeling That the Own Group is Worse Off Than Another Group	Group members explicitly express concern about relative social, economic, or political deprivation compared to another group. For example, under containment policies, unvaccinated protesters could not dine in restaurants while vaccinated people could.
		Misfits Between the Group's and Dominant Societal Values	The Group's Values are not the Prevalent Societal Ones	Currently prevailing social values are not in line with the group's, which leads to discontent or anger in the group. The value of bodily autonomy, for example, varies.
		Bringing anger into public	Publicly expressing the group's anger	The Group states issues that bother them and that they want to make public. For example, that the vaccination is allegedly not safe and fully effective.
Social Marginality ^P	Feeling of not Being Seen by Politicians	The Feeling That Their Needs and Worries are not Taken Into Account at State Level	References to feelings of being ignored by the government and politics at the federal level. For example, the government would not take citizens' worries into account for corona policies	
		The Feeling That Their Needs and Worries are not Taken Into Account at Local Level	For example, the mayor of Ottersberg allegedly participated in a counterdemonstration .	
Individuals' Belief in the Group's Efficacy ^P	Belief in the Group's Capabilities	Belief that Collective Action Paves the way for Change	Group members believe that the demonstrations are an effective means to accomplish their goal(s). For example, they think that the protests can lead to change villagers' minds.	
		Seeking Compensation for the Group	Group members refers to forms of compensation from other groups or persons who they believe are responsible for their grievances.	

Concept	Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Further Information
Motivation	Moral beliefs ^P	Self-Empowerment	Showing Courage	Participating in the demonstrations triggers or stems from a sense or urge to show courage. For example, the perceived police harassment could lead to a “Now more than ever” attitude to brave this situation.
			Experiencing Sense of Agency	Group members express that the sense that their protesting has led to a change or reactions that are directly linked to their individual actions. In addition, the participation in the protest alone could generate a sense of agency.
		Expressing and Performing Identity	Publicly Conveying What the Group Stands for	Group members explicitly express that they want to publicly show what the protest group stands for.
		Feelings of Unfairness	Feeling of Unfairness Against the Group Based on Moral or Ethnic Terms	Group members refer to situations or feelings where they think that the group is getting treated unfairly. For example, when they feel that the police are trying to intimidate them because the demonstrations raise a dissenting opinion.
		Perceived Threat of Violation of Norms or Principles	Feeling That own or the Groups Norms or Principles are in Danger	Group members feel that their personal or the group’s values and principles are threatened to be infringed by, e.g., new potential containment measures.
			Feeling That own or the Groups Norms or Principles are Violated	Group members feel that their personal or the group’s values or principles are being or have been violated. For example, their right to decide over their own body.

Note. ^G signifies a group characteristic, whereas ^P signals personal factors. Based on Andits (2018), Bos et al. (2020), Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (2020), McKay et al. (2021), Polletta and Jasper (2001), and Turner-Zwinkels and van Zomeren (2016).

3 Methodology

This study investigates personal factors and group characteristics that contribute to the continuation of German rural protests against corona measures. To assess these factors, I conducted a case study (Gerring, 2017, p. 56ff.) of the typical rural village of Ottersberg in Lower Saxony. The use of semi-structured in-depth interviews with protest participants allowed me to gain a detailed understanding of the protesters' motivations.

Before this chapter starts to describe the selection of Ottersberg as a typical village for the corona protest in rural Germany, it will briefly explain the focus on Germany. The following selection of the typical rural village of Ottersberg is based on two steps. In the first step, the typical Land of Lower Saxony is determined. In the second step, the selection of Ottersberg as the typical rural village is described. Following this, this chapter will present the protest group in Ottersberg. Next, it will outline the use of a neopositivist epistemological approach. Finally, it will discuss the use of interviews and the sampling of interviewees.

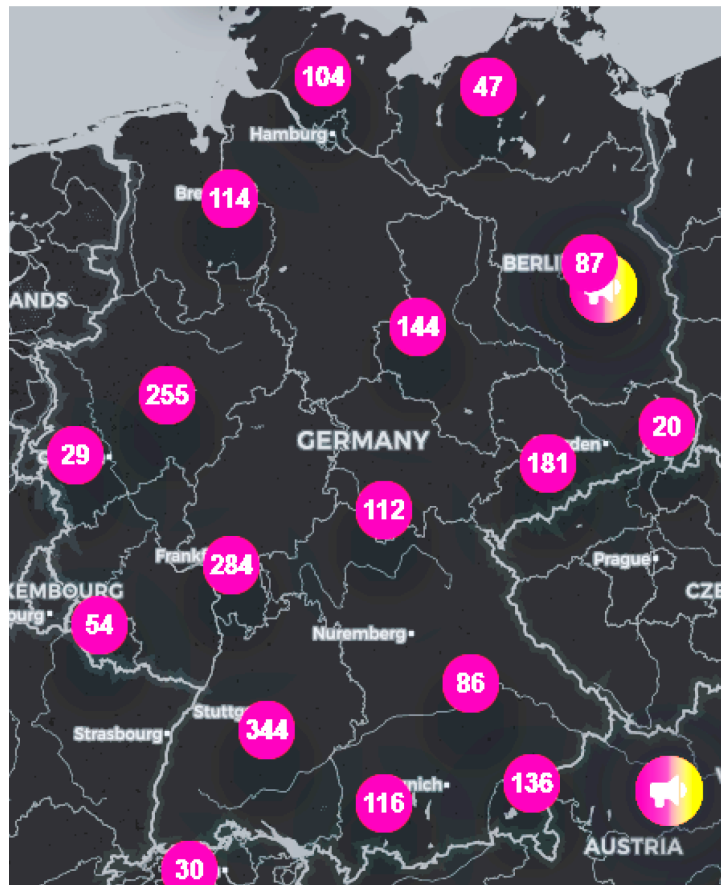
THE CASE OF GERMANY

Prior to the selection of the typical rural village in Germany, I will briefly describe why the currently experienced societal polarisation in times of the COVID-19-pandemic is unusual for Germany. It has a multi-party, pluralistic political system in which consensus building is central (Schieferdecker, 2021, p. 308). This is reflected in the stable centrist governments that have prevailed in Germany over time (Schieferdecker, 2021, p. 308). In addition, the media system is designed to show pluralistic stances and is built upon independent journalism (Beck, 2018, 383; 395-396; Schieferdecker, 2021, p. 309). Germany has a strong public service broadcast that is obliged to cater to and integrate diverse segments and political stances of the population (Schieferdecker, 2021, p. 309). Thus, Germany could be seen as a least-likely case for corona protests. This makes the country an interesting case.

Despite the abovementioned factors, protests against Corona containment measures are taking place across Germany, in *all* Länder. To exemplify this, Figure 7 visualises the collected corona protests collected by Filmkunstkollektiv e.V. (n.d.) for the selected time period of the week of March 28th, 2022.

Figure 7

Overview of Demonstrations and Protests across Germany



Note. Filmkunstkollektiv e.V. (n.d.) operates a website that lists anti-corona measures rally dates for allegedly documentary reasons and to provide an overview. This figure shows the German federal states and is taken from their website as of March 28th, 2022. This overview only gives an impression, it is *not* a complete overview of protest locations.

The data for the study's protest locations was retrieved from the overviews of the respective *Telegram* channels. *Telegram* channels are one of the few but key information sources for the corona protesters' milieu in Germany (Holzer et al., 2021, p. 15). Weekly overviews of planned demonstrations are provided by the Länder-specific channels (e.g., Freie Niedersachsen, n.d.). The reference week is March 14th, 2022.

Although these channels enable an easy overview, they might be biased. On the one hand, the numbers of demonstrations might be overestimated as the channels list the places without verifying whether the demonstrations actually take place (Freie Niedersachsen, 2019). Users call out if there are no protests in listed places (for example, Der wachsame, 2022; Wolleschaf, 2021). On the other hand, the numbers might be underestimated as users frequently point out that the overviews do not include scheduled demonstrations (yet) (e.g., Hella65, 2021). In general, the users of the channels are keen to

represent the protest environment as precisely as possible. Therefore, it can be assumed that the list of demonstrations used for the case selection is sufficiently accurate. Accordingly, the compilations of protest sites in the *Telegram* channels are the basis for selecting a typical rural village.

3.1 THE SELECTION OF A TYPICAL VILLAGE IN GERMANY

This subchapter describes the process of selecting a typical German village in which corona protests are taking place. In the first step, the indicators for the selection of the typical Land Lower Saxony are laid out. The second step presents the indicators for the selection of the typical rural village of Ottersberg.

Lower Saxony represents a typical Land for Germany regarding the protests' circumstances (see Table 2). This selection is based on the following three indicators:

- **Degree of Urbanisation (DoU).** This indicator, which I constructed, indirectly measures the degree of rurality of the Länder.
- **Vaccination Rate.** This indicator functions as a proxy for the Länder's citizens' readiness to comply with corona containment measures.
- **AfD's Share of the Vote in the Federal States' Parliaments.** This is an indicator for the likelihood of protests, as corona protesters are less likely to vote for catch-all parties (*Volksparteien*). The containment measures stringency was not an indicator as the variation on district levels and across states is neglectable (Plümper et al., 2021, 2238f.).

Turning now to the indicators, it becomes clear that the Land Lower Saxony exhibits common characteristics that are associated with a fertile ground for rural corona protests in Germany (Table 2).

INDICATOR: DEGREE OF URBANISATION

The focus of this work is the rural areas of Germany; therefore, I created the indicator DoU. This indicator is based on McKay et al.'s (2021) approach to measuring a rural-urban proxy. It measures the inverse of rurality. This means, for example, a small DoU translates to a high level of rurality.

Prior to calculating each Land's DoU, the municipalities gathered from the *Telegram* channels were classified as either *rural* or *urban* based on the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning's (2022) definition of city types. Municipalities with up to 20,000 inhabitants are rural; municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants are classified as urban (Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, 2022). Using data from the Federal Statistical Office (2021) on municipalities, I have calculated each Land's DoU by dividing the respective Land's number of rural municipalities by the total number of municipalities.

Then, I calculated the median of the DoU of the Länder instead of the mean to account for the extreme values of the city states of Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen, which have a DoU of 100%. The median shows that the typical Land has a DoU of 9.55%. Baden-Württemberg has a DoU of 9.36%, which deviates only by 0.19% and is thus closest to the median. Lower Saxony has a DoU of 9.75%, which is a value that is 0.2% above the median and lies within the interquartile range [3.57% - 26.12%]. Therefore, Lower Saxony can be assessed as a typical Land for Germany in this regard.

INDICATOR: VACCINATION RATE

The *vaccination rate* is included as a proxy for the Länder's citizens' readiness to comply with the corona containment measures. The underlying assumption is that the protesters are significantly less likely to get vaccinated. For this indicator, data on people who have gotten at least one vaccination was used (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2022a). This shows a more fine-grained picture and takes possible catching-up effects into account, for example, when people have only recently decided to get vaccinated. The median of this indicator lies at 77.15%. Lower Saxony has a vaccination rate of 78.4%, which is 1.25% above the median. Rhineland-Palatinate and Berlin, both 0.45% above the median, and Hesse, 0.45% below the median, are closer to the median. Although not a perfect typical representation of this indicator, Lower Saxony is still within the interquartile range [73.42% - 80.42%]. Therefore, I argue, it can still be considered typical. In addition, the other Länder like Hesse, Berlin, and Rhineland-Palatinate have even higher deviations from the median vaccination rate than Lower Saxony. Therefore, Lower Saxony is a viable alternative.

INDICATOR: AfD'S SHARE OF THE VOTE IN THE FEDERAL STATES' PARLIAMENTS

The *AfD's share of the vote in the federal states' parliaments* is the indicator for the protests. Based on Nachtwey et al.'s (2020) study, the main parties the corona measure protesters voted for were the Greens (23%), the Left (18%), and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) (15%). The *Volksparteien*, in contrast, reached no more than 10% each.

There are three reasons why the *AfD's share of the vote* is an indicator. First, in contrast to the AfD (Forchtner & Özvatan, 2020; Lehmann & Zehnter, 2022; Wondreys & Mudde, 2022)⁸, the Greens were perceived as being in favour of corona measures (Höhne, 2020) which is contradictory to the corona protesters' stance. Second, *the AfD* stands for a general critique of the political system (Berbair et al., 2015; Bieber et al., 2018) which might be assumed for corona protesters as well (cho/AFP, 2021). Third, the AfD is perceived as a protest party (Bieber et al., 2018), whereas the Greens count as an established

⁸ Although at the beginning of 2019, the AfD had an inconsistent stance towards containment measures, this stance changed quickly in 2020 (Forchtner & Özvatan, 2020; Lehmann & Zehnter, 2022; Wondreys & Mudde, 2022).

party. Therefore, the share of the votes of the AfD in the state parliaments is used as an indicator of the protests.

The median of the AfD's shares in the federal states' parliaments lies at 9.0%. Again, Rhineland-Palatinate and Berlin are closer to the median, with each lying 1% and 0.7% below it. Lower Saxony has a voting share of 6.2%, which lies within the interquartile range [6.2% - 17.73%] and thus can be considered typical.

In conclusion, Lower Saxony is one of the most typical German Länder in the abovementioned aspects, as seen in Table 2. An additional, yet crucial, factor is feasibility. From a pragmatic perspective, given the limited resources to conduct this study, it is also convenient that the researcher resides in Lower Saxony. Repeatedly travelling to Rhineland-Palatinate or Berlin, on the other hand, would not have been feasible for this project.

Table 2*Indicators for the Selection of a Typical Land*

Indicators	Baden- Württemberg	Bavaria	Berlin	Brandenburg	Bremen	Hamburg	Hesse	Mecklenburg- Vorpommern	Lower Saxony	North Rhine- Westphalia	Rhineland- Palatinate	Saarland	Saxony	Saxony-Anhalt	Schleswig- Holstein	Thuringia	German Median
Degree of Urbanisation	9.36%	3.65%	100.00%	6.71%	100.00%	100.00%	13.98%	1.24%	9.75%	52.53%	0.96%	17.31%	5.97%	11.01%	1.99%	3.32%	9.55%
Vaccination Quota	73.90%	74.00%	77.60%	69.40%	90.30%	83.10%	76.70%	74.30%	78.40%	80.40%	77.60%	82.40%	65.40%	72.00%	80.50%	70.20%	77.15%
Voting Share for AfD in Bundesland's Parliament Election	9.70%	10.20%	8.00%	23.50%	6.10%	5.30%	13.10%	16.70%	6.20%	7.40%	8.30%	6.20%	27.5%	20.80%	5.90%	23.40%	9.00%

Note. Lower Saxony's values are highlighted for reasons of visibility. "German Median" describes the median of the German Länder. Based on data by (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2022a; Der Bundeswahlleiter, n.d.; Federal Statistical Office, 2021).

3.2 SELECTION OF OTTERSBERG AS A TYPICAL RURAL VILLAGE

In a final step, I determined a typical rural village within the typical Land of Lower Saxony. The respective *Telegram* channels provide sufficiently accurate overviews of protest locations, which are used as a basis for selecting a typical rural village. After gathering data from the specific *Telegram* channel “Freie Niedersachsen [Free Lower Saxons]” for Lower Saxony, it can be assumed that there are frequent⁹ demonstrations in 271 cities and villages¹⁰. The weekly lists are divided by days. For my dataset, I took the entire list of the week of March 14th, 2022 and adjusted it for duplicates of places. In addition, the dataset is adjusted for locations that could not be unambiguously assigned geographically, for example, when a protest location could be assigned to two towns with the same name. While this avoids distortion, it does lower the number of villages included in the population slightly.

As previously noted, rural municipalities are defined as having up to 20,000 inhabitants (Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, 2022). Narrowing the 271 cities down to rural areas, the subpopulation consists of 246 villages. To select a typical village from this subpopulation, I employed the following indicators:

- **Incident Rate.** The incident rate was used as a proxy for the degree to which the county is affected by the coronavirus. It is defined as the weekly number of confirmed corona cases per 100,000 inhabitants of the respective district by reporting date (infas, 2022b). The data was gathered from the website <https://www.corona-datenplattform.de/> that collects district-level data on containment measures and epidemiologic and socioeconomic variables on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (infas, 2022a).
- **Population Density.** As the indicator DoU was not suited for analysis at the level of the subpopulation, it was replaced. Following McKay et al.’s (2021, p. 2) approach, population density is used as a proxy for rurality.

INDICATOR: INCIDENT RATE

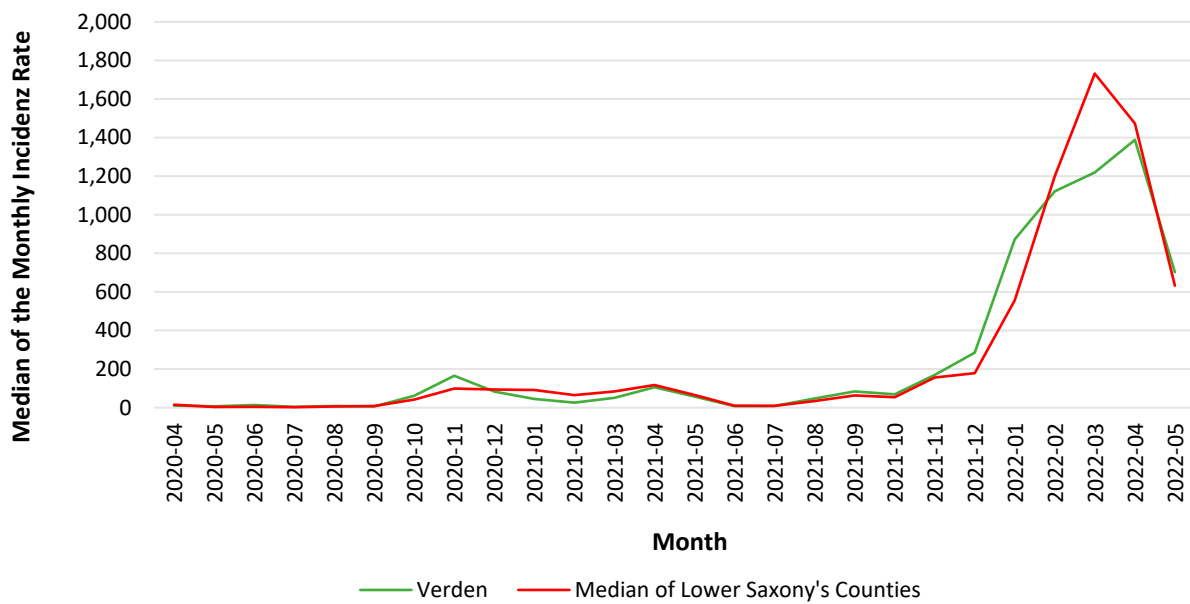
The data for the *Incident Rate* Indicator was provided at the county level. For each county in Lower Saxony, the weekly incident rate was gathered to calculate the respective monthly median (Appendix A.6). Figure 8 illustrates that Verden’s development of the median incident rate is similar to the Lower Saxony counties’ overall median development. Additionally, Verden has a median of 59.67, which lies within the interquartile range [46.2 – 77.84, median: 65.31]. Thus, Verden can be seen as a typical county of Lower Saxony regarding this aspect.

⁹ “Frequently” in this respect means that the demonstrations take place repeatedly over a prolonged time.

¹⁰ This is based on data from the reference week of March 28th, 2022.

Figure 8

Comparison of the Median Incident Rate of the Counties of Lower Saxony and the County Verden



Note. Visualisation by the author, based on data by (infas, 2022b).

INDICATOR: POPULATION DENSITY

The indicator of *Population Density* is based on data on the level of individual villages. To calculate this indicator, the respective population number of the village is divided by the geographical size of the village. The median for this indicator is 145.62, as seen in Appendix A.5. Ottersberg’s median for this is 131.47, which lies within the interquartile range [88.82-205.9]. Therefore, it can be seen as a typical village in Lower Saxony in this respect. In addition, Ottersberg belongs to the county of Verden, which is one of the most typical counties in Lower Saxony regarding the incident rate.

From a pragmatic perspective, the geographical location of Ottersberg is also convenient as the village is easy to reach for the me. This is an advantage as I needed to visit Ottersberg frequently during the data collection phase.

3.3 AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROTEST GROUP IN OTTERSBERG

Before describing my approach to the interviews, the following subchapter provides a brief picture of the group and its so-called “Spaziergänge [walks]”. While the group calls these activities “walks”, they are in fact registered demonstrations. The protest group in Ottersberg has been meeting regularly on Mondays since the beginning of 2020 for a walk through the village. The first time I visited the demonstrations was on May 16th, 2022. To conduct my research, I continued to travel to Ottersberg at least every Monday for the following five weeks.

The regular protest walks¹¹ start with the participants gathering around 6 p.m. To signal the start of the demonstration, music is played. The walking route through the main centre of the town is deliberately designed to attract the greatest possible attention from passers-by. Covering a distance of about 2 km, the demonstration starts at the town hall and follows a route that passes the communities' key infrastructure like the main grocery stores, the central bus station, and the main streets. Finally, the demonstration ends again at the town hall. While walking, the accompanying music calls for attention, and, on its way, the group stops traffic twice to cross roads. Therefore, the route ensures the groups' constant visibility.

When the protest march arrives at the town hall again, the leading figure addresses organisational issues. Before the group slowly disperses, the participants also have the opportunity to speak out about issues that they have on their mind. The group votes on whether or not to officially register the next week's walk with the responsible public authorities. The general tendency is to register the protest walks as demonstrations. For example, the group voted with one dissenting vote on the 23rd of May to do so. Demonstrations are to be registered with the responsible public authorities, like the municipality, county, or police, at least 48 hours prior to the demonstration. The responsible public authority may impose conditions on the demonstration, such as the number of participants required for the demonstrators to walk on the street (Bundesamt für Justiz, n.d.).

The participants are predominantly working people; however, there are also pensioners. Having chosen a Monday for protesting, the protesters not only wanted to relate their protest walks to the Montagsspaziergänge in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) but also selected a working day (e.g., 11.4¹²). The Montagsspaziergänge ("Monday demonstrations") were peaceful mass demonstrations against the political system of the GDR and for a peaceful transition to a new democratic system. These political protests contributed significantly to the Peaceful Revolution that resulted in the transition to a parliamentary democracy and, subsequently, the reunification of Germany (Kowalczyk, 2009).

Anecdotally, the protesters could be sorted into three types: First, the "*sparring-partner*". This type put me under cross-examination about my intentions, opinions, and educational background. Interestingly, only this type asked me personal questions that went beyond the technicalities of my study. As the approach for this study is to not emerge into the milieu but to keep a neutral distance, the answers given were brief, aimed to not influence their opinion of me while not appearing to be dubious or too evasive. The second type, worried about data security and data usage, can be labelled "*the hesitant*".

¹¹ This study uses the terms "demonstrations" and "protest walks" interchangeably in the context of the Ottersberg protest group against corona measures.

¹² In this thesis, "SI" is used as an abbreviation for „Short Interview“. "II" stands for "In-Depth Interview". The respective interviews of one individual are given the same number.

Overcoming their fears regarding voice recognition, selling data, or turning the information they disclosed against them takes not only time, but also carefully crafted arguments tailored to their concerns paired with total transparency about the study. Naturally, I have encountered mistrust of mobile phones, which I used to record the interviews. This could be circumvented by writing down answers on paper and organising a recording device that is appropriate for them. These two types compose the majority of the interviewees. The third type was “*the friendly one*”, who used the opportunity to explain their opinions and motivations. Only a minority could be classified as this type.

3.4 EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR THE DATA COLLECTION

This subchapter briefly explains why this study employs a neo-positivist epistemological approach. To substantiate this choice, the positivist approach is compared with the commonly applied ethnological approach. This illustrates clearly the underlying considerations of ethical concerns and the researcher’s possible undue influence on the interviewees regarding this study.

The underlying epistemological approach for this study is neo-positivism. Neo-positivism aims to uncover an objective truth while taking the possibility of errors and biases in observations, methods, and of the researcher into account (Roulston, 2010). Neo-positivism assumes that it is possible to minimise contextual influences on data generation and also to minimise or avoid the interviewer’s influence on interviewees’ responses. Also, it is possible to reach a mutual understanding of questions. Therefore, in the interviews, I aim to ask “good questions, while carefully minimizing bias and researcher influences through taking a neutral role” (Roulston, 2010, p. 204). I achieve this objective by not expressing my own perspectives and by using “‘open’ and ‘non-leading’ questions” (Roulston, 2010, p. 205).

My approach differs notably from ethnography, another common approach to interviews. Ethnography, as defined by Harrison (2014, p. 225), entails “the process and product of writing, recording, and describing culture”. For this, researchers are “participating, overtly or covertly in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1 as cited in Harrison, 2014, p. 225). This leads to adjustment to the research subjects and a level of rapport that results in a “trusting and caring relationship” (Roulston, 2010, p. 206).

In this study, I do not aim to be a co-constructor of knowledge, especially as motivations are generally of an innate personal nature. Further, embedding oneself too tightly into the group blurs the distinction between my role as a scientist and the group’s perception of me as a supporter of their cause. For example, after the walk on May the 23rd, the group urged me to be in the pictures they later wanted to upload to social media. I declined this offer. Another case that illustrates the blurring clearly is that the leading figure counted me as well when they did a head count of the group. Using a false pretence

to gain a “genuine” rapport in a romantic approach or to embed oneself fully into the group for an ethnographic approach is ethically questionable. Therefore, I follow a neo-positivist approach.

3.5 THE USAGE OF IN-DEPTH SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Having described both the protest group in Ottersberg and the study’s epistemological approach, this subchapter discusses the use of interviews before proceeding to lay out how the interviewees were sampled.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to produce fine-grained descriptions of feelings, expectations, values, practices, and identities (Quaranta, 2020). Further, semi-structured interviews leave more room for exploring unanticipated issues and clarifying aspects (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286). Instead of engaging in “passive recordings of people’s opinions and attitudes” (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286), the researcher may use “the dialogical potentials for knowledge production inherent in human conversation” (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286). As the interview questions rest both on indicators mentioned in the literature discussion and on inductive elements that come up in the interviews, the chosen approach reduces the possibility of omitting factors and motivations. In conclusion, semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow flexibility on the part of the interviewees while maintaining a minimum of comparability across the data.

The use of semi-structured interviews is a double-edged issue in terms of detailedness and comparability. It is in the nature of qualitative work that its conclusions rely on interpretations of the collected evidence (e.g., Diefenbach, 2009; Trent & Cho, 2014). It is necessary to be aware of the researcher’s own biases in the interpretation of the data. As detailed in Chapter 4, I took great care to minimise biases. It is possible to misinterpret information due to a lack of background knowledge. Interpretation is dependent on the researcher’s knowledge of the context. However, this is mitigated by having asked clarifying follow-up questions in the interviews. I could adapt the questions to further explore or clarify aspects mentioned by interviewees (cf. Brinkmann, 2014, pp. 285–286). The interviewer is, figuratively speaking, free to include and explore motives that come up in semi-structured interviews. The chosen approach of semi-structured in-depth interviews therefore reduces the possibility of omitting factors, especially in comparison to structured interviews. In structured interviews, this would not be possible since a fixed set of questions must be followed. Due to the inclusion of new aspects, in-depth semi-structured interviews allow for both testing theories (Leech, 2002, p. 665) and capturing inductive factors, which is a major advantage of this method. However, the use of semi-structured interviews has the major drawback that individual interviews are not as comparable as, e.g., fully structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286). Structured interviews, in contrast, are standardised in terms of the

questions' content and in order to make the results comparable and quantifiable across participants (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286).

This study's approach takes this potential issue into account. During the interviews, a fixed set of questions were asked in a fixed order to maintain basic comparability. Simultaneously, the interviewer was free to ask questions that arose during the interviews or to ask follow-up questions to clarify the interviewees' statements. In practice, this means that the questions for my interviews rest both on the indicators mentioned in the literature discussion and on elements that come up in the interviews. As a result, I could explore topics that could provide insights that had not initially been anticipated. Therefore, I chose semi-structured interviews for their flexibility while maintaining a minimum of comparability across the data.

A further potential drawback of qualitative interviews is the effect of the interviewer on the interviewee. In particular, the repeated visits to the demonstrations and my behaviour could have affected the behaviour and responses of the protest participants. On the one hand, the repeated visits could have been an advantage as the emerging familiarity led them to drop their reservations. This had positive consequences for the interview rate and increased the variety of the interviewees. On the other hand, the participants were talking with each other about me, which could have formed their opinion about me before meeting with me. This "reputation" was visible when I approached potential interviews and they greeted me with "Oh, you are the one who does the interviews, right?" or "You are the one who is currently doing her degree?" (I. Schütz, personal communication, May 30, 2022). In addition, my neutral stance in my approach might have resulted in less exhaustive or detailed answers due to some interviewees' reservations. The justification of one protest participant for declining to take part in an interview illustrates the described sentiment quite clearly: "I don't know on which side you're on, sorry" (I. Schütz, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

3.6 SELECTION OF THE INTERVIEWEES

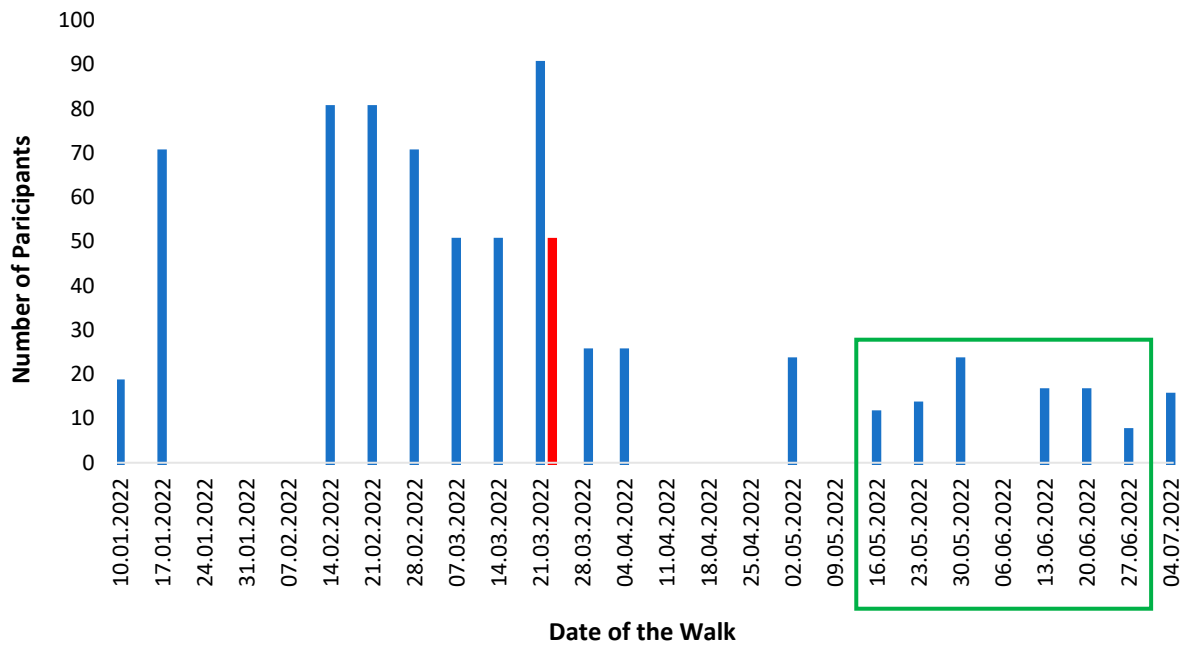
This subchapter discusses the sampling strategy for the interviews. The population of this study is the corona-measures protesters who frequently, and over a prolonged period of time, take part in so-called "walks" in a rural village.

In general, the protest walks in Ottersberg are a rather small phenomenon compared to the village's population: While the core town has 5,829 inhabitants, the population of the entire municipality is 13,083 (Flecken Ottersberg, 2019). The time frame for my study was characterised by a relatively stable participation rate. There was a slight increase during the study period in the number of participants; however, it did not change drastically (Figure 9). Regarding the development and context of the corona protest in Ottersberg, the significant drop in the participation rate after March 23rd, 2022, is

noteworthy (Figure 9). According to the group’s post (FNI_Helferlein_Bot, 2022), on that day there was an escalation between the police and the protest group during the control of the set conditions for the demonstrations. Therefore, it can be assumed that the remaining protesters constitute the core of the protest group, which is captured in this study’s time frame.

Figure 9

Overview of the Protest Participation in Ottersberg, January - July 2022



Note. The data for this graph is taken from posts in the *Telegram* channel “Freie Niedersachsen”. Caution might be necessary as the numbers in January to March are estimates by the Ottersberg group itself. These numbers do not include me as I was not participating in the protest walks as a protester. After 16th of May, I could verify the numbers as I visited the demonstrations. The red bar marks the day when there was apparently a violent incident between the protesters and the police (FNI_Helferlein_Bot, 2022). On dates with no participation number, the group did not provide estimates, and on the 6th of June 2022, the group decided not to walk. The green rectangle shows the time frame of this study.

The sample consisted of those participants who were willing to be interviewed. In order to build trust and recruit participants for the study, it was necessary to visit the local demonstrations repeatedly (six times). In this way, I was able to both recruit a sufficient number of interviewees and adhere to the time frame of the study.

The sample was focused on the core group (N=7) that consisted of those who participated in the walk every time I visited them. The core group showed the highest commitment to the protests and are, thus, most likely to exhibit the personal factors and group characteristics that contribute to the prolongation of rural corona protests. In addition, the likelihood is very high that these individuals will persist in participating in the corona protests, as the protests have been ongoing since 2019 and those individuals continued to participate even after the violent incident with the police (see the drop in

participation rate in Figure 9. This significantly adds to this thesis' validity. In sum, this study aimed to cover both the core protest group and individuals who are slightly less committed. This facilitates capturing the range of the protesters' motivations and group factors that contribute to the perseverance of the corona protests in rural areas. This approach bolsters the study's representativeness as well.

The selection of whom to approach for an interview is systematic. During the walk, the protesters tend to form rows of two to three people to adjust to the size of the pavement. Often, the short interviews already started at the gatherings at the beginning of the demonstrations and continued into the actual walk. In this situation, it was random which of the protest participants were asked to take part in a short interview. Then, I chose the next interviewee by walking to the line in front of me and talking to the person on the right side. If this person has already been asked or interviewed, I talked to the person on the left side. The objective was to cover all participants, and in particular, the core protest group.

The study population comprises 18 interviewees in total. Of those, 16 subjects consented to take part in short interviews, of which seven subjects agreed to participate in follow-up in-depth interviews. With two people, I conducted only in-depth interviews. Another two people were interviewed at the same time¹³ and one person was interviewed via telephone. The subjects are from both the core group and the "normal" group. The short interviews were conducted during the demonstrations and consisted of three umbrella questions. After that, I invited the interviewees to take part in in-depth interviews outside the demonstrations. For both types of interviews, the interviewees gave their informed consent.

¹³ The corresponding interview is referenced as II.6. In Chapter 5, the two interviewees were counted separately.

4 Data Collection

This chapter first describes how potential interviewees were approached, with a particular focus on obtaining a good rapport and informed consent. Next, this chapter describes the interview phase and the design of the interview questions. Finally, it briefly discusses the overall validity, reliability, and generalisability of this work.

4.1 STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING RESERVATIONS AND BUILDING TRUST

I visited the protests repeatedly to establish direct contact with the protest participants. This direct approach had two major advantages compared to an online approach, e.g., in *Telegram* channels. First, face-to-face encounters helped create the trust needed to be able to conduct interviews. Second, the demonstrators felt comfortable in the setting of the protest walks, which facilitated rapport-building. Compared to online contact, the protest participants at the demonstrations may be generally more trusting and open towards me. Trust is a key factor, given that this milieu generally does not tend to regard science and so-called mainstream journalism as trustworthy (Pantenburg et al., 2021).

Building rapport with the protesters was essential. The goal of obtaining rapport is not only to make interviewees feel comfortable but also to convey that “you are listening, that you understand and are interested in what they are talking about, and that they should continue talking” (Leech, 2002, pp. 665-666).

My starting point for approaching the group was not perfectly aligned with the protesters as I am a stranger, young, and a scientist. Aside from their tendency to distrust “mainstream” science when it comes to corona, one incident during my first encounter with the group gives an impression of their caution not only towards strangers but also towards journalists. Speaking to a small group of protesters, one person standing across the square mistook me as a journalist and piped up: “Are *you* the one who published the article in [a newspaper whose name I did not understand clearly]?” (I. Schütz, personal communication, May 16, 2022). Furthermore, one of the protesters has had a negative experience with the press. Interviewee II.4 recounted his experience of being slated by the local newspaper that he invited for one of the demonstrations. It is important to consider these sentiments, especially since the method of interviewing I used in this study resembled a journalistic approach, as implied by e.g., Interviewee SI.13.

In addition, when visiting the protest group in Ottersberg, I took great care to ensure that my *appearance* fit in with theirs. Considering that the participants generally see the researcher once a week, I have worn the same outfits on the protest walks to enhance my recognisability and familiarity. Further,

the selection of equipment has been a deliberate choice. From my bag to my pen, everything has been selected to fit into the protester's milieu and to display political neutrality.

Turning to the question of how to actually build rapport and gain trust, there were two key aspects to take into account: my communication strategy, and how I addressed their concerns regarding anonymity and past negative experiences.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

In the following, I give a detailed account of pitfalls in *communication with the protest group* and how I overcame or circumvented them. I specifically address measures taken to ensure as best as possible that interlocutors feel they can speak freely. In addition, I illustrate the group's scrutiny of my person and intention. Furthermore, I sketch out my handling of issues important to the protesters and describe the factors to which I adapted my communication accordingly.

In general, I had one advantage when approaching the group. Instead of talking *about* them, I engaged with the group and talked directly *with* them. The fact that the group may feel that they lack attention and acknowledgement helped me in this regard (Adams, 2010, p. 18). The group was more willing to interact with me.

In the interactions with the protesters, it was crucial that they felt like they could talk freely with me about their opinions and motivations. Therefore, one key objective was to ensure that "the respondents do not feel threatened and are not worried that they will lose face" (Leech, 2002, p. 665). Thus, I aimed to be both non-judgemental and a good listener (Adams, 2010, pp. 19–20). In the middle of an answer, for example, interviewee II.2 asked me whether I had already turned off the recording, indicating that they would like me to do this. I responded that the recording was still ongoing but offered them to turn it off. After this, Interviewee II.2 changed their mind, though, and told me that keeping the recording going was OK.

Furthermore, I made sure that neither the questions nor my communication with the group entailed stigmatising labels, such as "right-wing" or "conspiracy", nor derogatory or pretentious language or expressions. This was of particular importance when protesters referred to conspiracy theories. In addition, I have adopted the general terminology used in the group. For this reason, when interacting with the protesters, I used certain terms like "walks [Spaziergang]" and "strollers [Spaziergänger]" instead of "demonstrations" or "protesters". Similarly, instead of using the phrase "interviewing you", I often spoke of "talking with you" or inviting participants of short interviews to a "more profound conversation where we have more time". This is less threatening and less formal than the terms "interview" or "in-depth interview".

The second key aspect was concerns about confidentiality and anonymity which were frequently raised by participants. Full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, although I did take the utmost care to anonymise the participants' identities. Despite the use of pseudonyms and omission of traceable individual characteristics, contextual factors like the disclosure of the typical village's name might lead to an accidental disclosure (Wiles, 2013, pp. 46–47). Emphasising confidentiality, it was communicated that confidentiality also applies to the other protesters. Sometimes interviewees have asked about other interviewees' answers. In such cases, I encouraged them to continue because I would like to include all points of view in my research and reassured them that the interviewee was adding valuable aspects and insights. Simultaneously, I communicated clearly that no information from interviews would be shared with other protest participants as that would contradict my anonymisation guidelines and the interviewee's confidentiality.

While talking to the protesters, it was fundamental to explain my intentions and motivations for the study. This was the prime opportunity to build rapport, allay fears, and counter skepticism regarding both my person and the study. For this, it was of equal importance that I passed their testing of my stance and reactions to their position(s). On the one hand, they subtly tested me by, for example, frequently dropping certain phrases like "Lügenpresse [lying press]" and watching me closely for my reaction. On the other hand, they regularly "screened" me directly, for example, by asking me if I had been vaccinated against COVID-19 or what I thought about certain issues (I. Schütz, personal communication, May 23, 2022). Such topics could be, for example, whether the visits of the protest walks made me think or whether I perceived the protest group as a "bunch of right-wing extremists". This was not only a test of my stance but also reflected the group's common portrayal in regional newspapers or counterprotests, and sentiments from their social environments. Answering these questions proved to be a balancing act between building rapport and managing the consequences of that information (cf. Adams, 2010, p. 20). For example, when asked whether I perceived the group as right-wing, I stated that I did not see any right-wing insignia and that I considered them to be completely ordinary people.

The same approach applies to addressing *previous negative experiences* of group members, which is also important for obtaining rapport. For example, some protesters had negative experiences with journalists and tended to extend these reservations to me. Common concerns were the description as "right-wing" or putting quotations in the wrong context. Acknowledging this, I referred to differences between scientists and journalists, offered them explicitly to make my thesis available to them, and emphasised why anonymisation is crucial for my work and how I intend to ensure it as best as possible.

Lastly, many protesters were worried about the audio recording of the interviews. Reasons for this were, for example, fear of voice recognition, a general distrust of mobile phones, or fear of the audio file being passed on to third parties. This scepticism sometimes resulted in protesters being willing to take part in interviews' but being reluctant to or refusing to be audio recorded. Therefore, a pen and a pad were crucial tools in the process of data collection to be able to make notes, nonetheless. The comment by interviewee II.3 illustrates the issues described above in a concise way:

I think you go through the rows there [at the demonstrations] anyway and look and talk to everyone, and then you already get a pretty good impression. If I understand correctly, you're only in Ottersberg anyway. And I have to be honest and say that I have done this [interview] here and I'm not really going all out [Corona-related views], because I don't know exactly how intensively you are involved in this topic yourself. You have revealed very little about yourself, and that's okay. You seem to me to be a bit distant from the whole story. That's also okay. You do it analytically, and you are young, and everything is fine, but one doesn't know any more. Well, you can become schizophrenic with all these things and actually say, 'Where is this [information] all going?' You give me a piece of paper [declaration of consent] now, but if one's really nuts, what happens to these things? Some people are to the point where they're already actually carrying around such, such, such fears as well. 'Will I actually be recorded somewhere here by some policemen?' 'Will I already be pre-sorted somewhere here?'

4.2 THE INTERVIEW PROCESS: EXPLORATION WITH SHORT INTERVIEWS, DELVING IN WITH IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

All interviewees provided informed consent for both the short and in-depth interviews. For the short interviews, I provided initial introductory information about the study in order to attract potential study participants' interest and assess their willingness to participate (Wiles, 2013, p. 27). If they were interested, participants verbally received a condensed version of the information sheet for the in-depth interviews (Appendix A). This brief information includes the aim of the research project, the data collection process, the anticipated dissemination of the results, and which measures are taken to create confidentiality and anonymity as best as possible (Klykken, 2021).

Next, the prospective interviewee decided whether they wanted to participate in the study (Wiles, 2013, p. 25). In addition, they could decide whether they were comfortable with the interview being audio-recorded or not. In the latter case, I took notes. As signing formal consent forms was

inconvenient and interrupting in the dynamic, non-stationary protest setting, verbal consent was recorded (Wiles, 2013, pp. 34–35). In contrast, for the in-depth interviews, the interviewees received the aforementioned information sheet (Appendix A.1) that addresses data usage, the scope of the project, and ethical issues like anonymisation. After reading, the participants gave their written, informed consent. All of these interviewees, except two, had previously participated in short interviews.

The interviewing phase consisted of two steps. In the first step, I conducted short interviews with the protesters, consisting of three questions at the demonstration. In the second step, I asked whether they were available for in-depth semi-structured interviews. These two steps in the data collection phase were not separated but interwoven, which has two reasons. Firstly, the in-depth interviews had to be set according to the interviewees' time schedules, such as work, holidays, and families. Therefore, it would have been extremely difficult to fit all the interview appointments into one fixed time period. Secondly, although there is a core group formation, the changing group formation requires flexibility in conducting both the short and in-depth interviews. Therefore, considering the limited timeframe, it would not have been useful to conduct short interviews with *all* participants before moving to the in-depth interview step.

In the first step, I conducted short interviews aimed at capturing the protesters' main motives for participating in the demonstrations. For this, I asked them 1) what motivates them to participate in the walks; 2) what they (and the group) consider important; and 3) what connects them to the other walkers (see Appendix A.1).

There are two reasons for short interviews: On the one hand, this interview format enables forming basic personal bonds with the people. They got to know me and could decide whether they were willing to participate in an in-depth interview. This point is especially important as, prior to the study, there was uncertainty about their willingness to engage in interviews at all. This uncertainty is based on the fact that the *Querdenken* milieu¹⁴ is generally distrusting of science and so-called mainstream journalism (Pantenburg et al., 2021). On the other hand, it is not feasible to conduct in-depth interviews during the demonstrations. As this protest form implies, they are not stationary, and therefore the environment is too unstable for in-depth interviews when there could be unforeseen interruptions or loud music in the background. In addition, time pressure and other participants' or their mere presence could influence the interview. During the short interviews, I therefore took great care to create spatial distance from the other protesters. To sum up, the short interviews allow for gathering data in a dynamic environment and focus on the research interests' key points. Thus, the short interviews were designed to produce valuable insights even if participants would not have engaged in in-depth

¹⁴ This term is used as an umbrella term for the anti-Corona measurement milieu.

interviews. Entailing only overarching umbrella questions, it was possible to gather as much information as possible about the participants' motivations.

In the second step, in-depth interviews were conducted. After carrying out the short interviews, I asked the interviewees whether they would be willing to have a longer, more in-depth conversation with me outside of the demonstration. The interviews took place in public places, which accommodated the preferences of both the interviewees and me. This ensures both safety and the collection of as little personal data as possible.

The in-depth interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes, ranging from 35 minutes to 80 minutes. Although not all short interviews could be audio recorded, all interviewees agreed to be audio recorded during the in-depth interviews. The audio recordings were then fully transcribed with the help of the software *sonix*. If the interviewees provided personal data such as their profession, this was anonymised in the transcripts.

4.3 THE DESIGN OF THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The in-depth interviews, whose template can be seen in Appendix A.2.2, addressed the following topics:

1. The participants' motivation and why it is important for them to take part in the walks
2. The circumstances in which they joined the walks
3. How they would characterise the walks
4. The interpersonal connection between the protesters
5. What experiences they made and how the participation in these protests impacts their lives
6. The societal and political impacts of the walks
7. What they (ideally) want to achieve with their walks
8. Why they protest here and not in other places

The design of the questions was based on the literature review as discussed in Chapter 2. The questions were devised to be sound, clearly formulated, valid, non-trivial, and non-threatening (Leech, 2002). Of particular importance was the aspect of non-threatening language to ensure rapport with the interviewees. Moreover, this should allay the potential for social desirability bias. This happens when interviewees adjust their answers to what they think is a social standard and what is perceived as normal (Diekmann, 2007, pp. 447–449). The more sensitive a question is, the more likely this bias occurs. This bias is assessed as unlikely as the protest walks are a public and recurrent event. It is locally known that they hold critical positions regarding the corona vaccination and the corresponding politics. Not only do they express their opinions publicly, but the chosen form of protest also inherently aims to

reach out to passers-by. Therefore, the protesters have contact with other villagers who do not necessarily share their opinion. The enduring protest walks exhibit a firm opinion. They are unlikely to alter their stances to accommodate “mainstream opinions”¹⁵ revolving around, e.g., the usefulness of corona containment measures such as face masks and vaccinations.

Nonetheless, it might be possible that the participants tone down their opinions slightly when they are not in the “safe haven” of the protest group. However, this is minimised by the prior short interviews and the participants’ probing of my stance and reaction towards the group’s opinions. In addition, the interviews do not focus on the content of their political opinions but on the motivations for participation, which could also reduce the potential bias. Another mitigating aspect might be my use of neutral terms like “Spaziergang (walk)”, and the adoption of terminology introduced by the interviewee for the duration of the interview (see Chapter 4.1).

The initial interview guideline was designed to ensure that it elicited elaborate answers and that they were neither presumptive nor suggestive. This was tested in the first in-depth interview, which was additionally used to test if the questions were actually capturing the key points. For example, the protest participants do not necessarily equal their participation in the protest walks as with political engagement (II.4). While the overall order of the questions was confirmed, one new question was included to explicitly explore the impact that participation in the demonstration had on the interviewees’ personal lives.

To maintain anonymity, demographic questions were omitted. This approach should, on the one hand, ensure anonymity. On the other hand, it should make the interview less threatening for the interviewees as the topic is a societal and politically sensitive issue.

4.4 QUALITY CRITERIA

Having described both how I approached the interviewees and the process of the interviews, this subchapter discusses first the study’s internal validity and reliability, before moving to its generalisability.

4.4.1 INTERNAL VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

This subchapter gives an overview of this thesis’ objectivity, internal validity, and reliability, in particular respect to the interviews. Furthermore, it will introduce the alternative framework for measuring qualitative research by Lincoln and Guba (2007).

¹⁵ This phrase refers to views circulated in traditional media, by politicians, or other key societal protagonists.

OBJECTIVITY

Because this study is qualitative in nature, it is especially important to address its objectivity. Objectivity measures whether the repetition of a measurement produces the same results independently of the researchers (Diekmann, 2007, p. 249). Objectivity can be distinguished further: Implementation objectivity measures whether different researchers who have the same measurement instruments reach the same results. For this study, a high implementation objectivity would be reached if at least two researchers with the same interview guideline would get the same answers. The objectivity of analysis represents whether different researchers come to the same conclusion. In order to achieve objectivity, I have tried to keep my personal influence to a minimum (see Subchapters 3.4 and 4.1). Moreover, I have documented the interview guideline and my interactions with the interviewees in detail so that other researchers could replicate my work (see Appendix A.2).

RELIABILITY

The next aspect that needs to be addressed is the reliability of the study. Reliability is a measure of the replicability of measurement results (Diekmann, 2007). It is concerned with the consistent repeatability of observations (Marks, 2007, p. 4), the level of random error (Gerring, 2012), and the replicability of results (Diekmann, 2007, p. 250). The study is highly reliable when its results are consistent throughout repeated trials. To achieve this, it is necessary to document the data collection and analysis process in a detailed and transparent manner. Further, reliability can be improved by triangulating data, using multiple researchers for intercoder reliability, and employing analysis concepts that are unambiguous, concrete, and exhaustive (Adcock & Collier, 2001; Goertz, 2020, p. 22; Leuffen et al., 2012, pp. 41–42). Both extensive triangulation and intercoder reliability cannot be provided within the scope of this thesis. Instead, this study ensures test-retest reliability as it takes the interview transcripts through two cycles of analysis. The achieved value for this is 87%, therefore the coding is highly reliable. In addition to the interviews, I also draw on field notes taken after the interviews and for each demonstration. Although this is a limited triangulation of data, it increases the reliability of the data (cf. Marks, 2007). Moreover, the data collection process is carefully documented, and the concepts are designed to be mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive (Sartori, 1970, p. 1039).

VALIDITY

Finally, the study's internal validity needs to be addressed. Internal validity is concerned with the question whether the researcher measures what they actually want to measure and focuses therefore especially at potential confounding variables (Diekmann, 2007, 344f.). In qualitative research, influences by the researcher are the main problem. As described in the Subchapters 4.1 to 4.3, I have taken

various measures to ensure to minimise these influences. Subchapter 4.4.2 about the generalisability will discuss its external validity.

LINCOLN AND GUBA'S ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR MEASURING QUALITY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The above-described measures of objectivity, validity, and reliability originate from quantitative research. Some authors, such as Cho and Trent (2014, p. 679) argue that the quality of qualitative research might require more aspects than “accuracy, precision, rightness, or directness” in a quantitative context. They argue that qualitative research additionally needs to take “context, locality, properness, and indirectness” (Cho & Trent, 2014, p. 679) into account because this type of research often centres around values.

Thus, alternative validity criteria for qualitative works exist. Seminal, for example, is the alternative framework by Lincoln and Guba (2007). Corresponding to internal validity, Lincoln and Guba use *credibility*. *Credibility* entails not only that the researcher checks the accuracy of their interpretation with participants but also a prolonged engagement and ensuring that the data is representative. In this thesis, the researcher checked in with the interviewees during the interviews to give examples, to clarify vague statements, or to either verify or refute the researcher’s interpretations. Instead of external validity, they established *transferability*. Taking contexts into account, *Transferability* entails “the ability to transfer research findings from one group to another” (Cho & Trent, 2014, p. 680). This thesis aims to give a comprehensive description of the Ottersberg protests and protesters while maintaining the participants’ anonymity. Alternatively, to reliability, Lincoln and Guba (2007) use *dependability*. *Dependability* describes “when other research follows the decision trail used by the researcher” (Cho & Trent, 2014, p. 680) and entails intercoder reliability. Objectivity corresponds to *conformability*. *Conformability* assesses the degree of critical self-reflection of the researcher regarding possible biases. Chapter 6 discusses potential biases and the researcher’s approach to the interviews in detail.

4.4.2 EXTERNAL VALIDITY AND GENERALISABILITY

This subchapter discusses the external validity of this study respectively its transferability according to Lincoln and Guba (2007). External validity indicates whether the results are generalisable beyond the study itself (Diekmann, 2007, 344f.).

Regarding generalisability, I have shown that Ottersberg is a typical rural village for Lower Saxony. Lower Saxony, in turn, is a typical Land for Germany. In general, typical cases exhibit common features of a larger population (Gerring, 2017, p. 56). The advantage of a typical case is that the results are generalisable to the total population. Applied to this study, the findings of a single typical rural village are applicable to all rural areas in Germany. Germany depicts the total population as the protests take

place in all Länder. Thus, it can be reasonably assumed that Ottersberg is typical of Germany. The results of this study are applicable to Germany's rural villages.

Further, the question arises whether the national context allows the study to be transferred to other countries. For this, the stringency of containment measures, the uptake of the vaccination, and the affectedness of the countries in terms of deaths will be taken into account.

Turning to the vaccination rate, Table 3 reveals that Germany's cumulative uptake of a primary course vaccination in the total population is relatively low in comparison to Western European countries (ECDC, 2021). This may indicate that the German population is slightly more sceptical of the vaccination and containment measures. This may contribute to the persistence of the corona protests.

Table 3

Comparison of Cumulative Primary Course Uptake

Country	Cumulative Uptake of Primary Course In Total Population
France	78.3%
Germany	77.9%
Italy	80.2%
Spain	79.0%
Sweden	71.3%
United Kingdom ^a	87.8%

Note. Based on data from ECDC (2021) and the UK Health Security Agency (2022). These countries are exemplarily for Western Europe and, in particular, for different approaches to policing the corona pandemic. While France, Italy, and Spain were perceived as having a harsh approach (BBC, 2020; Horowitz, 2020; Terpstra et al., 2021), Sweden had the reputation of following a laissez-faire approach (Goodman, 2020; cf. Mens et al., 2021). In contrast to the other countries, the United Kingdom is no longer a member state of the EU, however, it is assumed that this fact does not confound the generalisability of this study.

^a The value for the United Kingdom shows the number of people who have received their 2nd dose of the corona vaccination.

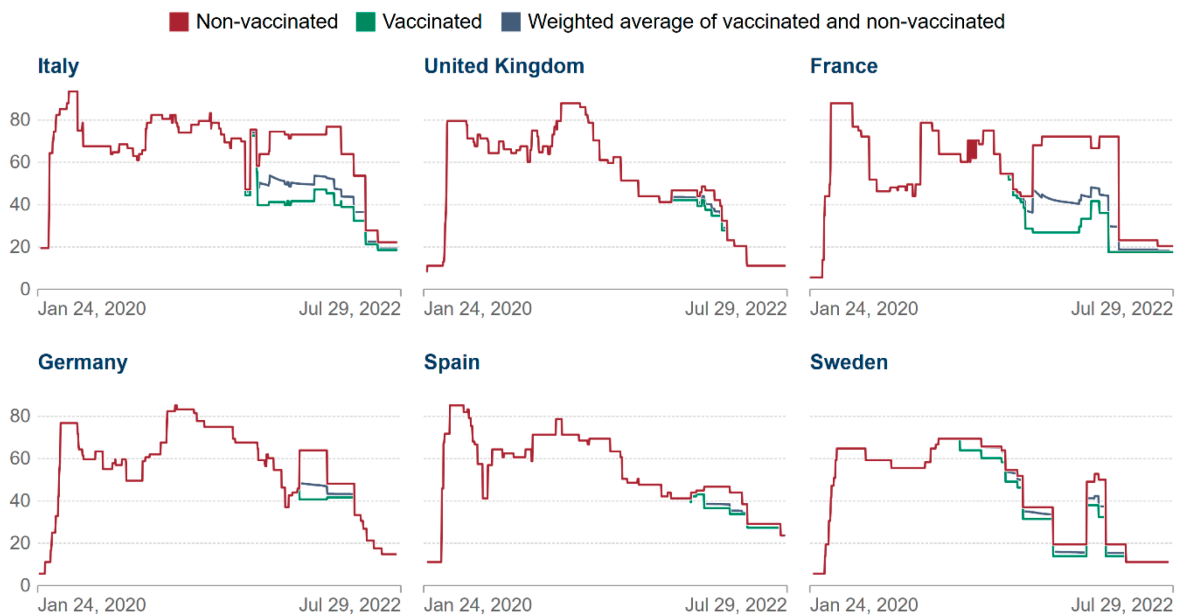
The comparison of the stringency of containment measures in Figure 10 might indicate whether Germany is an extreme case or shows similarities to other European countries. Germany had two periods of notable differences in containment policies for vaccinated and non-vaccinated (13th November 2021 to 20th January 2022 and 20th January to 30th March 2022). France and Italy, known as hardliners in terms of their pandemic policies (e.g., BBC, 2020; Horowitz, 2020; Onishi et al., 2021), show longer periods of highly different policies for non-vaccinated and vaccinated. In addition, the

stringency level in these two countries is generally higher than in Germany. In Sweden and the United Kingdom, regarded as having a laxer approach (Boseley, 2020; Mens et al., 2021; Triggles, 2021), there are shorter periods with less differentiating pandemic policies between non-vaccinated and vaccinated. This comparison shows that Germany is taking a middle course in its containment policies.

Figure 10

COVID-19: Stringency Index

The stringency index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest).



Source: Hale, T., Angrist, N., Goldszmidt, R. et al. A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker). *Nat Hum Behav* 5, 529–538 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01079-8>
CC BY

Note. Taken of Ritchie et al. (2020)

The affectedness by the coronavirus pandemic, measured in deaths, may be an emotional impact that leads to stricter policies. Table 4 shows that Germany has a comparatively low death rate. Social debate may be less emotionally charged as a result and less focused on the potentially deadly consequences of the virus.

For Corona demonstrators, this could mean that they feel that the reasons for maintaining the Corona measures are insufficient, which increases their motivation to demonstrate against them over time. Moreover, this could explain the persistence of the protests. This would be in line with Plümper et al.'s (2021) findings that there are more protests when the containment measures are harsh while the incident rate is low. Therefore, it may be that my findings are more transferable to protests that take place in low mortality situations while strict containment measures are implemented.

Table 4*Comparison of Cumulative Deaths due to Corona*

Country	Total Deaths	Crude Cumulative Deaths (per 1,000,000)
EU	1,064,631	2467.3
France	151,983	2257.6
Germany	143,972	1731.1
Italy	172,003	2883.9
Spain	110,719	2339.2
Sweden	19,358	1874.4
United Kingdom	183,953	2709.7

Note. Data taken from WHO Regional Office for Europe (n.a.).

Regarding political polarisation that causes “antagonistic, political camps” (Coppedge et al., 2021, p. 224) in society, Germany has a relatively low polarisation in comparison to East-Central Europe, Southern Europe, and Western Europe (Coppedge et al., 2021). Only the Nordic countries have lower political polarisation.

In conclusion, Germany has taken a middle course with regard to COVID-19 policies, while mortality in the country was relatively low during the pandemic. Furthermore, it is comparatively less polarised. Thus, Germany is close to the EU average, so that this study’s findings could be transferred to other (Western) European countries¹⁶. If there are differences in protest forms and characteristics in other (Western) European countries compared to Germany, it can be assumed that these protests are more vigorous and long-lasting. However, this needs to be tested in further research.

5 RESULTS: WHY THE OTTERSBERG PROTEST GROUP CONTINUES

This chapter presents the principal findings of the study (summarised in Figure 25). The purpose of this study was to explore personal factors and group characteristics that motivate rural corona protesters to continue their protests. Personal factors are labelled ^P, and group characteristics are labelled ^G. For this, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews.

In the next step, I analysed them using the software *MaxQDA*. If one interviewee mentions an indicator in both their in-depth interview and short interview, this indicator is only counted for the in-depth interview to avoid duplicates. If one interviewee mentions an indicator only in the short interview but not in the in-depth interview, this indicator is counted as belonging to the short interview. The percentage values were calculated on the basis of the 18 people interviewed.

¹⁶ Eastern Europe differs significantly from Western Europe, Southern Europe, and the Nordic countries.

In addition, semi-structured interviews are directed at having a conversation. This includes asking open-ended questions in order to prevent bias by giving set answer categories. Subsequently, the response category “not mentioned” exists if the interviewees do not think of an answer category by themselves.

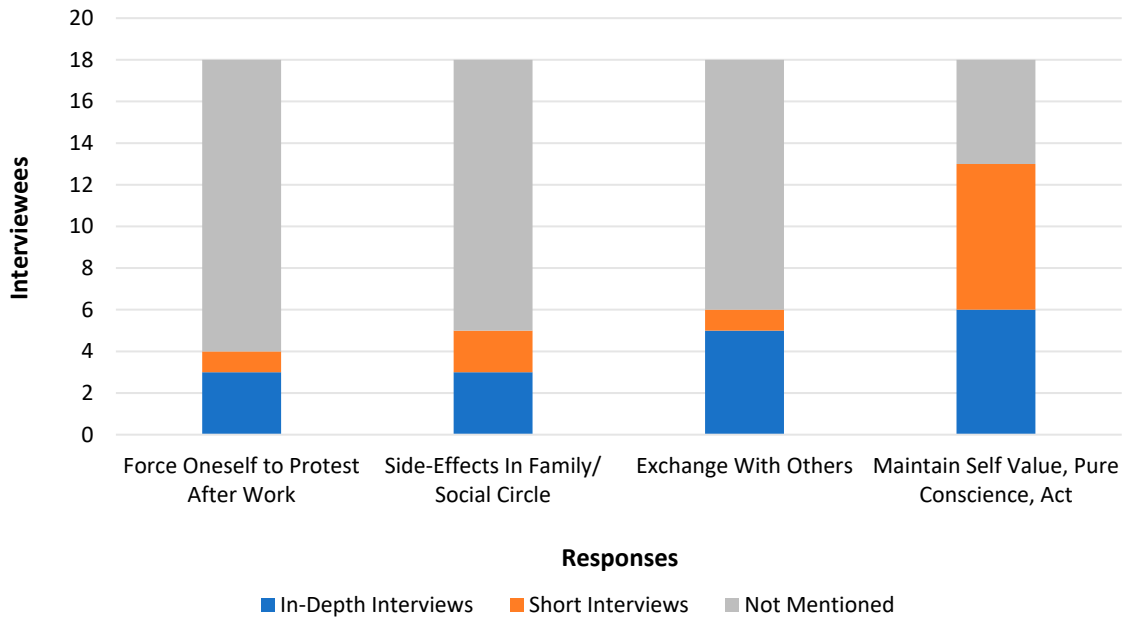
The chapter is divided into two parts: First, it lays out the key personal factors and group characteristics that emerged in the analyses along the four steps from *collective identity* to *collective action*. The analysis revealed five personal factors and three structural factors that were especially important for the corona protesters in Ottersberg. Second, it proceeds to compare the results as a whole with the conventional theory of protest participation as laid down in Chapter 2. Furthermore, my findings imply another route for collective action of protest groups that has been undertheorised so far.

Prior to the creation and consolidation of the Ottersberg protest group’s collective identity, the question of why protesters decided to demonstrate *in this village* gives an interesting glimpse into the group. The most important factor (39%) was the small distance to go there. Nearly a third (28%) joined the protest walks in Ottersberg because they were already acquainted with people there or they knew about the protest from hearsay. About 17% of the protesters came to the protests in Ottersberg because they searched for places with small protest groups to support them. Moreover, 22% of the interviewees consider the local level as the *only* or only feasible political venue to voice their protest.

To describe the creation and consolidation of the Ottersberg protest group’s collective identity, it is useful to assess the group members’ *intrinsic motivations*. There are three motivations that stand out. First, the urge to act, either because of their conscience, conviction, or their self-worth (72%). Second, the topical exchange with others about the coronavirus and corresponding measures (33%). Third, knowledge about the side-effects of the vaccine among their families, friends, or acquaintances (28%). Therefore, their motivation to participate in the protest walks is strongly connected to their personal values, norms, and principles. The social aspect of meeting and getting to know other people, however, is less relevant.

Figure 11

Intrinsic Motivations for Protest Participation



Note. Responses mentioned by fewer than four interviewees are generally not displayed, a detailed overview is provided in the Appendix A.7. The responses relate to the questions: What motivates you to participate in the protest walks? And why is it important for you to participate in the protest walks?

5.1 CREATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE PROTEST GROUP’S COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The first step in generating collective action by a group is to *create and consolidate a collective identity* for that group. The results for this step are summarised in Figure 16.

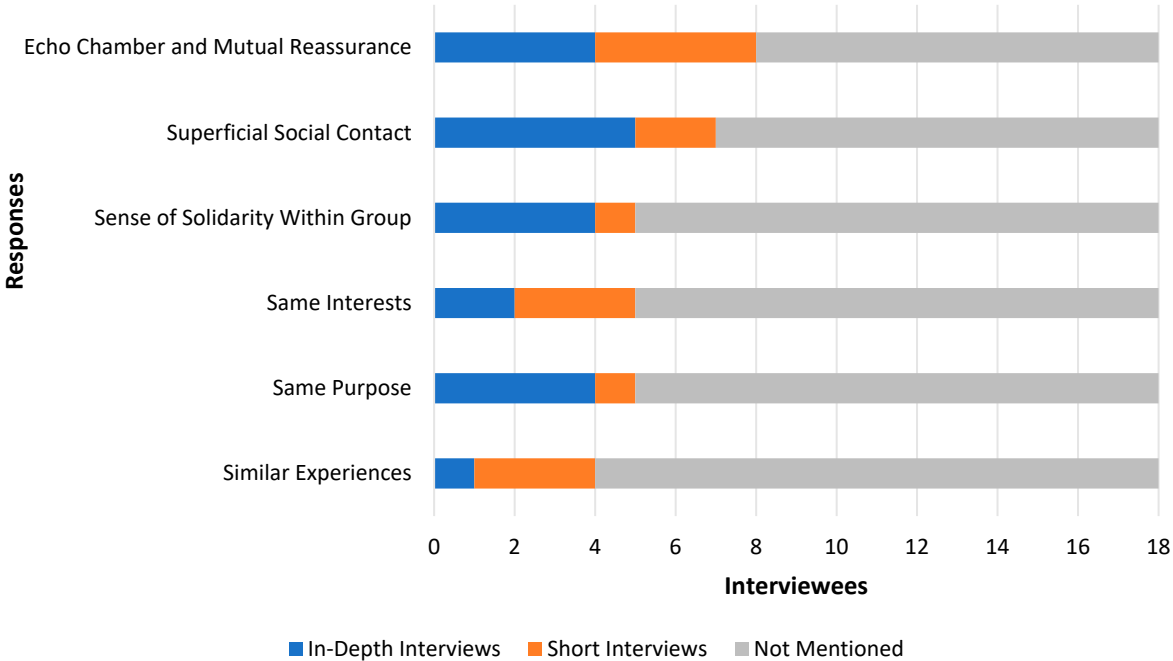
Fundamental in this regard is that the *individual identifies as part of the group*⁶, which most of the interviewees (83%) do. From Figure 12, it can be seen that this feeling stems mainly from the group forming an echo chamber. There they can affirm each other's political positions on the corona measures and have a safe and non-discriminatory space where group members are equal (44%). This “safe space” is evident in Interviewee II.2’s account of what connects the protesters with each other: “Well, personally, as usual, it's good for me because we all think the same way and you're not looked at funny because you think that way”¹⁷.

Further, individuals’ identification is also linked to knowing the other protesters superficially (39%). Nearly a third of the group (28%) mentions a sense of solidarity within the group, for example, when they exchanged tips on how to treat a corona infection (II.5). Furthermore, almost one-third of the

¹⁷ All quotations are translated from German into English.

group emphasises in each case that the group members share the same interests and the same purpose (28%). Although those aspects of belonging are named by the majority of the interviewees, it is noteworthy that only four of them directly state that they feel like the group is a community.

Figure 12
What Makes the Protesters Feel Like They are Part of the Group?



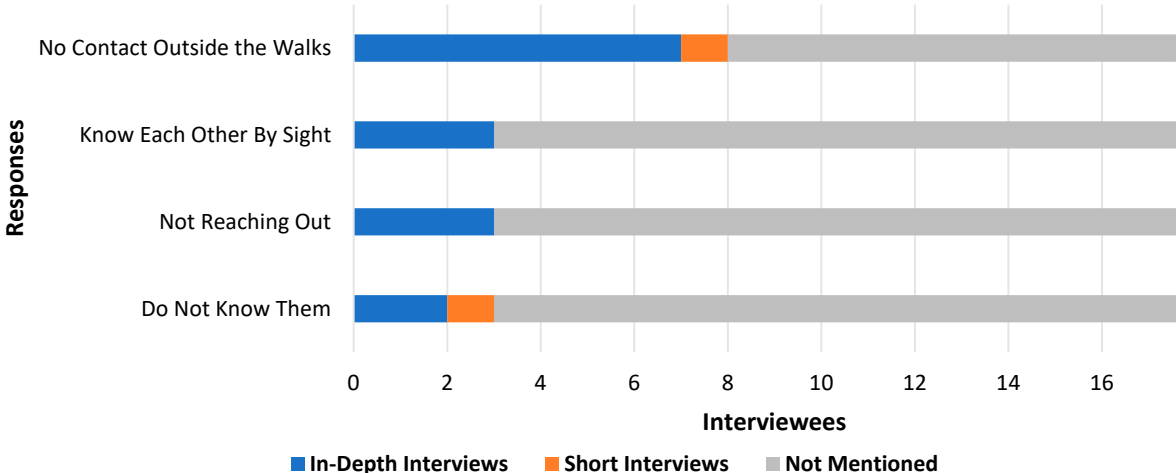
Note. The responses relate to the questions: Would you say a group feeling exists among the protesters? What motivates you to participate in the protest walks?

Moreover, as Figure 12 shows, the heterogenous responses highlight that the protest group sees itself as a community of purpose. The sense of belonging to the group is largely based on reasons that can be described as “catch-all terms”, which are vague in their content and can thus be interpreted individually. Furthermore, the emphasis on the group as an echo chamber points towards the importance of individuality within the group. Therefore, it is crucial for the Ottersberg community of purpose to share the same objectives. The outstanding role of the “same purpose”, which is also a “catch-all term”, is further described by Interviewee SI.4: “Yes, of course you like some of the others by now. And well, that’s how it is, then you talk to them a bit more. Going for a walk is also healthy and nice as such. But at the end of the day, it’s about the goal that we have”.

Having established that the group has a sense of community, the fact that 44% of the interviewees *do not feel like the group is a community* must be emphasised. There are too few protesters (6%) with too little personal contact (11%) and too much fluctuation in the membership (11%). As Figure 13 shows, they do not know their fellow protesters (17%), they know them only by sight (17%), and they do not

reach out to deepen their contact (17%). One interviewee illustrates this clearly with their answer to the question of whether the protest group constitutes a community: “Nope. I wouldn’t say that, simply because we haven’t even introduced ourselves, where we come from, what our opinions are. Well, one voices one’ opinion, but this is limited specifically to the Corona story [containment measures]. No, a community hasn’t yet developed, I have to say” (II.1). This is reinforced by the fact that they do nothing together outside of the protest walks (44%).

Figure 13
The Ways in Which the Indirect, Passive Relationships Manifest Themselves in the Group



Note. Because there were few detailed references in this respect, responses that were mentioned less than 4 times are shown in this figure. The responses relate to the question: What ties the group together? When asked this, the interviewees said yes, but also gave reasons why this was not the case.

Therefore, it can be assumed that for a small part of the group, the group must have a certain degree of continuity and connection. For them, fluctuation prevents the emergence of a sense of community. As one of the interviewees points out: “The group feeling has to be rebuilt over and over again” (II.5). Nonetheless, it seems that 17% of the interviewees regard at least the core group as a community. Fluctuation and a shallow bond within the group, therefore, do not per se preclude individuals from feeling part of the group.

THE SECONDARY ROLE OF ACTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE GROUP

For the creation and consolidation of a group’s collective identity, according to conventional theory, it is also important that the group members are embedded in the group and feel committed to it (Figure 16). For this, I assessed the interviewees’ relationships with the group. Interestingly, the interviewees equally mentioned aspects of active relationships^G (39%) and passive relationships^G (44%) with other group members.

The interviewees agree that over time, people get to know each other superficially (39%). Nearly half of the interviewees (44%) report that they do not meet other protesters outside of the protest walks. Although they know each other by sight (17%), the group does not meet to build friendships (II.3; II.2; II.4). One of the interviewees describes this sentiment as follows: “And through the walk, through seeing, you know each other, of course. We don't know each other privately, but we know each other. But that we somehow form friendships or something? It's not supposed to be like that. We all just stand up for the same things” (II.2). This underlines the temporary restriction of relationships to the demonstrations. Although the company of the protesters is nice, it is not the purpose of the walks to build relationships (e.g., II.3). This contact is more of an inevitable effect that has the bonus that the individual protesters are not alone.

The superficiality of the relationships indicates that the purpose of contact is directed towards the individual's inner self. Group members predominantly use contact with the group for self-validation and to (re)affirm their way of thinking. Through this, they feel like they belong to the group.

In conclusion, this shows that the group is based on superficial relationships and overarching commonalities rather than on close relationships. Moreover, it becomes clear that strong relationships are not necessary to feel part of the group. The emphasis on only superficially knowing fellow protesters makes it clear that relationships have a low priority in the group. It is reasonable to assume that the group feeling is rather anchored in the notion of a community of purpose than a fellowship. Considering the feeling of shared social discrimination (see below), this finding seems counterintuitive. However, several interviewees emphasise that the superficial, temporarily confined contact is sufficient (e.g., II.3; SI.4). Moreover, as friendship is not the goal, the purpose of contact for the individual protesters is self-affirmation. Furthermore, the feeling as a group is not necessarily the fundament of the group and its longevity, especially since it has shrunk substantially. Nonetheless, the protest group still exists¹⁸.

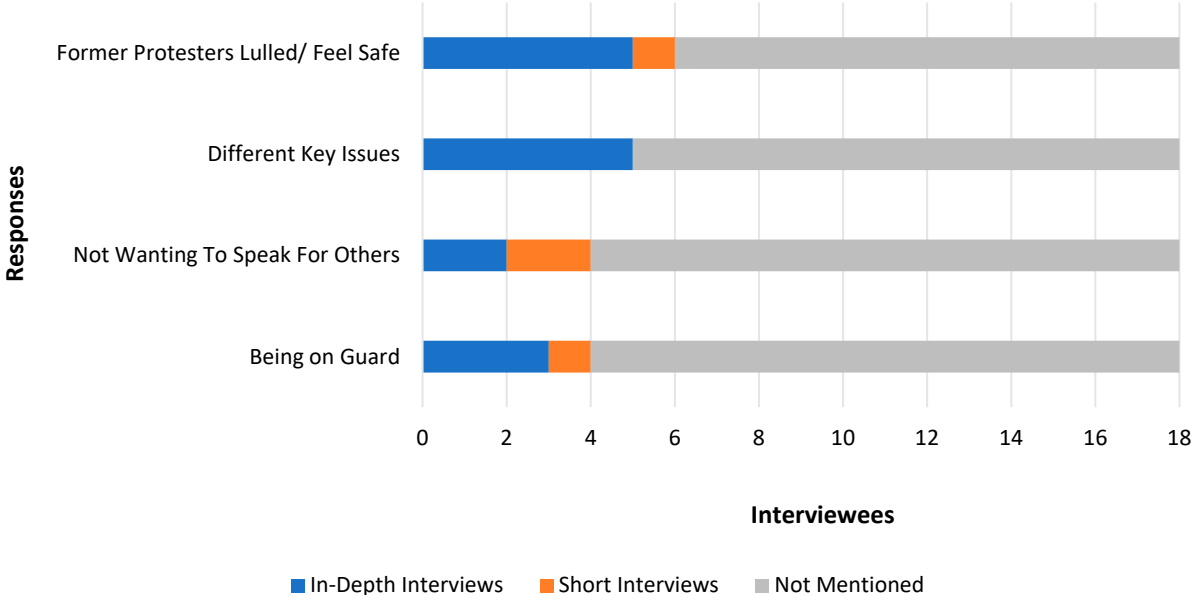
THE IMPORTANCE FOR THE PROTEST GROUP TO DISTINGUISH ITSELF FROM OTHER GROUPS: THE VILLAGERS AND THE GOVERNMENT

The assumption that the protest group has a significantly individualistic characteristic may be supported by the high intra-group distinction. The *intra-group distinction*⁶ made by 67% of the interviewees reveals a high level of differentiation. This indicates a certain internal fragmentation in the group. Notably, 22% of the interviewees explicitly declare that they cannot speak for the other group

¹⁸ In contrast to other protest groups in other villages that have ceased to exist, such as the group in Vis-selhövede, Lower Saxony (M. Haase, personal communication, May 5, 2022).

members. The group members have different key topics besides the corona measures they are protesting against (28%), which supports the notion of “catch-all” group values and orientations. Further, a few protesters (11%) explicitly point out that some of the group members hold conspiracist tendencies (e.g., II.4). At the same time, 17% of the interviewees positively note that the group members come from different social strata, which would reassure them that their views are not a niche opinion (cf. II.4; II.2). In addition, they compare themselves to former protesters. In contrast to them, the current ones are staying on guard (22%) and are not lulled by softened measures (33%), tired out (17%), or intimidated (11%). Therefore, the high level of intra-group distinction may support the assumption that the group has an individualistic core feature. In addition, a considerable part of how the group defines itself hinges upon its demarcation from former protesters who gave up.

Figure 14
What Intra-Group Differentiations Does the Protest Group Make?



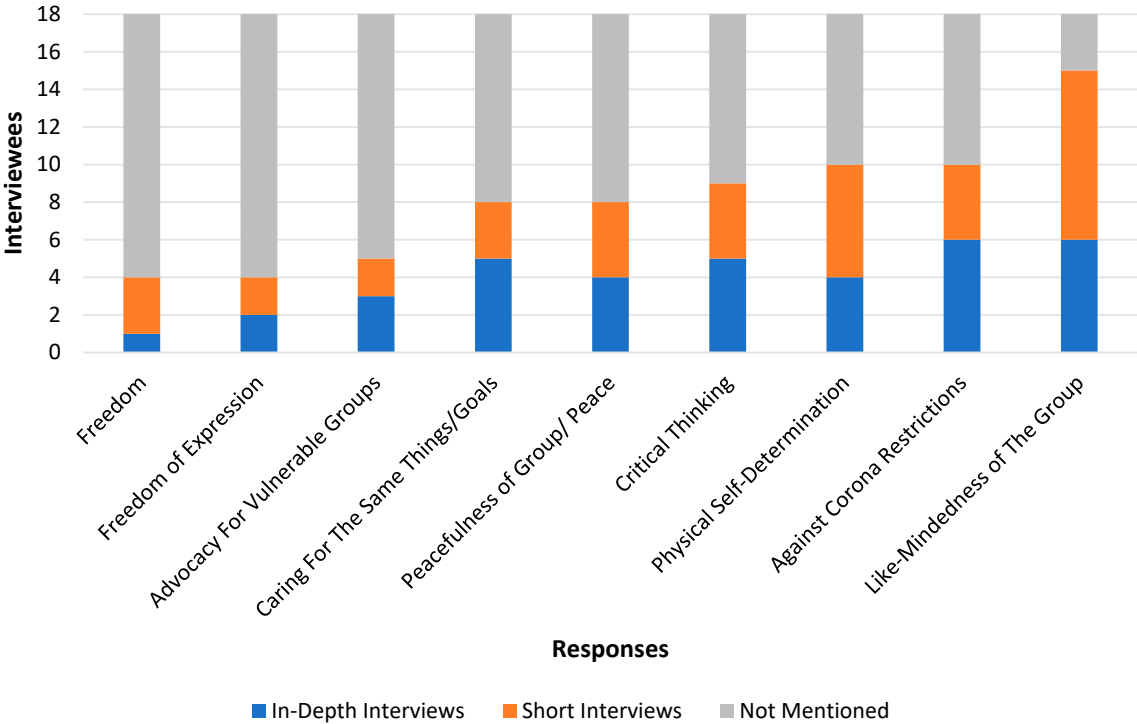
Note. The responses relate to the questions: What ties the group together? How would you characterise the protest group?

SHARED NORMS AND VALUES

Finally, for the creation and consolidation of a group’s collective identity, it is also important that the group members *create collective norms and views* (see Figure 15). In general, the protesters overwhelmingly feel like they *share common values and norms*⁶ (94%). However, it should be borne in mind that statements about common values and norms are based on *individual* perceptions, they do not necessarily need to actually exist in this form as group values. The interviewees emphasise that they simply assume they have the same opinion as the other group members, but do not know for certain. Interviewee II.4 illustrates this point when explaining that “I assume that we have the same interests. Mostly. No? The same interests, the same fears. And that's what brings us together”.

The sense of shared values is significantly based on the individual’s feeling that group members are generally like-minded (83%). In addition, more than half of the respondents (56%) declare self-determination over one’s own body as a group value. Correspondingly, they commonly reject the corona containment measures (56%). It may be that the aversion to corona measures is already partially contained in the feeling of like-mindedness. In line with this, half of the interviewees (50%) explicitly rate the group members as critical thinkers. More generally, almost half of the group (44%) emphasise that they are at the protests for the same goals.

Figure 15
Shared Values, Norms, and Orientations in the Protest Group



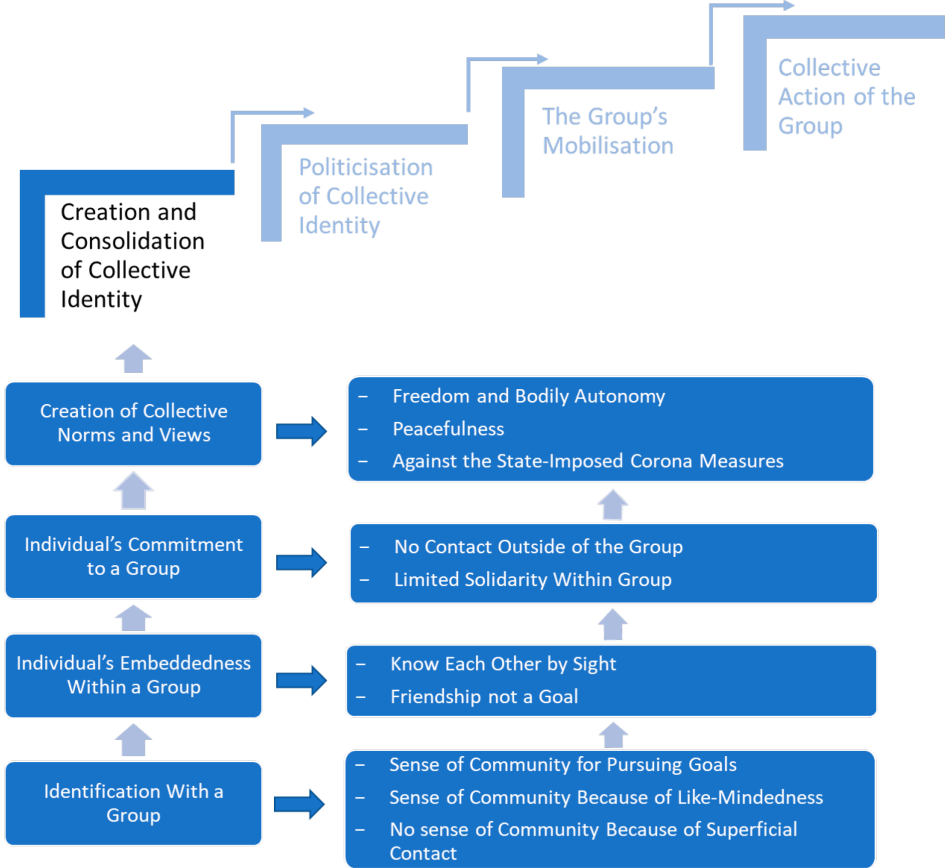
Note. The responses relate to the questions: What ties the group together? How would you characterise the protest group?

In summary, for the *creation and consolidation* of the Ottersberg protest group, two aspects stand out. First, the group feeling is not rooted in deep social relationships. Instead, the group provides a room to share the same interests and to express oneself. The group is centred around a common goal and offers a “safe space”. It can be assumed that the protest group constitutes a community of purpose in which individuals can “be themselves”. Second, the collective identity mostly consists of umbrella features that are vague enough to include all group members but who can interpret these umbrella features individually. Interviewee II.4 states this quite drastically when they explain that “(...) this [opinion of another protester] is simply the extreme, and you have to watch out for that. Some people are Reichsbürger [“Reich Citizens”, a label for people or groups who are far-right and reject the legitimacy of the modern German state]. ... Let me put it this way: as long as they're for freedom, peace,

democracy, and stuff like that, with walking and self-determination, that's fine. Anyone can come. Even a murderer can come. As long as he doesn't murder anybody here or whatnot”.

The unexpected lack of fellowship, in the form of limited and superficial interaction with the other protesters, can be compensated for. Not only do individuals assume that the group members have the same goals and interests as they do, but the feeling of being among like-minded people also helps individuals to feel relaxed and secure. Distinguishing the group from outsiders further contributes to a sense of belonging and cohesion. Finally, the protest walks are about reassuring one another rather than getting to know one another.

Figure 16
Factors That Create and Consolidate the Collective Identity of the Ottersberg Corona Protest Group



Note. Comparison of this thesis' findings with the developed model based on Andits (2018), Bos et al. (2020), Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (2020), McKay et al. (2021), Polletta and Jasper (2001), and Turner-Zwinkels and van Zoeren (2016).

5.2 POLITICISATION OF THE PROTEST GROUP'S COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The second step in generating collective action by a group is to *politicise the collective identity* of the group. The results for this step are summarised in Figure 19.

The politicisation is grounded in the *group's awareness of its shared struggles or grievances*. More than a third of the interviewees (39%) explicitly express a feeling of *relative deprivation*⁶ of their own group compared to other groups

AWARENESS OF SHARED STRUGGLES: SHARED DISADVANTAGES, GRIEVANCES AND RELATIVE DEPRIVATION

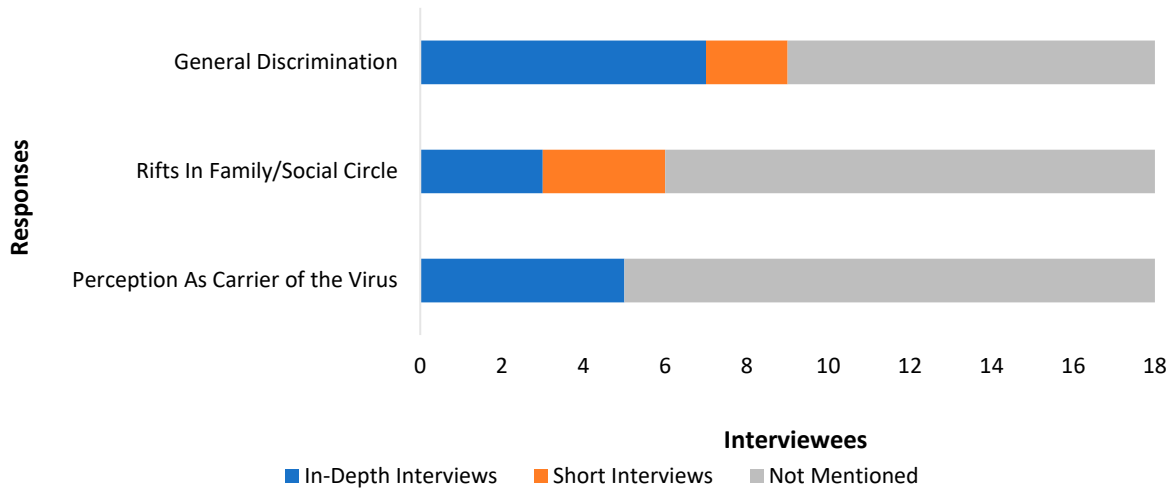
To explore the anger, grievances, and struggles of the interviewees, it is illuminating to look at their *perception of shared disadvantages*⁶. The least important aspect is *shared economic disadvantages*, mentioned by only 17% of the interviewees. This type of disadvantage is based on the potential threat of unemployment for unvaccinated workers in the health sector (11%) and potential fines for violating corona containment measures (6%). These shared economic disadvantages are also linked to shared political ones.

Shared political disadvantages are felt by nearly half of the group (44%). The predominant feelings are that the police take particularly harsh measures against them (39%) and that the group faces repercussions because of their political stance (39%).

Regarding *shared social disadvantages*, half of the interviewees (50%) feel discriminated against by society. One third (33%) address rifts that occurred in their family and social circles. A considerable number of the interviewees also referred to the assumed perceptions of the group by the village. On the one hand, villagers would treat them as carriers of the virus (39%), as exemplarily pointed out by one interviewee (SI.2): "It always looks as if we unvaccinated people carry this virus within us. But we don't! And we don't carry it dormant in us". On the other hand, society would treat them like they were right-wing (11%) or conspiracy theorists (6%). Interviewee II.4 describes this sentiment as following: "[We are] all right-wing and stuff, but we don't have any right-wing flags or anything of the sort. And you saw it yourself, it's a peaceful bunch, all nice people". To summarise the public prejudices that the group perceives it is facing: "Yeah, we are all right-wing. We have absolutely no clue. We are all anti-vaxxers" (II.4).

Figure 17

Perceived Shared Social Disadvantages by the Protest Group



Note. The responses relate to the questions: Would you say that the protesters experience more advantages or disadvantages in society? In the village? Which positive or negative consequences do you experience because of your participation in the protest walks?

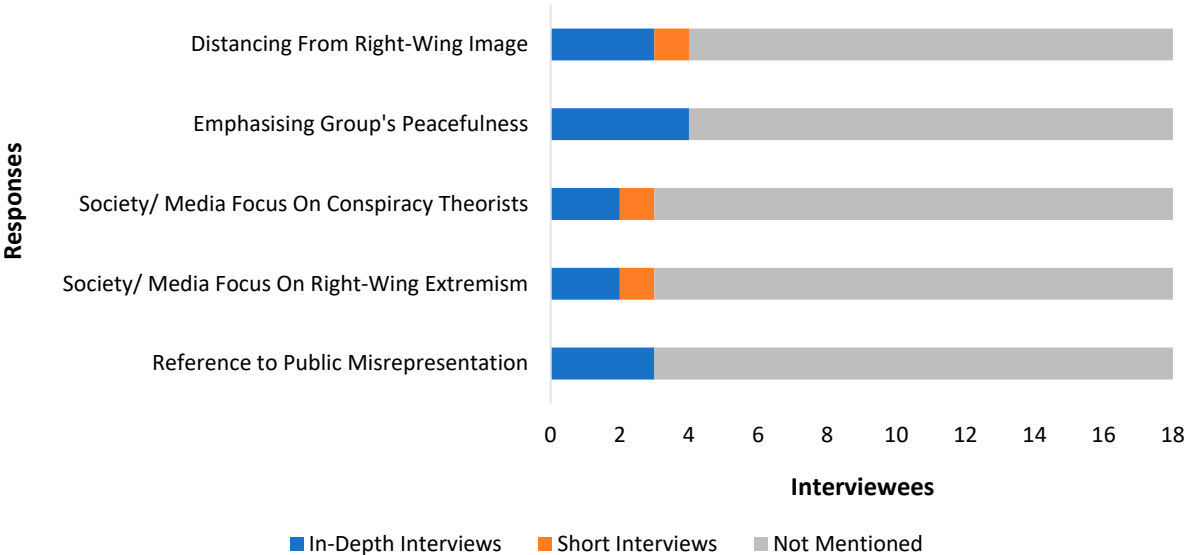
Notably, the interviewees' fear of being labelled as right-wing is stronger than their fear of being called conspiracy theorists. This might be explained by Germany's history of National Socialism. Another explanation might be that the group is using a rationalisation tactic. Individuals feel like the group is being oppressed because of their beliefs. Consequently, they perceive the media coverage of them as a distorted representation of the group. The aspiration of attracting more protesters in autumn may indicate their hope that villagers will then realise that the group is in the right. This hope is a recurrent motive in the interviews, which will be analysed in greater detail in Subchapter 5.3.

The group's awareness of its shared struggles or grievances is further evident in the interviewees' *concern about the group's public image* as a sign of social marginality. In this regard, a distinction is required between the group's supposed depiction by society and the media, on the one hand, and the group's reactions to it, on the other hand. In terms of coverage of them, 22% of the interviewees complain of an alleged general misrepresentation of the protest group and movement in public. Society and the media would focus on members who are allegedly right-wing (22%), conspiracy theorists (17%), or absolutely opposed to vaccines (6%). The group's reaction concentrates on emphasising their peacefulness and distinguishing themselves from being right-wing (22%) or conspiracy theorists (6%). Simultaneously, 11% of the interviewees justify or tolerate conspiracy thinking. Accordingly, the interviewees are more concerned with distinguishing themselves from being right-wing than with being conspiracy theorists. This contrasts the group's feeling that society would perceive them rather as corona carriers (39%) than as right-wing (11%). This is particularly noteworthy because the group does not make a palpable effort to refute or rebut society's alleged perception that its members are carriers

of the coronavirus. During my conversations with the group, they also made greater efforts to refute the prejudice of being a right-wing group.

Figure 18

How the Group Think it is Portrayed in Public and how it Reacts



Note. Because there were few detailed references in this respect, responses that were mentioned more than two times are shown in this graph. Responses relate to the following questions: Would you say that the protesters experience more advantages or disadvantages in society? What do you think the walks achieve in the village/society?

The lack of refutation to the preconceptions that the protesters are virus carriers may be related to the group distances itself from what it sees as an uncritical and vaccinated society. A considerable part of the group cohesion is built on the shared rejection of corona measures. Because they are perceived as COVID-19 carriers, the group faces discrimination not only politically but also socially. While the group could defy the official restrictions by e.g., meeting despite its prohibition, being shunned by society and social circles may hit the group members at a different level and intensity (cf. II.6). Then, some of the group share the conviction that the (current) virus mutation is not dangerous (e.g., SI.13) and that the corona measures are inefficient (e.g., II.6). Finally, people who are vaccinated can fall ill and transmit the virus as well (e.g., II.2). Thus, according to the group, the social discrimination is unnecessary.

Another factor that causes indignation is the feeling that the *group's needs and worries are ignored at the state-level (22%)*. Citizens would have no say in the corona situation (17%), the state would ignore the vaccine's side-effects and potentially lethal consequences (28%), and it would not quell the group's worries and fears (22%). Only two people (11%) mention their *feeling of not being considered at local level*, referring to a counterdemonstration which the mayor apparently joined. The interviewees do not often express the sense of being ignored by politicians at the local and state level. However, this

concern may indicate that the villagers are the main audience for the protesters as the group does not seem to address politicians.

Nearly half of the interviewees (44%) feel like the *group is treated unfairly*, stemming predominantly from the perception that their peaceful and calm attitude is neither reciprocated nor rewarded (22%). More precisely, they feel like they are treated in a vile manner by the police (28%), the villagers (11%), and the state (11%). In particular, the measures taken by the government are perceived as arbitrary and unreasonable (11%), and the police is directly connected with harassing the group (22%).

Talking about the group's relationship with the local police, Interviewee II.3 exemplifies the group's notion that the police harass the group. They say that it was obvious that "the whole thing is absolutely not wanted because we [the protesters] have been harassed so massively by the police". Sometimes, when walking in Ottersberg, the police would bring eight or ten buses from other towns. The group "has been followed there [in Ottersberg] back and forth by police cars because we [the group] have gone through the city, walked through this village (...)" (II.3).

WHOM TO BLAME, ACCORDING TO THE GROUP?

After the group is aware of its shared struggle against power structures, the politicisation of the group is advanced by identifying those who are supposedly responsible for the group's predicament.

The state is named as the main culprit (83%) when respondents express negative views about actors and public institutions at state-level. The police and the "mainstream" media only follow in second place by a wide margin, with 39% each. Dislike against the pharmaceutical industry was voiced by 28% of the interviewees. Thus, there are four sources of potential conflict. First, the vaccine and corresponding containment measures. Second, the government. Third, the police. Fourth, the media. It could be that the police and the media have lower scores than the government because the group perceives them as tools of the latter to achieve its goals.

Having a closer look at why the interviewees articulated this negative stance towards the government, they outline three main reasons. First, the government would break the law and would act in an unlawful manner (39%). "And from a legal point of view, this is not acceptable at all. If you study the law a little bit, you realise again and again that what happened here should not be allowed to happen", explained interviewee II.2. This is corroborated by interviewee SI.12, who expresses their grievance similarly: "What really bothers me about this whole story is that our rule of law has been abolished. Our parliaments no longer function, and our judiciary even less so". The second main reason is the opinion that the government would use citizens as unwitting test subjects for the corona vaccination, which, in addition, would not be an effective, real vaccination (56%). Complementing this, 22% of the interviewees feel like the government would shield the pharmaceutical industry from being held liable.

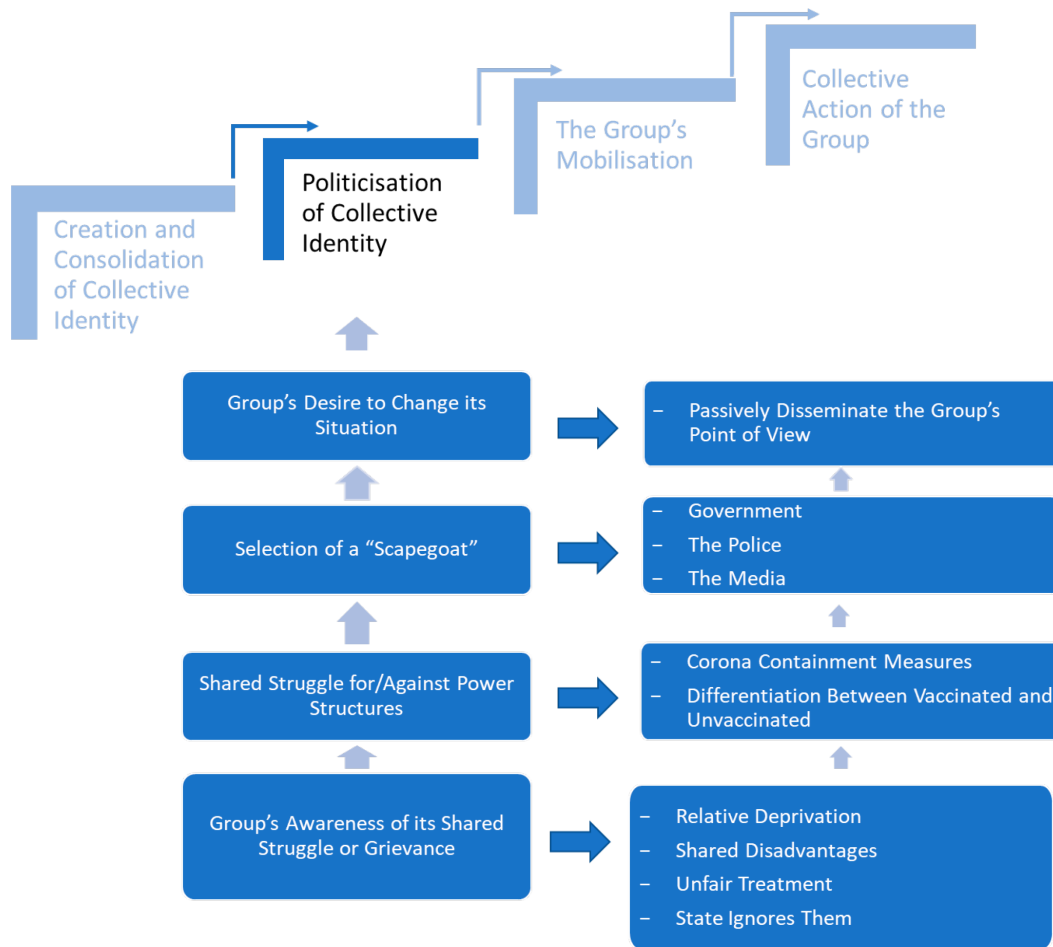
The third reason is that the government introduced the as repressive seen corona measures (39%). This is supplemented by the belief of one-third of the interviewees (33%) that the government would suppress voices of dissent and would lie to citizens.

In addition, 28% of the interviewees declared that they believed that the government would knowingly ignore side-effects and deaths from the corona vaccination. Interviewee II.4 illustrates this with the following case. One health insurance company is said to have found that there are considerably more vaccine patients with side effects compared with the official rate. While the official rate was 0.1, the health insurance company allegedly found a rate of 7% or 8%. The health insurance company then made an inquiry to the federal government, the WHO, and the RKI to clarify this discrepancy. According to Interviewee II.4, the official response was to dismiss the entire board.

In general, 22% of the interviewees feel like the government would intimidate its citizens and would incite fear. Considerably more, 56% of the interviewees feel like the police aim to intimidate citizens. Likewise, the interviewees express the opinion that the media would inflate or omit aspects and would carry out propaganda (56%). In conclusion, the group's main disapproval is directed at the government, which they mistrust and feel has malicious intents. The media and the police, in contrast, seem to be perceived as the government's henchmen.

Figure 19

How the Collective Identity of the Ottersberg Corona Protest Group is Politicised



Note. Comparison of this thesis' findings with the model derived from sources mentioned in Figure 16.

5.3 MOBILISATION OF THE PROTEST GROUP'S MEMBERS

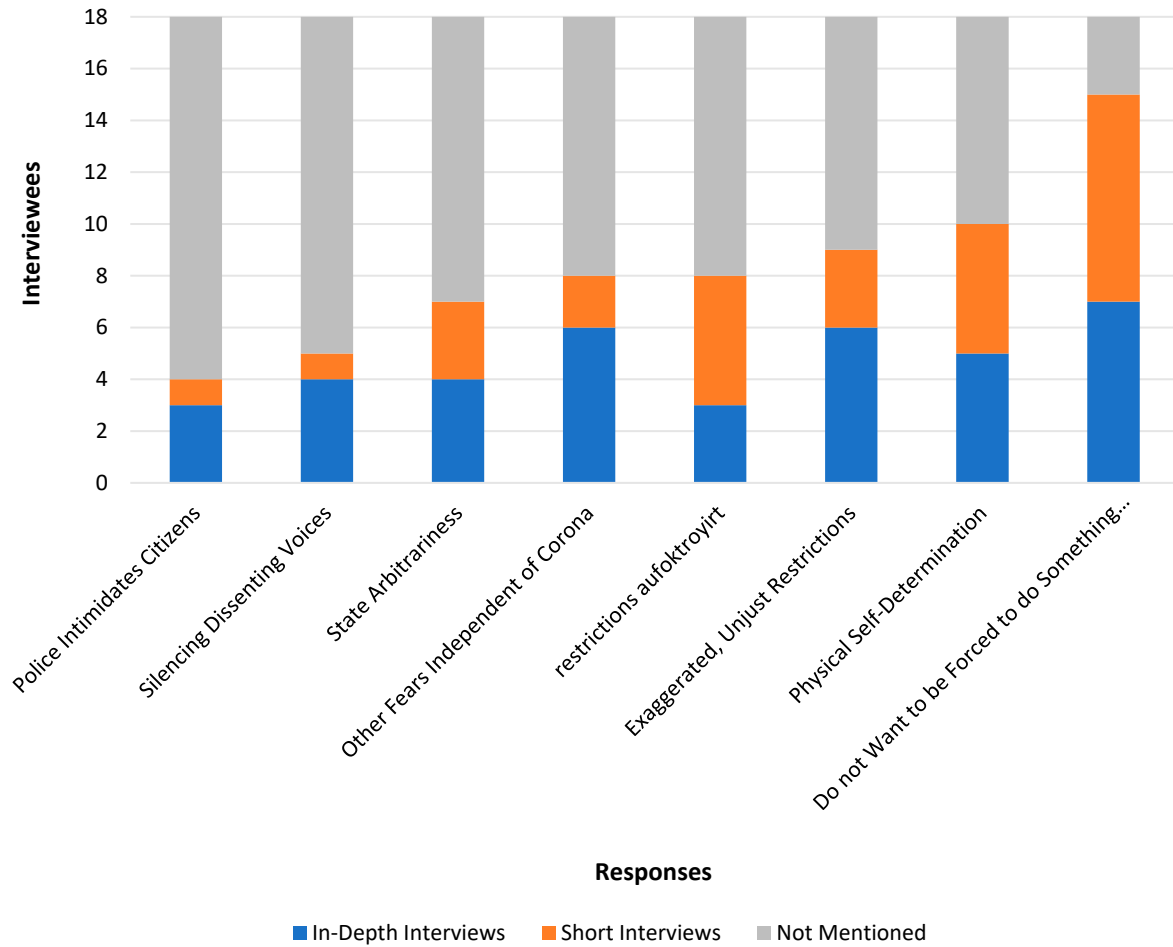
The third step in generating collective action by a group is to *mobilise this group* (see Figure 22 for a summary). Fundamental to this is the perception that the group's values are being violated or threatened. Almost half of the interviewees (44%) expressed the *violation of group norms and principles*^P. The most salient norms that are violated are physical self-determination (33%), just like the feeling that the government would intentionally cause harm (33%). These are closely followed by the perception that the corona containment measures would be paternalistic (28%). Likewise, almost a third of the interviewees (28%) feel like freedom of speech is being infringed upon. Furthermore, they feel like the reporting on corona in the media would be inaccurate or false (22%). In conclusion, the named values and principles that are perceived to be violated revolve around the corona measures, and the protesters' sense that their attempts to express their opinions are to be suppressed.

Turning to the *perception that group norms and values are threatened*^p, almost 45% of the interviewees indicated that this was the case. The predominant threat (33%) is a possible reintroduction of containment measures at a future point in time. In addition, approximately 17% of them indicated negative future changes in the political system that would threaten the group's norms. Thus, the threats are without temporal specifications and remain vague in their content. This may indicate that the group is focusing on the present and not on the future. This assumption might be strengthened by the group's notion that autumn could be a repetition of the last period of harsh containment measures (e.g., II.2, II.2, II.4). In such a case, the group particularly hopes to increase their numbers of participants again.

Although theoretically violated or threatened group values are essential for the group's mobilisation, the interviewees notably emphasise the *violation of their own personal norms*^p. In comparison to the violated group norms that were only addressed by half of the interviewees (50%), more than 80% of them (83%) expressed the violation of their *individual* norms and principles. The most prevailing motive is that the individual protesters do not want to be forced to do something that they do not deem reasonable (77%). The violation of their physical self-determination comes second with 61%. Just as many (61%) feel like the containment measures are exaggerated or unjust. Further, they denounce general arbitrariness by the state (39%). Surprisingly, more than half of the interviewees (56%) refer to other issues independent of corona, such as pensions (e.g., II.6, II.4, II.1), whose state handling angers them. This may point towards a general discontent with the state or with their own situation.

Figure 20

Perception of Violated Individual Norms



Note. Responses relate to the following questions: What motivates you to participate in the protest walks? Why is it important for you to participate in the protest walks? What do you want to express with the protest walks? Are the other topics you want to adress?

In summary, a third (33%) of the interviewees talk more about the infringement of their own values than about their group’s values and principles. Physical self-determination is the key aspect that is reflected in both group norms and individual norms. Moreover, it can be seen as a link between both these two types of norms and between individuals and the protest group. Not only is the violation of individual norms more prevalent, but also the references to other infringements unrelated to corona measures are widespread. This focus on the individual may be reflected in the previously mentioned intrinsic motivations, as they strongly accentuate the role of self-esteem and the urge to do something. In addition, the comparison of violated individuals’ norms and group norms also points towards the role of individual motives in the general motivation of the group members. The feeling of being part of a group is tied to a few common norms, such as bodily self-determination, of which their broadness has two advantages: On the one hand, their broadness allows for integrating individual interpretations

while maintaining group values. On the other hand, their vagueness also allows the individual protesters to construe the group norms according to their own views.

Following the feeling of group norms being threatened or violated, the next step for the group's mobilisation is their *desire to bring their anger into public*^G (see Figure 22). Turning to this question, half of the interviewees (50%) intend to do so and are convinced of it. Some take this desire quite literally, as one interviewee (II.6) explains that "showing what one stands for is important. And that means [walking] without a mask". The underlying key issues for this are that the group does not agree with the corona restrictions (39%), followed by the general need to make their anger public (33%). Then, one-third (33%) perceive the state as too intrusive, closely followed by their wish to air their dislike of the pharma industry and its relationship with the state (22%). Lastly, 17% of the interviewees want to show their anger about both the intrusive and aggressive behaviour of the police and their resentment of the media as a tool for propaganda. The media may be not as prominent as expected from the insights about their negative stance towards public authorities. This might be due to the fact that some of the interviewees are not keen on using "mainstream" media but use alternative online sources instead (II.6, II.2). "I don't read newspapers and that kind of thing. And ... I haven't read newspapers for 100 years, I think. You can't do that anymore, it's not doable", explained Interviewee II.2. That is because "we live in a society that, let's say, what our media do [propaganda], you have to acknowledge without envy, it works! [... .] We sit in front of the *Tagesschau* (*Review of the Day*, television news service) and everything is awesome" (SI.12). The protesters would hold different opinions than the prevalent ones in society as they "don't swallow everything that the public media wants to sell us" (II.5). Instead, they turn to social media to be informed: "What they write here [on *Telegram*] is information. So, I'm on *Telegram* now, it's information that's not so bad, where you can then also think about it again, to that extent it's also an enrichment" (II.4).

THE GROUP'S OBJECTIVES

As laid out in Subchapter 2.5, there are different potential goals of mobilisation for a group. In *instrumental motivation*, the group tries to set external goals (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020). The second possible objective, based on *expressive motives*, is to raise awareness of the group's grievances. When engaging in *consensus mobilisation*, the group tries to disseminate their views. When trying to transform sympathisers into protesters, however, the group *mobilises action* (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 7). The last potential objective is to *express and perform their group identity*^P.

The main concern of the protest group seems to be the *dissemination of their views*. In this attempt at consensus mobilisation (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 7), they hope that the demonstrations will attract the attention of the villagers. At a later date, probably in the autumn, the group

expects the government to introduce new containment measures. These external interventions would change the situation of both the protest group and the villagers. The group hopes that this would lead to *mobilisation for action* (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 7). If the villagers were sufficiently angered by the new restrictions, they would eventually join the protesters.

A further major concern is to somehow change the group's situation at an unspecified point of time. This vagueness is characteristic of the group's plans. The interviewees do not have a strategy on how, who, where and through what they can reach their goals. The following excerpt from Interview II.3 gives an impression of this:

Researcher: What do you hope to achieve with the walks?

Interviewee: Yes, as I said, that the sleeping sheep wake up.

Researcher: And if you were to break it down a bit into smaller steps?

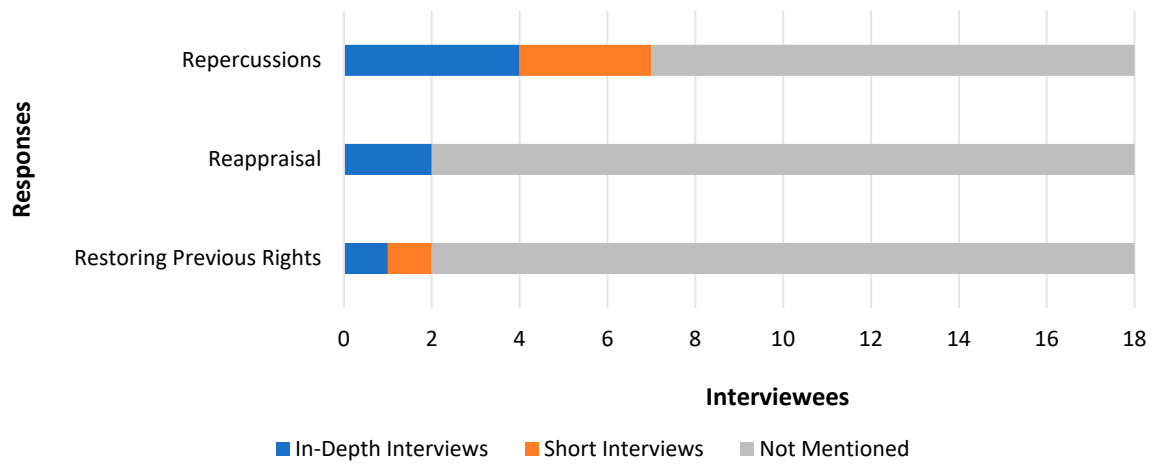
Interviewee: Even smaller than that?!

Likewise, 78% of the interviewees are driven by the fact that they want to *publicly convey what the group stands for*^P. From those, a third (33%) emphasises that they want to convey their persistence, while less than a third (22%) explicitly mention that they want to offer an alternative view of the corona pandemic and corresponding measures.

The interviewees view the protests less as an *opportunity to show courage*^P (22%) and more as an opportunity for *empowerment and self-agency*^P (56%). The underlying factors are a general feeling of being able to do something (50%) and not wanting to give in to pressure by society or politics (33%). Considering the feelings of shared disadvantages, this could indicate a "Now more than ever" attitude. Interviewee II.2 defends the group's stance: "And as usual, we walkers, we read. We read and we research. What's wrong with that? People who do not simply accept things, who investigate for themselves, who know for themselves 'Is it really like that? Does it have to be like that?' and not just go along with it". Therefore, participation in the protests is both a sign of bravery and resistance.

Figure 21

The Group's Desire for Compensation



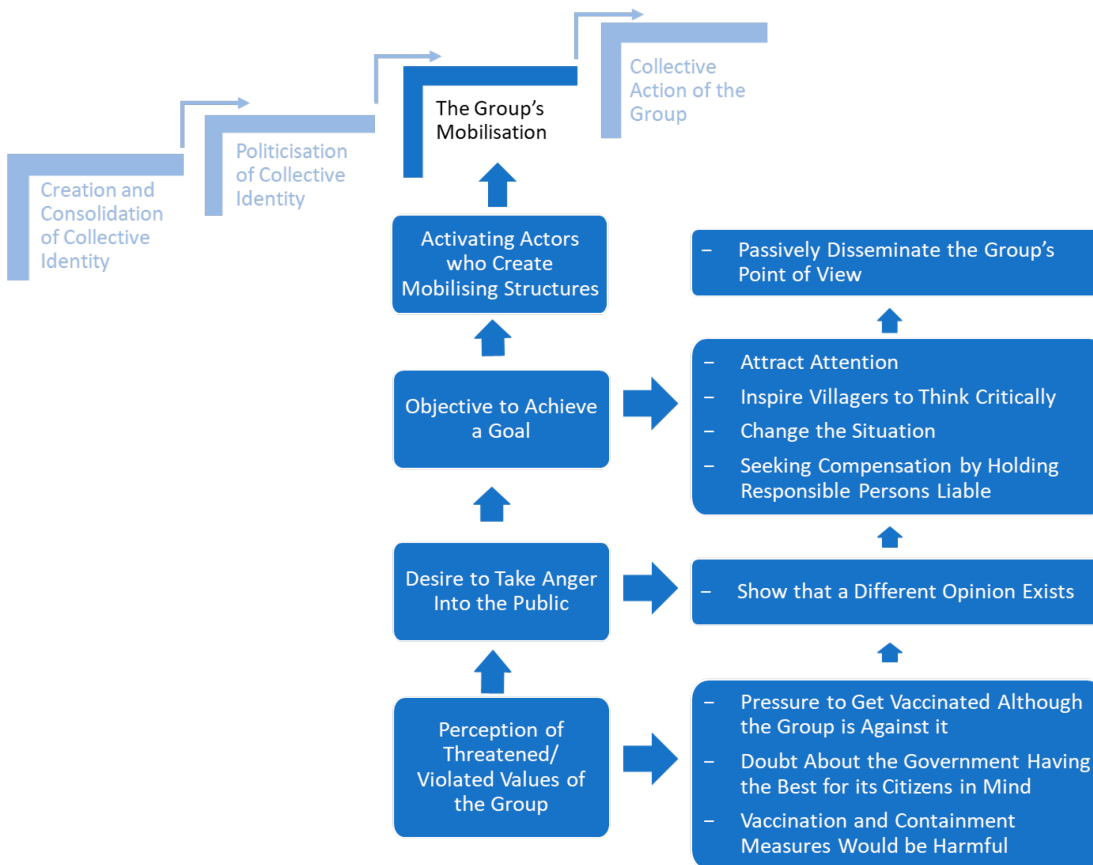
Note. Because there were few detailed references in this respect, responses that were mentioned more than two times are shown in this graph. Responses relate to the following questions: What do you hope the protest walks will achieve? Are there other issues you want to address?

After creating the desire to take the group's anger into the public, the next step in mobilising the group is to evoke the desire to change its situation. In this regard, it is illuminating that half of the interviewees (50%) are seeking a form of compensation^P for their grievances.

The most important factor for the interviewees is that those who are allegedly responsible should face consequences in the form of prosecution or being held liable (39%). The demand for justice is therefore more prominent in the group than abolishing the corona measures. Moreover, the sentiment of revenge is directed towards the outgroup. Few interviewees seek a form of compensation that directly addresses the ingroup. For example, only 17% of the interviewees seek legal reconditioning or historical reappraisal. Thus, the desire to prevent those responsible from shirking responsibility might be one driving factor for the protesters to carry on. Subsequently, this may indicate that the group's anger is not oriented towards future compensation but rather towards emotions embedded in the present.

Figure 22

How the Collective Identity of the Ottersberg Corona Protest Group Is Mobilised



Note. Comparison of this thesis' findings with the model derived from sources mentioned in Figure 16.

5.4 COLLECTIVE ACTION OF THE PROTEST GROUP IN OTTERSBERG

The final step of a group's *collective action* is initiated when the group members feel that the *group is collectively able to redress the group's situation*^P. Figure 24 summarises this step of the Ottersberg group. The basis for this is the group's prevalent belief that it can cause change (72%). Foremost, this concerns the prevailing belief that the group attracts attention (44%). However, the hope for a subsequent change of opinion among the villagers is not very pronounced among the interviewees (28%). On a more general level, however, more than one-third (39%) think the group's protests make their opposition clear to the public. Some interviewees (28%) believe that the group can change the situation in general.

In sum, the interviewees perceive that the group can contribute to *raising awareness*. However, the group does not have concrete further goals other than gaining attention. The main concern of the group is attention itself rather than using this attention for another purpose, such as initiating concrete change or formulating clear demands. Attracting attention while showing their opposition may serve

to show the villagers that the group stands up for their convictions regarding the corona containment measures in the long term.

Further, half of the interviewees (50%) think about *collective actions in the future*. A third (33%) expect that containment measures could be reintroduced in the autumn, which in turn could subsequently lead villagers to join the protests. This hope is specifically expressed by some interviewees (17%). Some also refer to potential future communication formats. Likewise, 17% of the interviewees explicitly mention the abolition of the vaccine mandate for health workers. Although this is a concrete goal and part of the corona containment measures, it does not seem to have the highest priority for the interviewees. This may point towards a higher priority for individual points of views than for solidarity with potentially affected group members or villagers.

In contrast, slightly more than half of the interviewees (56%) *doubt whether the group can achieve change*^P. There were few interviewees (28%) who even mentioned falling participant numbers. Regarding the possibility of change, more than two-thirds refer to the failure to achieve change so far (39%) and one-third do not hold much hope for success in the future (33%). In addition, some (22%) doubt the group's ability to convince passers-by, considering that 22% of the interviewees feel like people lack the conviction to join the protest walks. This uncertainty about gaining protesters might be due to previous negative experiences when either actively trying to talk with villagers or the missing feedback when doing so.

The few *positive reactions* (22%) are limited to private positive feedback (11%) and sometimes an exchange with villagers over the span of the protests (11%). Likewise, recounts of *negative reactions* focus on getting shunned by social circles (17%), previous counterprotests, and verbal abuse by villagers (17% each). Thus, there is no outstanding feedback they received from the villagers. Nonetheless, have they continued with their protests.

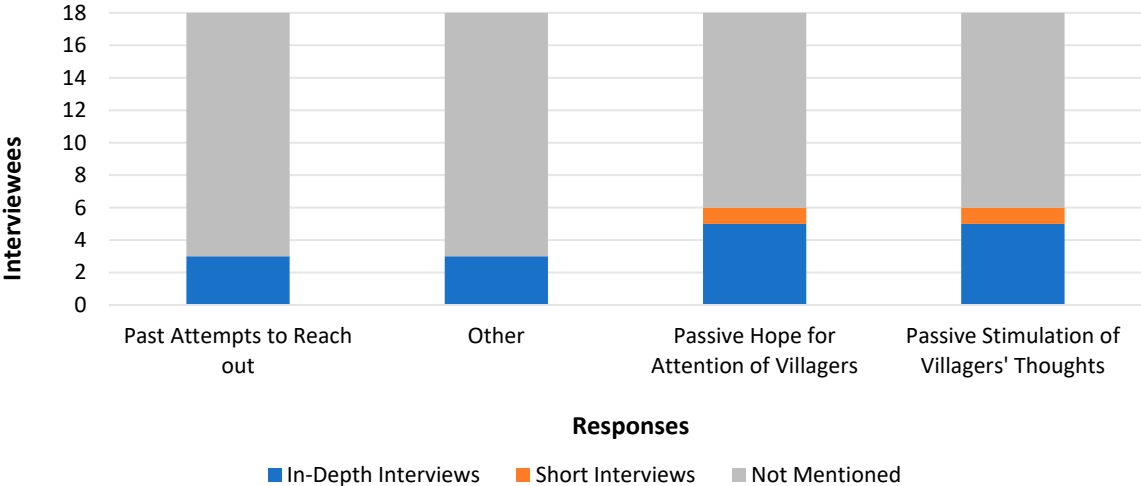
As the group's belief and disbelief in change are balanced out, it is reasonable to assume that those who do not believe in the group's capability to bring change need to focus on different aspects to persist in their protest participation. On the one hand, hope to achieve a change at a later point in time could be such an aspect. On the other hand, it may be that the group is focusing on the group to maintain it as a room for exchange and reassurance instead of trying to expand. Consequently, the current protesters would need to have a high degree of commitment and intrinsic motivation to maintain their protest participation over time. This rings true, especially when considering that the protest group has been organising these protest walks since 2020 and more than one-third (33%) does not feel like it has achieved any external results through the demonstrations. Regardless, the group could still use them to communicate their beliefs and their rejection of corona measures over time.

HOW THE PROTEST GROUP TRIES TO REACH OUT TO THEIR AUDIENCES

Looking at the attempts by the protesters to *reach out to their audience*, it is interesting that they solely focus on the villagers. No one mentioned that they want to address politicians, neither on state nor on local level. This could be a sign of disenchantment with politics, or it could indicate that the protesters have so far ruled out this group for themselves at the mental level. Moreover, only 11% of the interviewees mentioned directly that they try to reach out to the villagers, while slightly more (17%) reported such efforts in the past. The majority are probably there because they have the inner drive to act. Considering that demonstrations are a high-profile form of protest, as they are a means to reach and address both the protest group’s audience and antagonists, the protesters’ attitude can be deemed unusual.

Figure 23

How Does the Protest Group Attempts to Reach Out to the Villagers?



Note. Responses that were mentioned less than three times are not shown in this figure. Responses relate to the following questions: What do you think the demonstrations achieve in the village? How has the situation of the protesters changed as an effect of the protest walks? In which ways do the protesters try to reach out to the villagers? What do you hope the walks will achieve?

Moreover, it seems paradoxical that the group believes it could change people’s minds while at the same time doubting this because the villagers are supposedly too uncritical (67%). A considerable number of the interviewees (33%) hope that their weekly protest walks will *raise awareness among the villagers and stimulate them to look critically* at the information about the corona pandemic provided by the “mainstream” media (e.g., II.3, II.5). In the interview II.5, this attitude is described succinctly: “We wanted to encourage the [local] population to think about whether everything is really correct what the normal media or let's say the classical media tell us”. To do so, several interviewees (22%) additionally refer to their protest signs and music. In general, one-third of the interviewees (33%) explained that they hope to passively attract attention. It stands out that the group has a stronger hope

to passively make people think than to passively reassure them in their doubts. However, given the widespread view among protesters that villagers are “uncritical”, this might not be a surprise.

As described earlier, a considerable part of the interviewees anticipates the autumn in the hope that new or re-introduced measures will lead to a surge in new members. Further, when considering how they create the insider-outsider differentiation for their group, slightly over two-thirds of the interviewees (67%) feel like many people are lulled by the currently loosened measures (22%), or that villagers lack the conviction to join the protests. In contrast to the protest group, they see the villagers (and society) as conformist and uncritical (56%). It may be that the interviewees place their hope in those who are (currently) not bothered enough and not afraid enough to go on the streets again. A reintroduction of corona measures would push them over their threshold to participate (again).

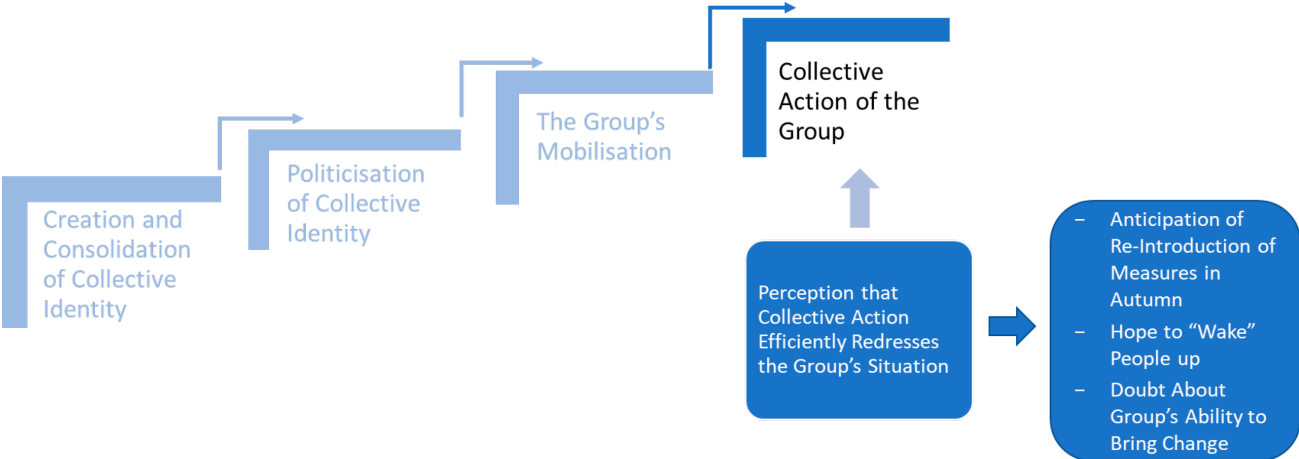
According to the interviews, the group's strategy is to only talk to villagers who approach them. They do not actively approach villagers on their own anymore. Those attempts, as Interviewee II.4 found, “are of no use and a wasted effort”. In addition, a certain frustration or annoyance with society is palpable, as exemplified in the case of interviewee II.3: “And then he [a colleague] asked me, and I said, ‘Honestly, [...] but it’s really no longer necessary for you to ask me that, you can research it yourself anywhere. Do you really want me to spell it out for you?’” Consequently, it is important for some protesters to passively reassure villagers who may doubt the view of corona and the corresponding containment measures prevalent in society that they are not alone and that their doubts are not far-fetched (17%).

This rather passive and indirect approach is puzzling when considering their choice to voice their disagreement. Demonstrations have an inherently outward-bound signalling effect. The fact that relatively few people want to actively disseminate their views so people would change their minds about corona measures does not utilise the chosen form of protest to its full potential. If protesters did not prioritise reaching out to the villagers, they could have opted to meet weekly in, e.g., a café as a space for exchange and mutual reassurance. Therefore, the use of demonstrations seems to be inefficient, given the interviewees’ reasoning that they participate in protest walks to influence or change the villagers’ opinions.

The displayed approach of reaching out to people might also be mirrored in the prevalent *doubt about whether the group is able to achieve change*. As described earlier, a considerable portion of the interviewees anticipate the autumn in the hope that new or re-introduced measures could lead to a rise in new members. Further, when considering how they create an insider-outsider differentiation for their group, two-thirds of the interviewees (66%) feel like many people are lulled by current loosened measures (22%), or that villagers lack the conviction to join the protests (22%). In contrast to

themselves, the protest group regards villagers (and society) as conformist, brainwashed, uncritical or intimidated (56%). Nevertheless, their assumption that their numbers could rise again in the autumn implies that they judge the uncritical mass in the population as having the potential to change their minds under specific, favourable conditions. A reintroduction of corona measures might encourage former protesters to re-join and would also bring in new participants. According to the protest group, the realisation in the autumn that the restrictive measures taken were in vain should lead to the rehabilitation of the group. This would subsequently mobilise the villagers to come to their senses and join the protest. In sum, the group is also waiting for the autumn when its convictions should gain wider acceptance in society through the possible reintroduction of the Corona measures.

Figure 24
Why the Ottersberg Corona Protest Group Engages In Collective Action



Note. Comparison of this thesis' findings with the model derived from sources mentioned in Figure 16.

In conclusion, the following personal factors contribute to prolonging the corona protests. First, the perceived violation of individual and group norms, in particular the former. Then, a sense of agency that the protest participants have, which motivates them intrinsically and helps them to publicly convey the group's goals. Publicly conveying what the group stands for is also a general important factor for the group members, which goes hand in hand with their belief in the group's capacity to bring change. Regarding group characteristics, especially overarching shared values and the feeling of belonging to the group, are important factors for prolonging the corona protests. Finally, a sense of shared disadvantages fuels the protests over time.

5.5 COMPARISON OF THE RESULTS WITH THE MODEL: HOW THE RESULTS DIFFER FROM THE THEORY

These findings show some significant divergences from the underlying theory. Regarding the creation of a collective identity, the group does not rely on individuals being strongly embedded within a group, especially because social contact is deliberately limited. Although the group selects a responsible actor for their situation, the group addresses another outgroup, the villagers. The following mobilisation relies heavily on the violation of personal values. The goals the group aims to achieve are not located in the immediate future, are content-wise vague, and have an unspecific timeframe. Further, the group does not rely on an activating actor who provides mobilising structures. Finally, regarding the group's collective action, it is evident that the group members are not convinced they will succeed.

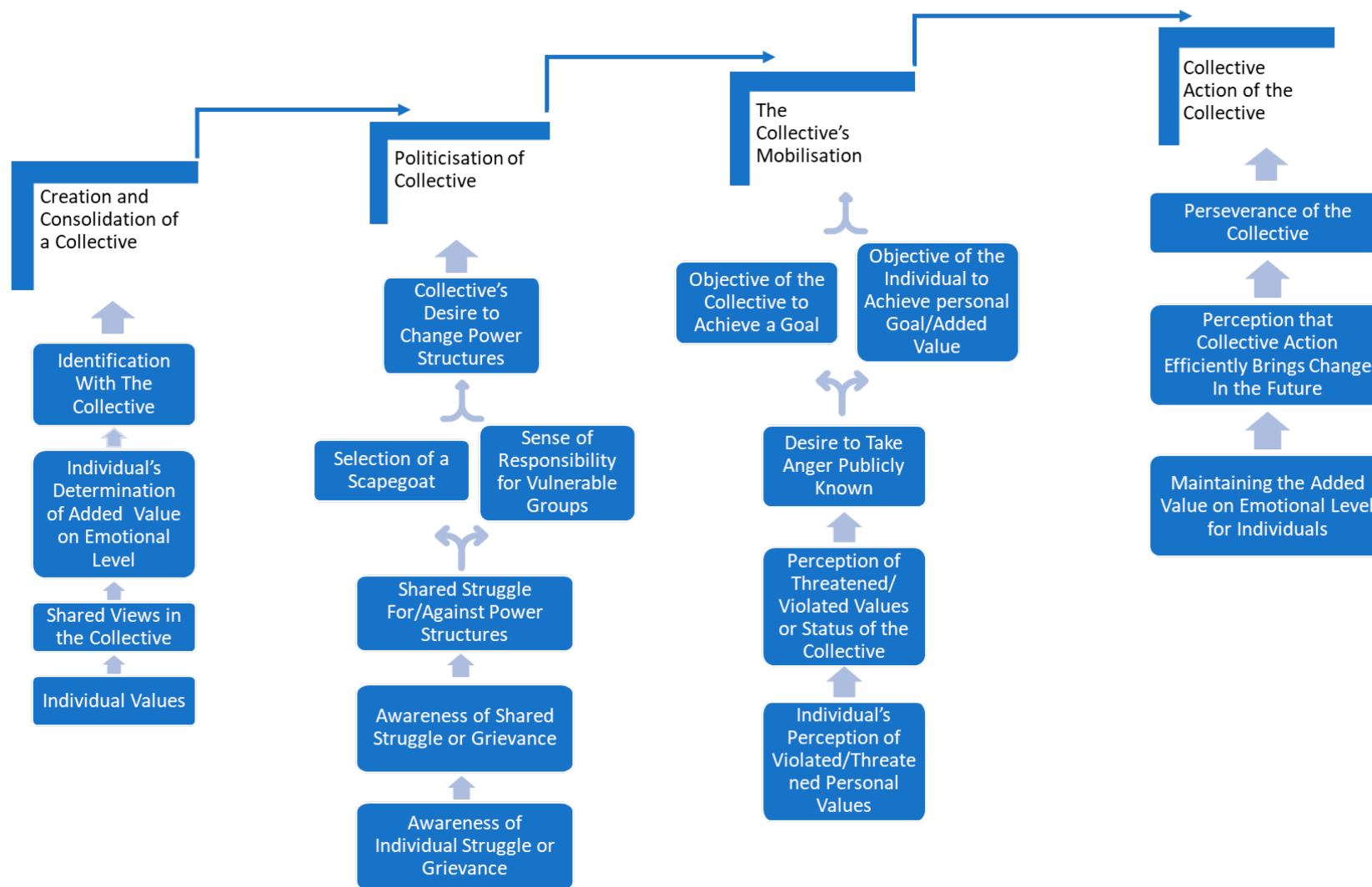
Thus, the theoretical underpinnings *cannot* be fully applied to the Ottersberg protest group. Instead, the findings suggest a different route to collective action (see Figure 25). Namely, a route that is based on the prospect of individuals having an added personal emotional value from the group. This value consists of the "safe space" that the group provides, in which the group members can freely express themselves without being judged by their environment.

1. STEP: CREATING A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Collective action not only pays off for the individuals in terms of achieving change for the group, and therefore for the group members, but also for the individuals directly themselves, independent of the relationships with other group members. Starting with the first step of building a collective identity, my research shows that *individual values* are foundational for the protest group, which contributes to the creation of the group's point of view. These viewpoints are shared, overarching, and basic, are able to integrate the group members' individual values. Individuals experience added emotional values in this group due to group norms, such as equality among its group members. This is the "sticking glue" that holds the group together in a loose, temporary framework. The positive connotation of the collective with emotional added value and the integration of their values without having to compromise leads group members to identify with the collective.

Figure 25

Tentative Outline of Another Possible Pathway to Creating a Collective Identity That Engages in Collective Action Based on the Otterberg Protest Group



A shared point of view is limited to overarching key issues like being against corona containment measures and vaccination. These topics are generic, and their details remain unspecific, even over time. Moreover, the topics are not adapted to appeal to a broader part of society.

The degree of embeddedness and commitment to the group are generally seen as important factors for consolidating the individual feeling of belonging to a group. As for the embeddedness of group members in the Ottersberg group, this factor is weak. The relationships within the protest group consist of loose connections to each other, which in the vast majority only exist in the context of the protest walks. Since the interpersonal relationships in this group are low, its members should be less inclined to commit to the group. Nonetheless, the frequent gatherings caused the group to build mutual trust, shared norms, and interpretative frameworks (Nicholls, 2008, p. 845) as explained in Figure 2.

On first sight, the reinforcing process of group membership increases commitment and identification with the group, as well as the group member's judgement of issues. This applies to the protest group in Ottersberg. However, the commitment to the group is limited. The group members deliberately limit their embeddedness and involvement in the group. It would be inevitable to have superficial relationships (II.2). However, the key reason for protest participation is that they "stand for the same thing" (II.2). Contact outside of the protest walks is rare. During the protests, the participants do not deepen their superficial relationships with each other, and neither do the former protest participants seek out contact with the group nor does the group try to stay connected with them.

I assume that the individuality of the protest participants is maintained and preserved in the group. Not only are the shared values and principles open to interpretation but can also express individual preferences. For example, when voting on whether the group should meet to protest at the next public holiday or not (I. Schütz, personal communication, May 30, 2022). In general, the group's collective identity hinges upon umbrella norms that are found in the individual norms of the group members as well. Moreover, individual norms have a higher salience than group norms.

Their shared values and the interactions with fellow protesters have an egoistic note. The findings suggest that the protest walks are not so much about the other and deepening their relationships, but *every action is directed at making the individual protester feel better*. In a figurative sense, these people go to the protest where others might go to the spa. The contact increases their self-confidence in their role as resistant and strengthens their self-esteem and convictions in terms of the rightness of their views. Some of the individuals perceive themselves as distributors of the group's knowledge (e.g., II.2, II.3), so they could help other protesters and – hopefully later – villagers to see the truth. In addition, the shared overarching views within the group enable it to be a safe space in which the protest

participants can “recharge their batteries”. This is an important motivation that could be *the* decisive reason for the continuation of the protests.

For the creation and establishment of collective identity, the Ottersberg corona protesters’ moral, cognitive, and emotional connection with the group is fundamental. Common rituals, such as meeting on the same day, time, and place, support the protest group’s collective identity. The sequence of the demonstrations, with the vote at the end as a set ritual, has a reinforcing effect. Interestingly, social marginality seems to be a limited driving factor, although the interviews indicate the group’s belief that the government largely disregards the corona protest movement in Germany (e.g., II.4).

In summary, the group identity is based on the individual protester’s need for validation and reassurance without attachment to the other group members. Further, this indicates that there is a need for a feeling of an external threat to hold the group together. In the case of the protesters, this is the shared social and political disadvantages due to the containment measures. At the same time, the external threat does not lead to a tightening of relationships within the group. This points to the importance of individuals’ motives and fears, independent of the group.

2. STEP: POLITICISATION OF THE GROUP

Turning to the politicisation of group identity, it is evident that the Ottersberg protest group experiences a bottom-up politicisation without an organisation or strong leader in the background (cf. Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 1).

Theoretically, the awareness of shared struggles and grievances is the basis for polarisation, where the group decides on a power structure to fight against, such as the corona containment measures (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 3). Linked with this is the selection of those who are to blame for the group’s situation, like the government, police, and the media. Finally, this ignites the desire to change the situation.

In order for the collective to politicise, it is important that individuals are aware of their own grievances and deprivations. From this, the anger of the individuals is aggregated under a common denominator at the group level, in case of the Ottersberg protest group the rejection of corona measures. As the group’s denominators are a catch-all term, the various individual positions can be integrated with ease. Therefore, this approach is likely to prevent internal conflicts about definitions or strategic directions. At the same time, this approach provides the group with a general idea of its goals and its characteristics. Therefore, a person’s awareness of the group’s grievances supports their identification with the collective.

Based on this, the collective distinguishes itself from an actor whom they can hold responsible for their grievances. Furthermore, it also distinguishes itself from another group that helps this actor disadvantage the group – the village they protest in. However, while the collective aims for compensation from the supposedly responsible actor, which for the group is the government, it displays a sense of responsibility for the as vulnerable perceived villagers.

Defining a clear-cut outgroup that is to blame supports both the consolidation of the group identity and its politicisation. The protest group has two main outgroups. First, the other villagers who are being “brainwashed” by the government with regard to the corona measures. Second, the government itself, for the various reasons described previously. Notably, the protest group seeks only compensation from the government, even though the demands are vague.

DESIRE FOR CHANGE

Together with the desire to improve its own situation, the group aims to change the power structure that disadvantages its members. Despite having an overarching common struggle, shared disadvantages apparently play a greater role for the group. Referring back to Borbáth et al.’s (2021) study of how the corona pandemic affected political and civic engagement, my findings corroborate social threats as the most important threat during the pandemic. Economic threats are far less pronounced. Therefore, the assumption holds that societal and political fears are the main motivations, although societal anxieties are slightly more pronounced.

Next, the group wishes to change its status in society rather than their situation, at least in the short-term. These desires are determined by outgroups that continue to threaten or violate the group’s values. As the villagers are the primary target audience of the protest group, their withdrawal from the protest and their neutral or negative reaction to the protests are likely to reinforce the protests. This is particularly the case when considering that the main motivation for the protest group’s formation is the social discrimination of the group members, which is their most significant grievance.

The group fights against the key power structure of changing the corona containment measures. These are the immediate power structures that directly restrain the protesters. Even if politicians have introduced them, it is the containment measures that lead to the group being socially discriminated against. On the secondary level, some protesters are therefore also concerned with the need to change the political system, which they believe is broken (II.6).

The main goal of the protest group, however, seems to be the dissemination of their views. The objective of amending or abolishing the corona measures is rather secondary. To address the desired political change, the group is waiting for the situation to worsen, which would prompt the villagers to join the protests. This is reflected in the group's waiting for autumn and the vagueness of the goals so far.

At a later date, probably in the fall, the group expects the government to introduce new containment measures. These external interventions would change the situation of both the protest group and the villagers. The group hopes that these measures will then anger the villagers enough to trigger their willingness to join the protesters.

In summary, awareness of common struggles is more important in terms of group cohesion and individual's commitment than common power structure to fight against. The shared grievances also emphasise the importance of the group as a safe space where protesters trust that they have similar experiences and views and where individuals do not have to expect discrimination or negative reactions. Moreover, their goals, both in terms of "awakening" the villagers and political change, are very vague, so that anyone can feel that they appeal to them. That is one reason why the group still exists. In addition, the goals and necessary conditions to achieve them are located in the future, so the group is in a waiting position.

3RD STEP: MOBILISATION OF THE GROUP

The first step in mobilising the collective is *the individual members' awareness that their personal values are being violated or threatened*, and that *the views of the collective are under attack*.

Moving on to the mobilisation of the group identity, the feeling of violated values is fundamental for the group's mobilisation (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2020, p. 8). This is in line with theory. However, the violation of one's own norms is more salient than that of group norms. Nonetheless, group values are important to connect the individual protesters with each other and to create a group identity.

In addition, the urge to do something and the desire to publicly convey the group's convictions are strong drivers for mobilisation and continuation of the protests. In the next step, the collective expresses its grievances, convictions, and self-image to the public. At the same time, the need of the individuals to maintain the collective as a "safe space" for reassurance increases. Thus, the expressive motive to bring their anger about their relative deprivation into the public is important for the group's longevity.

SECONDARY ROLE FOR AN ACTIVATING ACTOR

The creation of mobilising structures and the activation of opportunities to protest through individuals can be partly observed in the Ottersberg protest group. The person who initiated the protest group is responsible for registering their protest walks with the police. However, the group votes on whether they want to do so and whether they want to meet the next week. The organiser has therefore a facilitating role, although their impact upon the longevity of the group is uncertain. Since it is in the group's

control whether they want to continue the protests or not, the organiser does not have a decisive role. This emphasises that the group is driven by bottom-up mechanisms and not by top-down instructions. The organiser supplies a consistent setting if the group so decides, but the group also controls the continuity of the protests. Thus, the organiser had only an initial activating role. Now they only assume an operational administrative function in the implementation of the respective group decisions.

4TH STEP: THE GROUP ENGAGES IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

The maintenance of added emotional value for individuals at the collective level in the form of a “safe space” is fuelled by the individuals’ desire for reassurance. It is not dependent on hope for change. However, the collective retains hope for future change, which may also contribute to the collective’s perseverance.

According to the theory, individuals are more prone to engage in collective action when it is seen as an effective means to redress their situation. However, the group is divided over whether it is able to bring change and to improve its situation. The group harbours the hope of improving their situation, although they equally doubt their chances of success. Nonetheless, this externally directed hope can be replaced by internally added value from the group’s affirmation and reassurance of a person’s self-esteem and views. Thus, the group is currently in a waiting period until a change occurs in the near future (autumn) that sensitises the villagers to the group’s fears and grievances. Although the government is the main group to blame, according to the group, the desire to change their situation is directed at other target groups. These hopes are currently primarily aimed at persuading villagers to change their minds about the corona measures. This is linked to a second goal, namely, to increase their number or participants.

The group chose an approach that restricts their outreach, and their actions are confined to the group. This is only a supposedly passive stance. Protesters showing their anger does not mean that they play a passive role, otherwise, the protesters would have stayed at home. Regardless of the fact that they primarily show their anger, they do not directly reach out to their target group(s).

Therefore, the overarching goal is consensus mobilisation, the dissemination of their points of view among the villagers. In a next step, they hope that this will aid in action mobilisation, so that villagers turn to sympathisers who will join the protest group at a later point in time. In a final future step, they plan to achieve the external goal of compensation, although this has not been further specified yet.

Furthermore, the results indicate two feedback loops. The protesters’ negative social experiences strengthen their will to participate in the hope of eventually gaining the recognition of the villagers. Negative experiences with the police at the protest walks reinforce the protesters’ feeling of being in resistance to the suppression of dissenting voices by the state. The group’s characterisation of the

villagers as supposedly in need of protection because they were deceived by the government about the containment measures confirms their view of standing up for a suppressed opinion. These feedback loops drive the collective to continue.

Finally, the group's persistence is also driven by the fact that participating in the protests is a possibility for realising a sense of self-determination, especially since some of the protesters believe that the local level would be the only level at which discontent could be expressed.

Besides this, there are two other aspects that stood out during the interviews in relation to motivations to protest. Firstly, the *Telegram* channel for Lower Saxony, which links the local Corona protests, was highlighted in the interviews in relation to the motives for protest. Such online networks could be another motivating feedback loop. In the case of the Ottersberg protest group, these networks could convey the feeling that it is not alone, even if they do not have many participants (e.g., II.5; II.2). Similarly, sharing videos of the protests might be another form of presenting their group identity, a form of self-agency as the posts on the relevant channels such as "Freie Niedersachsen" receive positive feedback (II.5; Britta, 2022; Mike, 2022). Secondly, the protest site in Ottersberg is not far away for the protesters and is easy to reach. This might also contribute to the longevity of the protests.

In summary, the group is characterised by its individualistic nature. The main added value is that it gives the protesters a "safe space" whose existence is their driving force to continue. The findings suggest that this group's individualistic nature represents a different pathway for why groups emerge, take collective action, and persist. Figure 25 visualises this new possibility to explain prolonged protests in rural areas.

6 LIMITATIONS

This chapter will address possible limitations of this study, both in terms of its methodology and its underlying theory. Regarding the methodology, it is necessary to discuss limitations due to the sample size. Then, the absence of additional quantitative evidence will be discussed. Next, the scope of the study may be a potential limitation. Finally, this chapter will discuss the selection of Ottersberg as the typical village.

Turning to the sample size of this study, the focus on the *core protest group* in Ottersberg is a limitation on the *representativeness* of the sample. It is not representative of *all* corona protesters. However, this limitation is a minor one as this study focuses on those individuals who maintain their protest participation over a prolonged period of time. In addition, this study would have benefited from a larger sample size. This would have helped to capture the diversity of the protesters even better. One factor that made it more difficult to reach a bigger sample size is the reluctance of protesters with

more extreme or conspiratorial views to participate in interviews. The short interviews mitigated this potential bias as they were less threatening than the in-depth interviews. Further, short interviews included the option of written notes instead of audio-recording. In general, this study was able to capture the core protest group with short interviews and, for the most part, with in-depth interviews. The short interviews were designed to capture the core motivations. In sum, the sample size can be seen as adequate.

An additional potentially limiting factor was the interview skills of the researcher. My neutral stance and limited experience with interviewing might have resulted in less exhaustive or detailed answers due to some interviewees' reservations. On some rare occasions, this stance resulted in the interviewee declining to partake in the interview. Nonetheless, I was able to create sufficient trust that a large part of the group agreed to participate. This made it possible to capture the diversity of the group.

Another downside was that it was not possible to employ additional quantitative methods, which could pose a weakness. Since the Ottersberg protest group runs both a *Telegram* and a *WhatsApp* group for communication, it seems reasonable to conduct an additional accompanying survey to systematically substantiate the results of the interviews or to gain new insights. These groups are reasonably small. The *Telegram* group has twenty-one members, and the *WhatsApp* group has twenty-eight members as of May 31st, 2022 (II.4). Data gathered from these sources may provide valuable insights, especially about internal social dynamics and the internal organisation of the protests.

Nonetheless, there are three substantial reasons why no such additional quantitative methods were used in this study. They underline the difficulty of collecting data on the group on social media. The same concerns would apply to the hypothetical case of a researcher joining a group to simply share an invitation link for a survey.

First, the utilisation of the group's social media groups would be accompanied by significant *ethical concerns*. In principle, membership of these social media groups for research purposes would provide interesting opportunities for data collection. However, to be able to use such data, it is necessary to officially get the *approval of all group members* for their data to be used for my thesis. It has already become apparent during the data collection phase that this could prove extremely difficult considering the various reservations of the protest participants. Excluding selected users from data collection in this medium could prove impossible. Besides, my presence would probably noticeably affect the groups.

One way to circumvent the necessity to collect every group member's consent in order to disseminate the invitation link for a survey would be to ask a member of the group to post it on the researcher's behalf. However, this would impose serious problems. It would impose a strong dependency on how

the group member frames and advertises the survey request. Moreover, the involved group member would practically transform from a study subject to a “research assistant”. This dual role for both the researcher and the corresponding group member could significantly affect the group dynamic. Moreover, if the researcher is part of the online group, the role of the researcher could blur in the eyes of the protesters or shift to the role of a supporter. Therefore, this approach would be highly problematic.

Second, the *response rate* for quantitative research is unpredictable. It cannot be taken for granted that enough protest participants would respond to generate reliable and valid results. The group's partial reservations about interviews could indicate the same attitude towards surveys, which would result in a low response rate.

In addition, the size of the abovementioned social media groups is assumed to be close to the number of participants on the streets. Further, it is uncertain whether there are overlaps in group membership. It is unknown whether some people are in one of the groups, in both, or in none of them. During the interview phase, I have already interviewed the core group that regularly takes part in the protest walks. Therefore, I assume that the interviews covered the majority of the core protest group in Ottersberg.

Third, it is *uncertain whether a survey would generate significant new insights*. As mentioned above, the interviews covered the majority of the group, so that the surveys would not have necessarily added value content-wise. Most importantly, the survey would have to avoid asking questions that have already been asked in the interviews, otherwise the participants would likely feel they are not being taken seriously.

This study is further limited by its timeframe. As it was not possible to conduct a long-term study, it may not be able to draw conclusions about the protesters' motivations in the previous years as they could have differed during that period of time. For example, the corona containment measures have changed significantly over the last two years (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2022b) which can be assumed to play a significant role in the corona protests.

Finally, this case study is based on the selection of a typical rural village in Germany, not a typical rural corona protest group. The typical rural village of Ottersberg was selected according to indicators based on literature about the general emergence of corona protests in Germany (Plümper et al., 2021) and mainly on Länder' and counties' average of the indicators for ruralness. I am aware that the aspect of feasibility might have influenced the results, as there are other federal states that are also among the most typical federal states in Germany. There remains some uncertainty as to whether the Ottersberg protesters can be considered a typical protest group. However, the selection is useful as there is no comprehensive data on the composition of corona protest groups in rural areas, to the best of my

knowledge, and only limited research has been carried out to investigate the characteristics of a typical corona protest group so far (e.g., Nachtwey et al., 2020; Reichardt, 2021; Reinemann et al., 2020). Therefore, I assume that a typical village like Ottersberg has a corona protest group that is similar to other rural municipalities' protest groups. If this assumption is not true, generalisability is limited.

7 CONCLUSION: WHY PEOPLE KEEP PROTESTING

Over the course of the last three years, the world has been fighting the corona pandemic. To contain the spread of the disease and to prevent deaths, the countries introduced several policies, ranging from initial travel restrictions to lockdowns and the mandatory use of face masks. However, these containment measures elicited a notable backlash in parts of the societies of the affected countries.

One notable case is Germany, where society was not united in its response to corona. A part of society began a livid and prolonged protest against the German containment measures. This development towards societal polarisation has been regarded as rather unexpected.

Despite the seeming waning of the pandemic, corona protests notably continued in Germany. In particular, their persistence in rural regions is puzzling as protests there are assumed to have a low impact on national COVID-19 governance. Further, these rural corona protests attracted low coverage in the national media. Research has focused overwhelmingly on major demonstrations against corona measures in central cities. Studies on protest movements in rural areas have not been conducted so far, to the best of my knowledge.

Therefore, I explored *which personal factors of corona protesters and group characteristics contribute to prolonging the corona protests over time in peripheral areas*. For this, I conducted a typical case study, for which I selected the rural village of Ottersberg in Lower Saxony. I investigated the local Corona protest group using in-depth semi-structured interviews.

In conclusion, the following personal factors contribute to prolonging the corona protests. First, the perceived violation of individual and group norms, in particular the former. Then, a sense of agency that the protest participants have motivates them intrinsically and helps them publicly convey the group's goals. Publicly conveying what the group stands for is also an important factor for the group members, which goes hand in hand with their belief in the group's capacity to bring change. Regarding group characteristics, especially overarching shared values and the feeling of belonging to the group, are important factors for prolonging the corona protests. Finally, a sense of shared disadvantages fuels the protests over time.

This study has found that, generally, the conventional theory on protest movements cannot be fully applied to the Ottersberg protest group. Individual values are foundational for the protest group. They

contribute to the creation of shared points of view by the group. Overarching and general, these viewpoints integrate the group members' individual values. This focus on the individual in the process of creating collective identities allows the members to experience personal added emotional values that are crucial for them to participate. This is the "glue" that holds the group together as a loose, temporary collective, in which close personal bonds between the protesters are scarce, if not completely absent. The anger of the individuals is aggregated under a common denominator at the group level. These shared grievances such as perceived violations of bodily autonomy and free speech provide the group with a general idea of its goals and its characteristics. Based on this, the collective selects the federal government as an actor whom they can hold responsible for their grievances. Subsequently, they seek compensation from it. Furthermore, it also distinguishes itself from the villagers as a group that helps the supposedly responsible actor to disadvantage the group further. However, the protest group shows a sense of responsibility for the villagers they perceive to be in need of protection. The perceived violations of own values and of the group's views lead the protest group in Ottersberg to voice their convictions and grievances in public in the vague hope for change. At the same time, the perceived violations as well as the perceived hostility of other villagers perpetuate the protesters' need for a "safe space" and reassurance, which in turn leads to the prolongation of the protests.

The individualistic nature of this group differs from typical theories on why groups engage in collective action. The case study's results diverge from established theory on protest participation and motivations, which calls for further research. More work that explores the indicated differences in protest dynamics in rural areas is needed.

A natural progression of this work is to repeat the study in autumn, when the majority of protesters expect a rise in their numbers. Independent of participation rate development, such research could yield significant insights into protesters' long-term motivation.

In addition, I suggest conducting a long-term study of rural corona protests' structural characteristics and motivational factors. More information on this issue would help us to further understand why protests might continue over a prolonged period of time and how motivational factors and their importance might change over time. Such approaches could also be supplemented by data from respective social media channels. This might provide additional interesting insights into the link between online and offline structures for the corona protests and communication between different protest groups.

As this study is based on a typical rural village in Germany, investigation into what characterises a typical (rural) corona protest group is needed. In a subsequent step, research similar to this study could be carried out, which selects its case study on precisely these characteristics. In addition, work in this

area could conduct a large-N study that compares protest groups across Germany on a large scale. This type of research could not only refute or support typical case studies based on typical corona group characteristics but could also point out possible regional differences. Having established the typical features of corona protests, work could then focus on the most-likely and least-likely cases to explore further structural factors that influence the protests. Findings from such studies could help improve national and local public authorities' approaches to crisis management and crisis communication.

Lastly, this study indicates a new route in the process from and reasons for collective identity formation to a group's participation in collective action. This path is based on the prospect of the individual participant receiving personal emotional added value from the group. Further research is needed to test this tentative new pathway.

The question implicitly raised by this study is how policy-makers could deal with societal polarisation in times of crises. Albeit the issue is nothing new, policy makers have to revisit once again their stance on the dilemma between including all citizens and giving a minority a disproportional voice. Especially in crises, the state has the obligation to contain potentially dangerous attitudes and beliefs for the good of the people. Taking normative democratic principles into account, the question is whether they should facilitate or hinder protests. What could policy-makers do to do right?

The challenge now is to tailor crisis communication to the worries of diverse groups in society. In the case of the corona pandemic, it has been crucial that society works together to overcome the pandemic as soon and as unscathed as possible. Therefore, even though the communication about the pandemic is emotional at its core, it is critical for societal, political, and media discourse to avoid using derogatory descriptions or terms. Science communication must play a critical role in translating scientific findings and insights for laypeople. This focus will likely result in the perception of greater transparency and inclusion. Together with non-derogatory language, these approaches might reduce scepticism about the state's motives. In practice, the way the corona pandemic displayed the behaviour of politicians and the media needs to change.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A.1 INFORMATION SHEET

Informationsblatt

Informationen über das Projekt

In meiner Masterarbeit untersuche ich, warum sich Spaziergänge in Bezug auf Coronamaßnahmen und die Coronapandemie vor allem in kleineren Städten und Ortschaften halten. Dafür werde ich vor Ort mit Spaziergängern wie Ihnen sprechen, um die Hintergründe und Motivationen aus ihrer Perspektive zu erfahren.

Datenspeicherung

Die Daten werden allein auf den Computer der Forscherin abgespeichert und werden nicht an Dritte weitergegeben. Die Interviews werden zur Auswertung verschriftlicht. Die Interviewaufnahmen werden gelöscht, wohingegen die Transkripte auf dem Computer der Forscherin für den Zeitraum des Forschungsprojektes gespeichert werden.

Forschungsethische Aspekte

Um die größtmögliche Anonymität der Interviewpartner zu gewährleisten, werden so wenig personenbezogene Daten wie möglich erfasst, die einen Rückschluss auf die interviewte Person ermöglichen. Solche personenbezogenen Daten könnten Alter, Name, Wohnort oder auch Beruf sein. Ich versuche, keine direkten Zitate zu verwenden, durch die Sie identifiziert werden könnten. Dennoch könnte es sein, dass Zitate in der Arbeit mit Ihnen in Verbindung gebracht werden.

Nutzung der Daten

Die Daten, die aus den Interviews gewonnen werden, werden zusammengefasst und analysiert, um generelle Motive und Faktoren, die zu dem Anhalten der Spaziergänge führen. Zur Veranschaulichung können in meiner Arbeit Zitate genutzt werden. Diese Zitate werden dann Pseudonymen wie "Interviewee 1" zugeordnet.

Die Daten werden im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit verwendet. Die Masterarbeit wird sowohl in der Bibliothek der Universität Konstanz als auch in der Bibliothek der Universität Utrecht veröffentlicht. Das bedeutet, dass Bibliotheksnutzer auf meine Arbeit zugreifen können

APPENDIX A.2 INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

The order of the interview questions is designed to ask easy, inviting, non-threatening questions first. Subsequently, questions are asked that dive deeper into the points of interest and that are potentially difficult. Finally, I ask questions that ease out of the interviews (cf. Damhuis & Jonge, 2022).

APPENDIX A.2.1 QUESTIONS FOR THE SHORT INTERVIEWS

1. Was bewegt Dich dazu, bei den Spaziergängen mitzumachen? (Und dabei zu bleiben?)
2. Was sind Dinge, die Du und die anderen als wichtig empfinden?
3. Was verbindet Dich mit den anderen Spaziergängern?

APPENDIX A.2.2 QUESTIONS FOR THE IN-DEPTH SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Erster Teil

- Was motiviert Dich, bei den Spaziergängen teilzunehmen?
- Warum ist es Dir wichtig, hier bei den Spaziergängen dabei zu sein?
- Wie bist Du zu den Spaziergängen gekommen? (Und wann?)
- Was verbindet die Gruppe untereinander?
- Wie würdest Du die Spaziergänge charakterisieren?
- Triffst Du Dich auch außerhalb der Spaziergänge mit den anderen Spaziergängern?
 - Würdest Du sagen, es herrscht ein Gruppengefühl unter den Spaziergängern?

Zweiter Teil

- Was möchtest Du mit den Spaziergängen ausdrücken?
- Würdest Du sagen, dass die Spaziergänger eher Vor- oder Nachteile in der Gesellschaft bzw. im Ort erfahren? (Und motiviert Dich das zu den Spaziergängen?)
- Was denkst Du, bewirken die Spaziergänge im Ort/gesellschaftlich?
 - Wie hat sich die Lage der Spaziergänger durch die Spaziergänge verändert?
- Welche positiven oder negativen Auswirkungen hat Deine Teilnahme an den Spaziergängen auf Dein Leben?
- Was erhoffst Du Dir, dass die Spaziergänge bewirken?
 - Im Ort? Gesellschaftlich? In Deutschland?
 - Auf welche Art und Weise versuchen die Ottersberger Spaziergänger Außenstehende zu erreichen?
- Aus welchen Gründen hast Du Dich dafür entschieden, zu den Spaziergängen hier vor Ort zu gehen und nicht woanders hin?

- Stellt die Teilnahme am Spaziergang für Dich ein politisches Engagement dar?
- Wie unterscheidet sich oder gleicht sich die Ottersberger Gruppe von anderen Gruppen, Deiner Meinung nach?

Dritter Teil

- Gibt es Themen/Dinge, die Du gerne noch ansprechen oder weiter ausführen möchtest?
- Mit wem sollte ich Deiner Meinung nach noch sprechen?

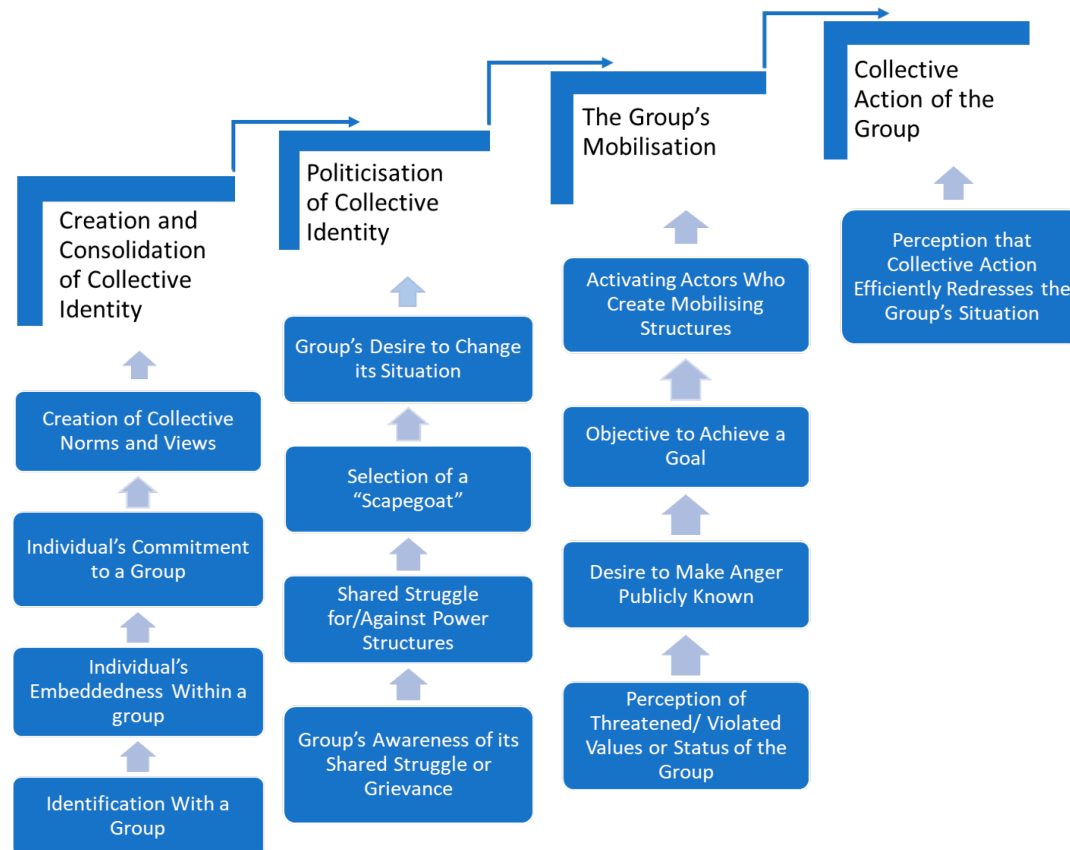
APPENDIX A.3 THE RESEARCHER'S SECURITY

During the data collection phase, it is important to take my security into account (Wiles, 2013, pp. 61–63). It is known that journalists, among others, frequently become victims of violent *Querdenker* at demonstrations (e.g., Rogalla, 2021). Although this might not apply to scientists, the scepticism towards science and the sometimes hostile attitudes toward scientists call for caution. Therefore, a trusted person accompanied me. This person was not involved in the data collection process or in approaching potential study participants. Their role was to intervene in the case of an emergency.

APPENDIX A.4 OVERVIEW: STEPS TO TRANSFORM COLLECTIVE IDENTITY INTO COLLECTIVE ACTION

Figure 26

Overview: Steps to Transform Collective Identity Into Collective Action

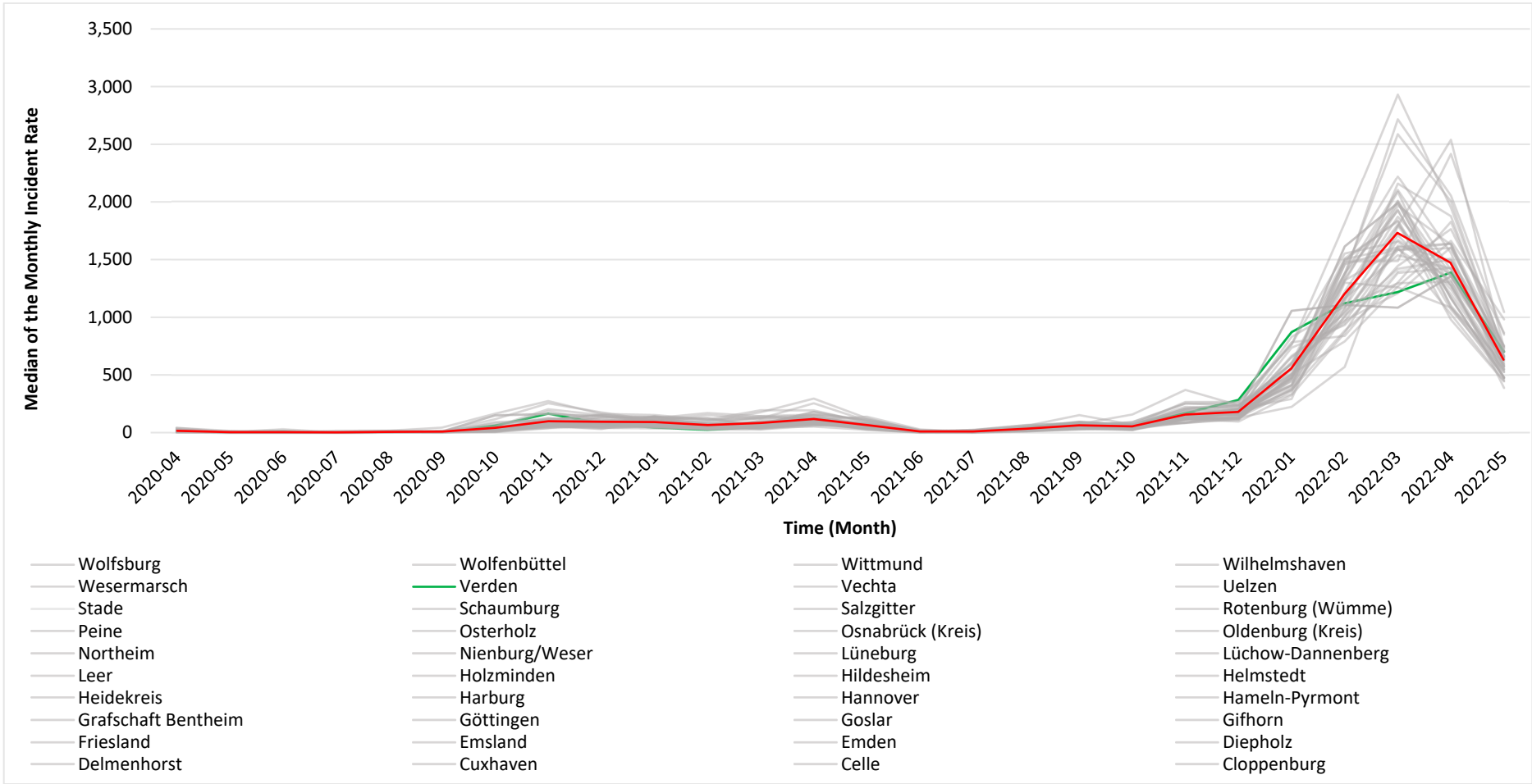


Note. Visualisation by the author, derived from sources mentioned in Figure 1.

APPENDIX A.6 INCIDENT RATE OF THE COUNTIES IN LOWER SAXONY

Figure 28

The Incident Rate of the Counties in Lower Saxony



Note. Visualisation by the author, based on data by infas (2022b).

APPENDIX A.7 DETAILED VISUALISATION OF THE RESULTS

This section contains the unabridged and complete graphs of the results.

Figure 29
Intrinsic Motivations for Protest Participation

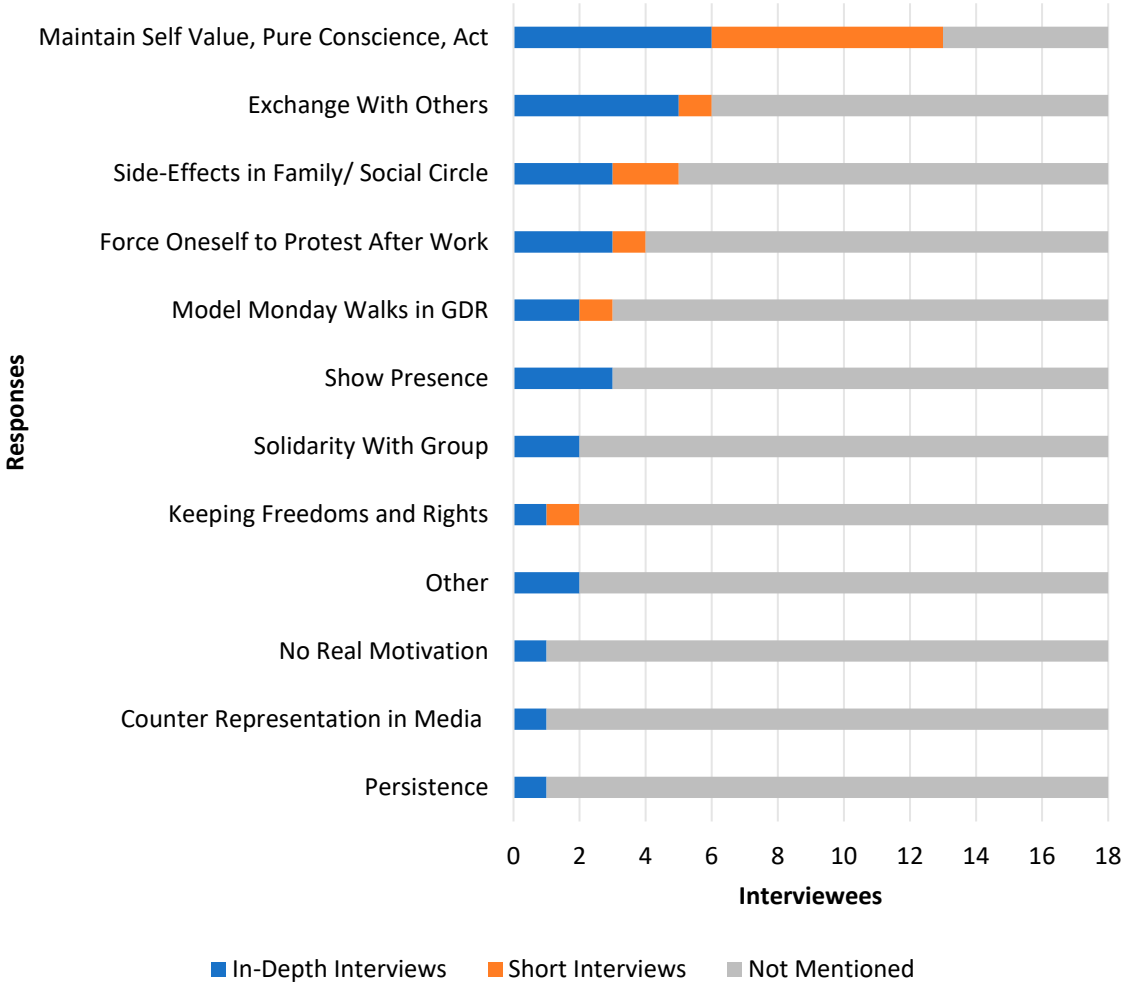


Figure 30

Who are the Protesters Against?

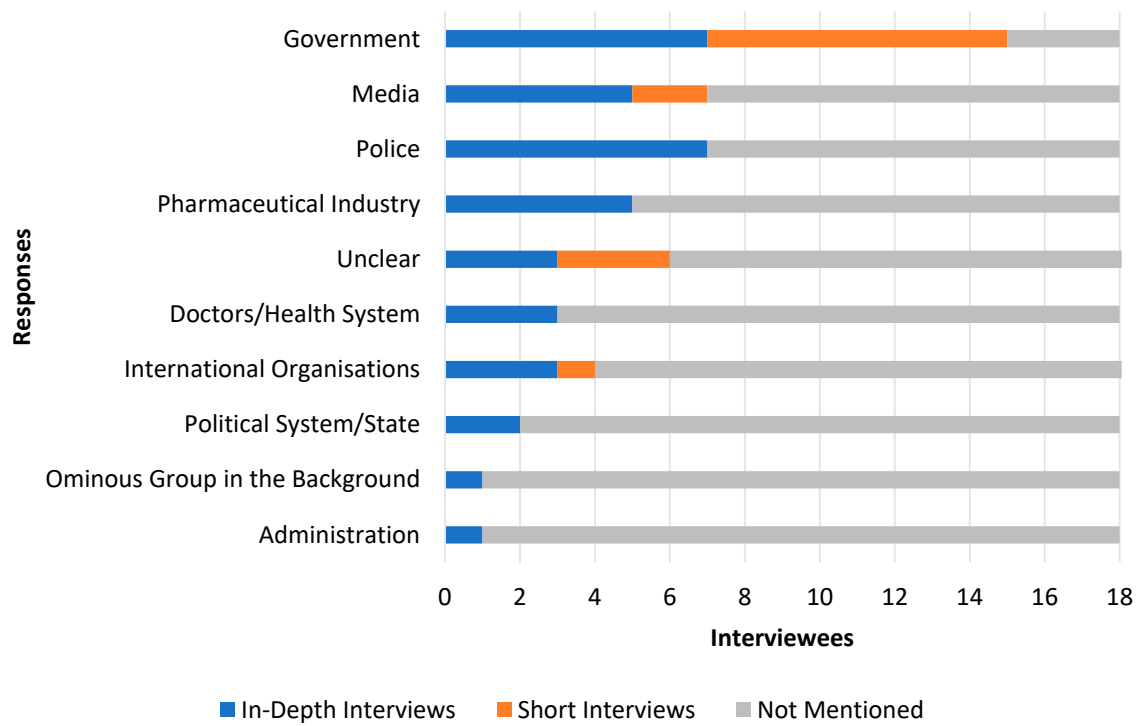


Figure 31

Malicious Intents of Opposed Actors

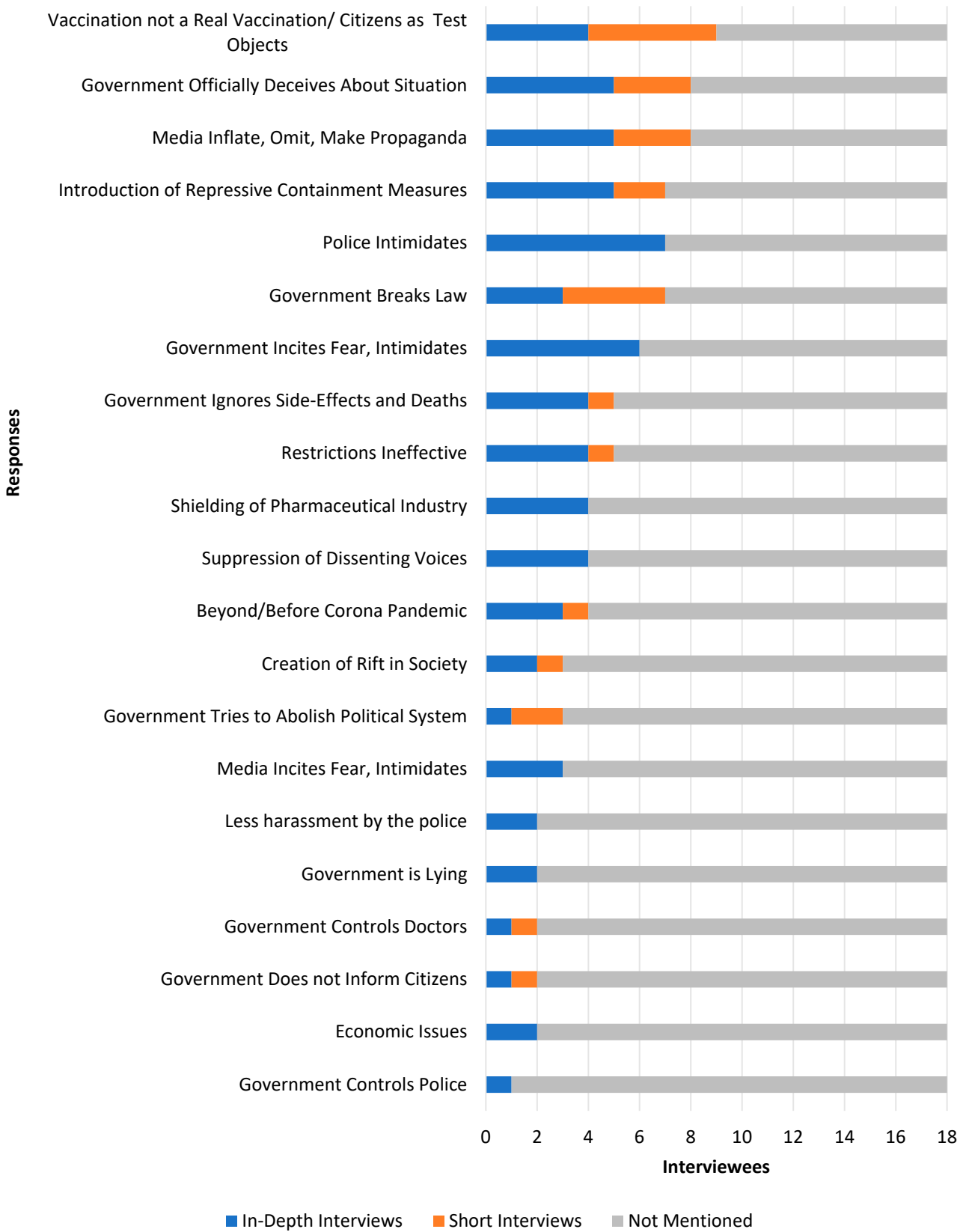


Figure 32

The Group's Demarcation Against Outgroups

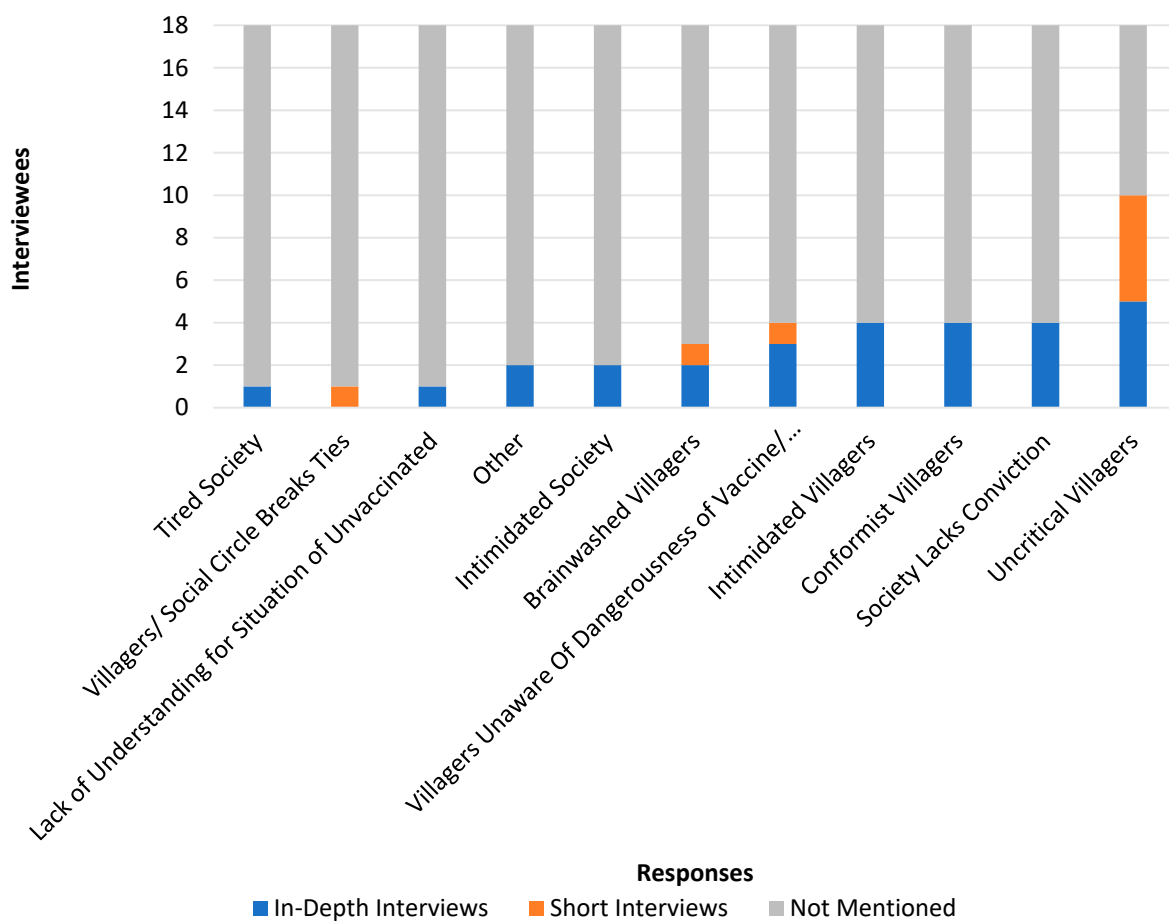


Figure 33

Differentiations Made Within the Group

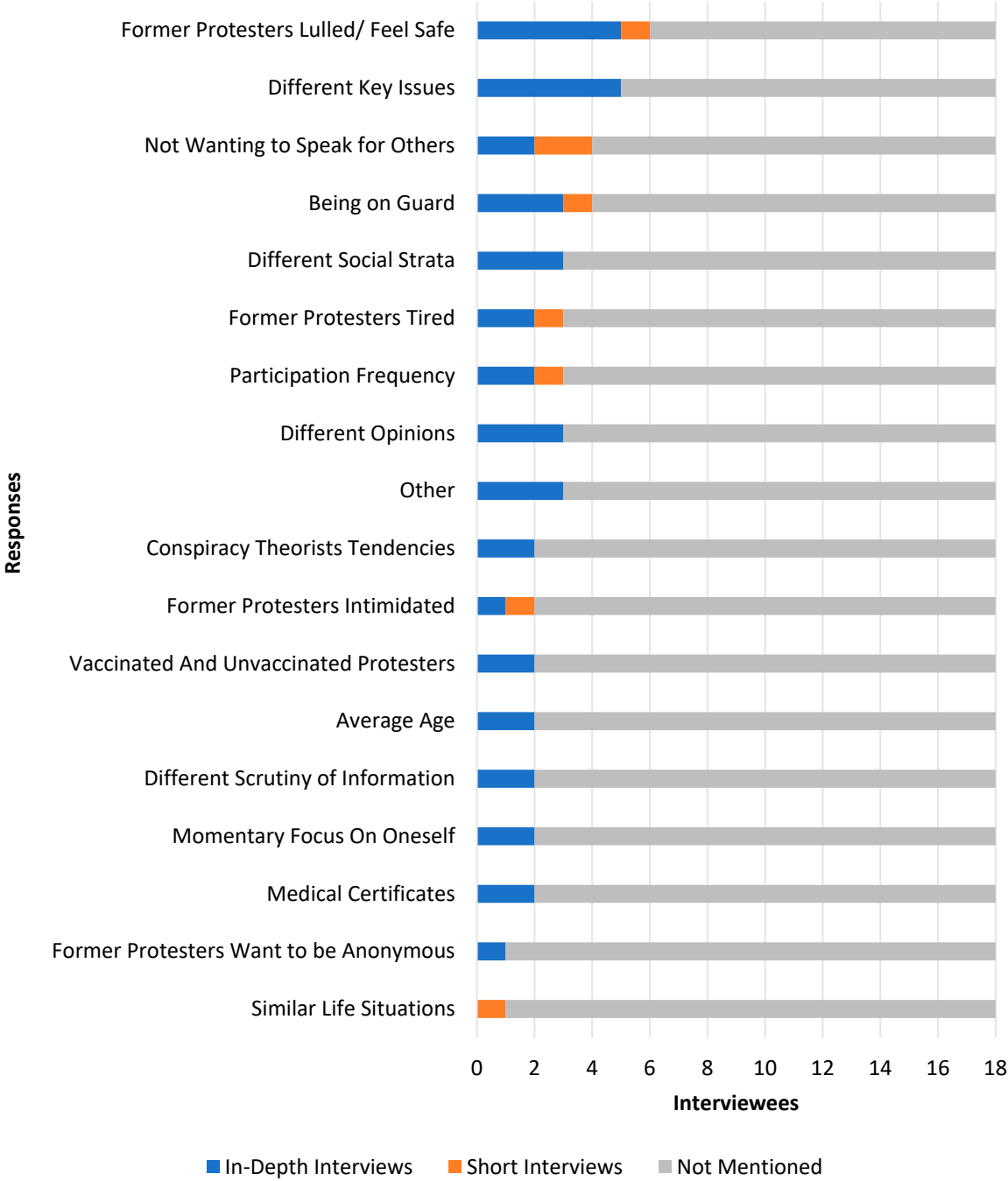


Figure 34

What Concerns Does the Group Have About its Public Image?

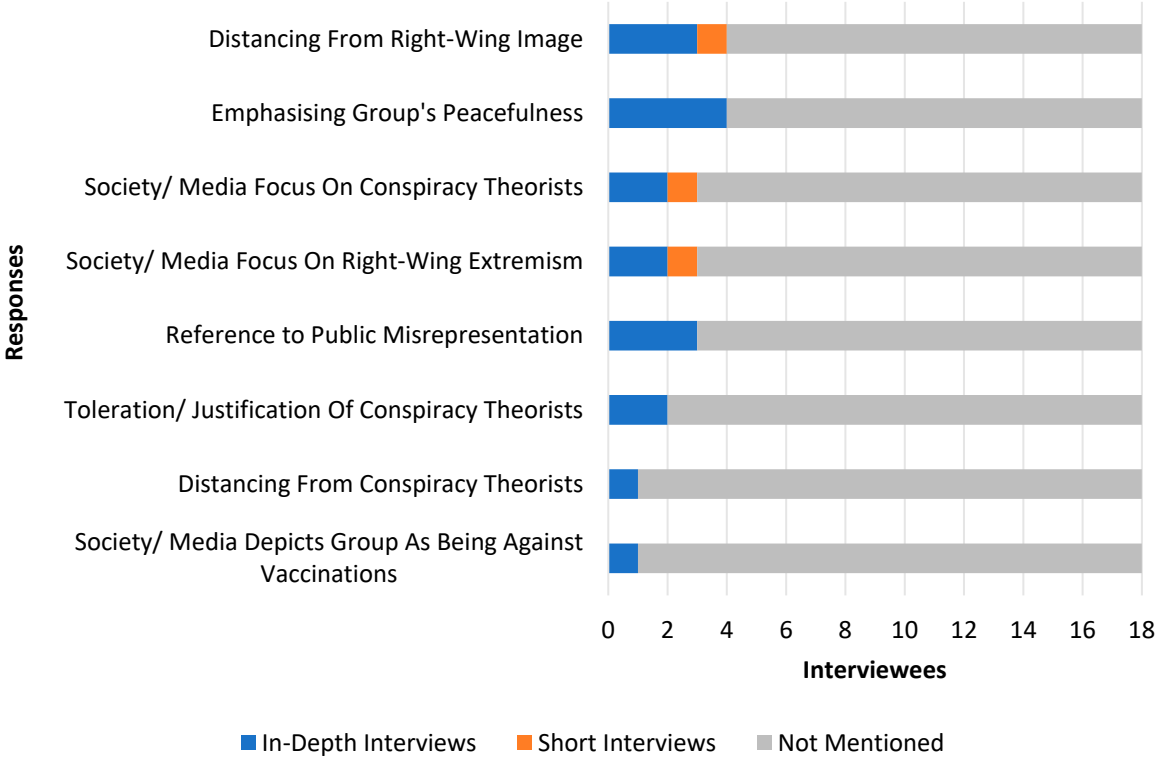


Figure 35

Reasons why the Group Does not Feel Like a Community

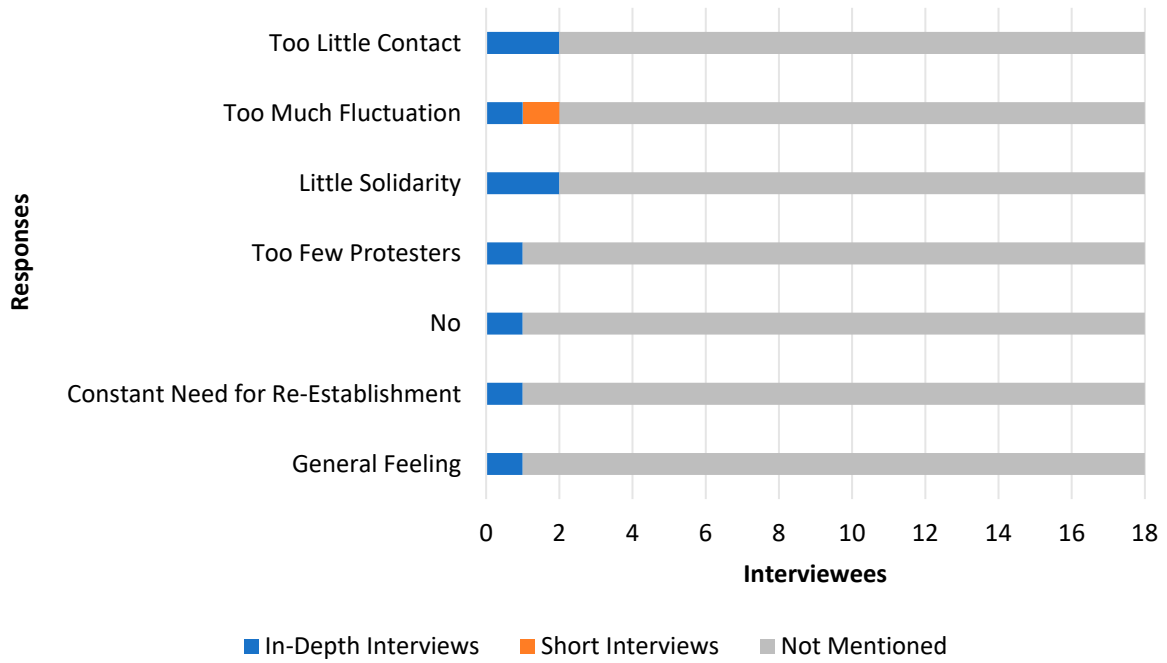


Figure 36

Aspects of Passive Relationships Within the Group

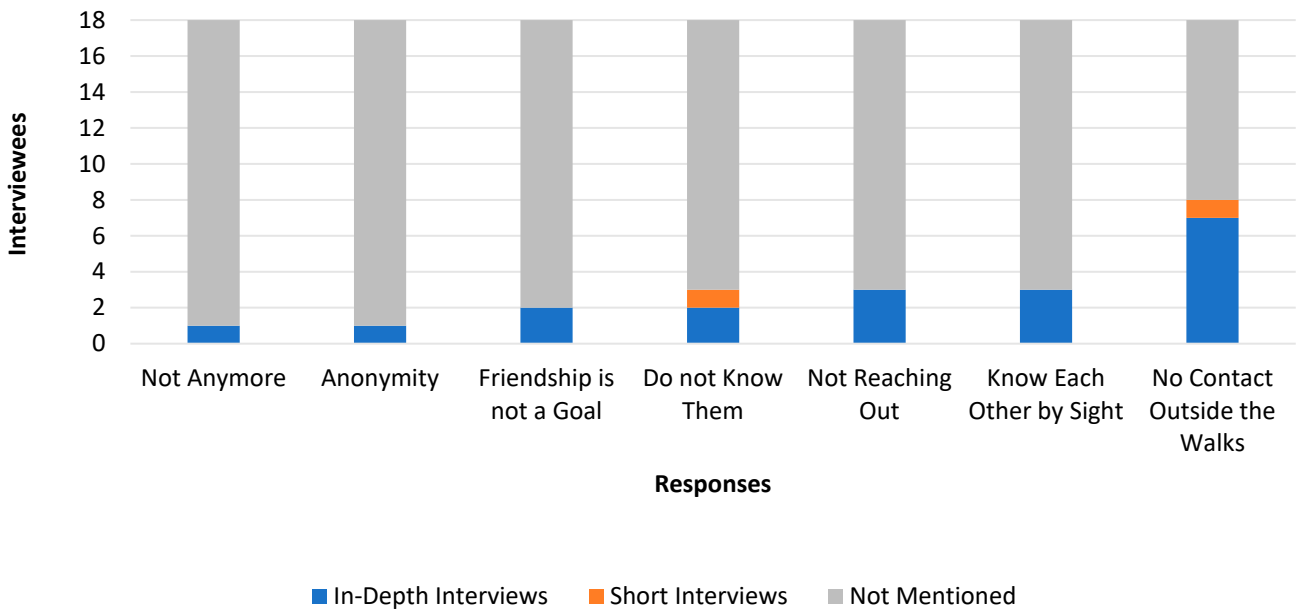


Figure 37

Why do Interviewees Feel Like Part of the Group?

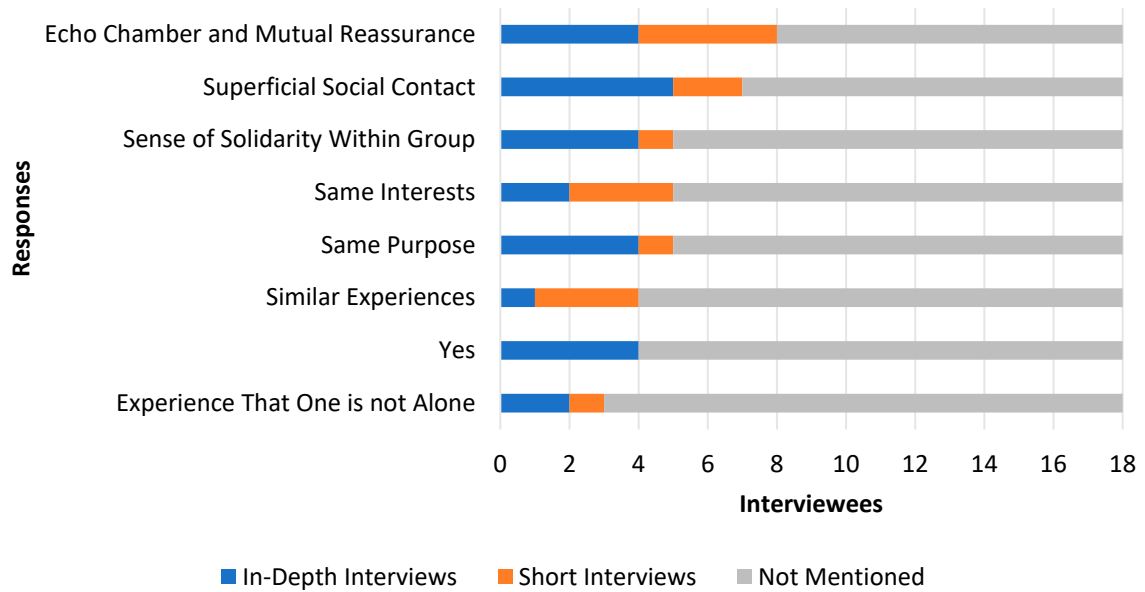


Figure 38

Aspects of Active Relationships Within the Group

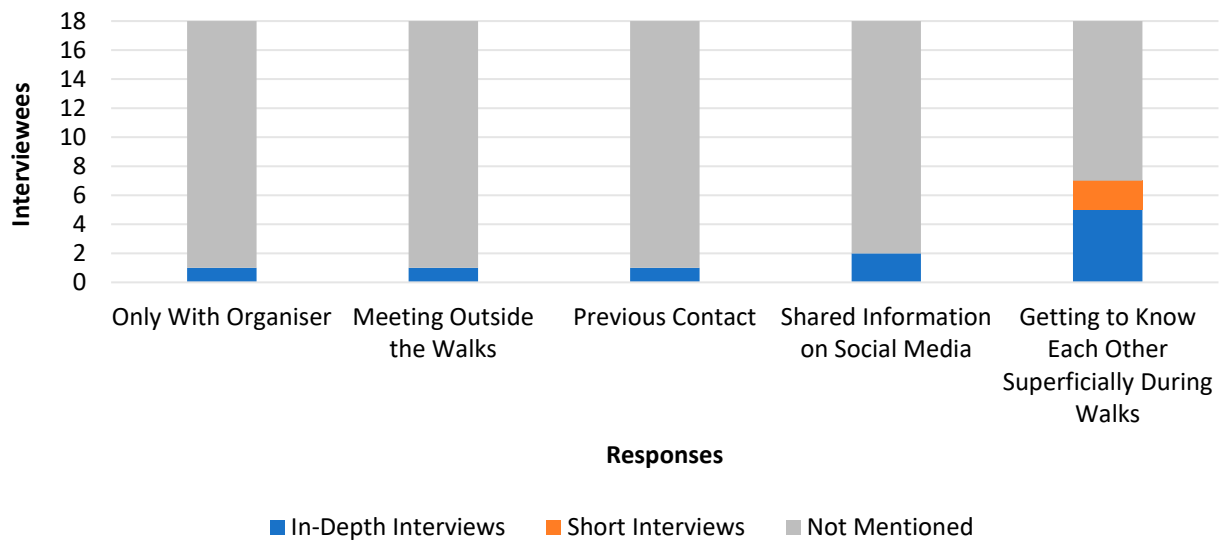


Figure 39

Feelings of Relative Deprivation

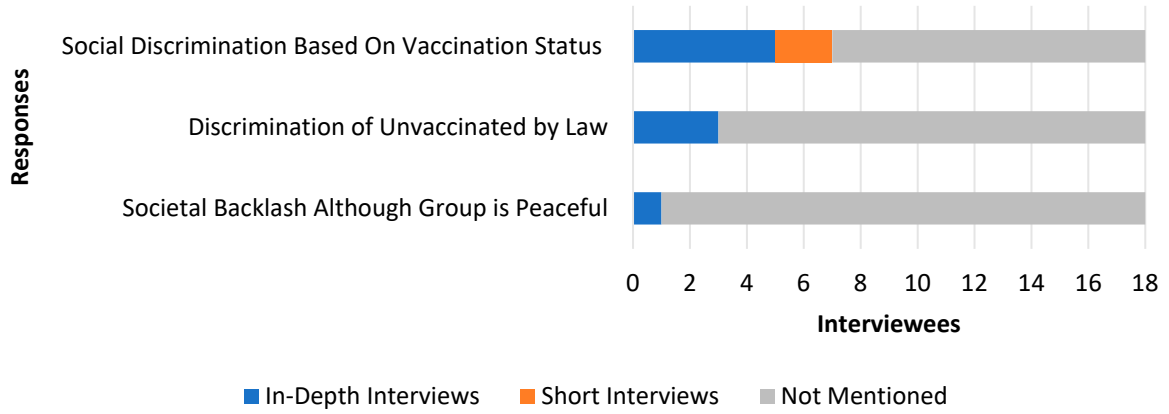


Figure 40

Perception of Shared Economic Disadvantages

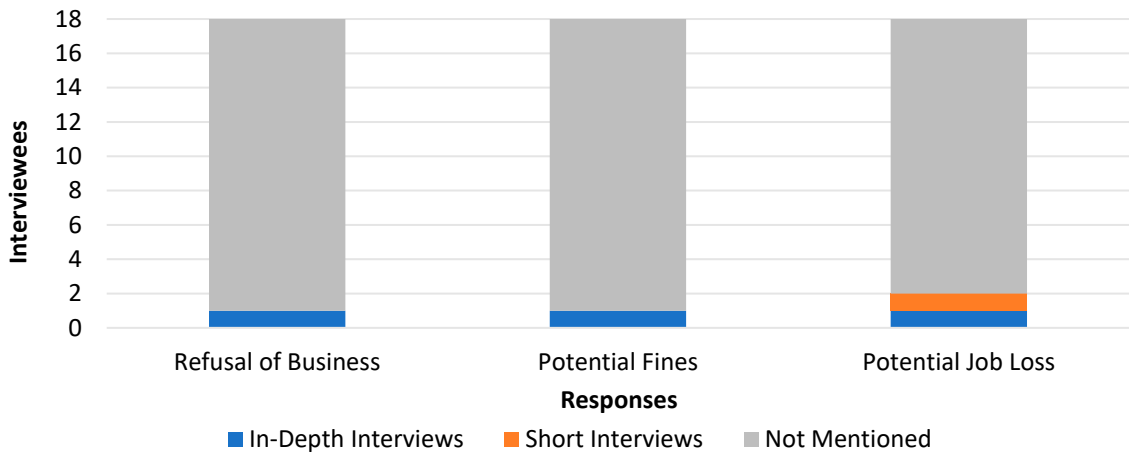


Figure 41

Perception of Shared Social Disadvantages

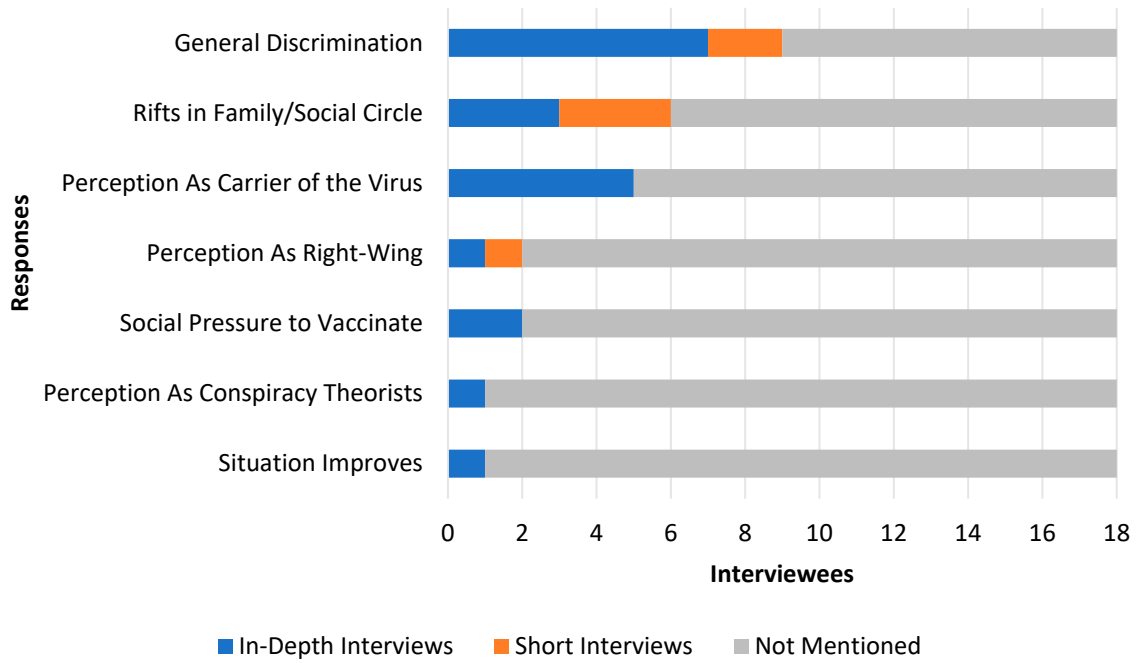


Figure 42

Perception of Shared Political Disadvantages

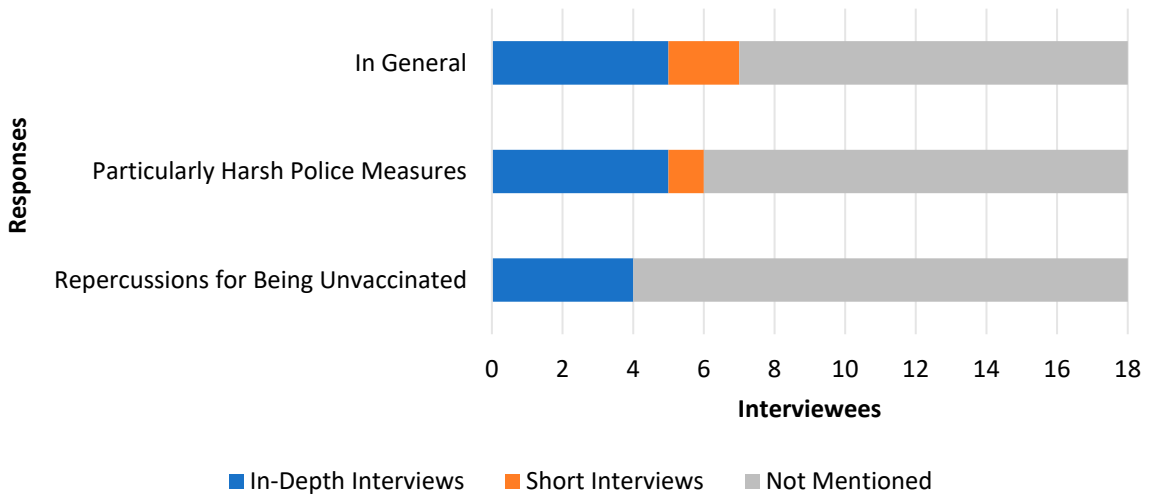


Figure 43

Perception of Shared Political Disadvantages

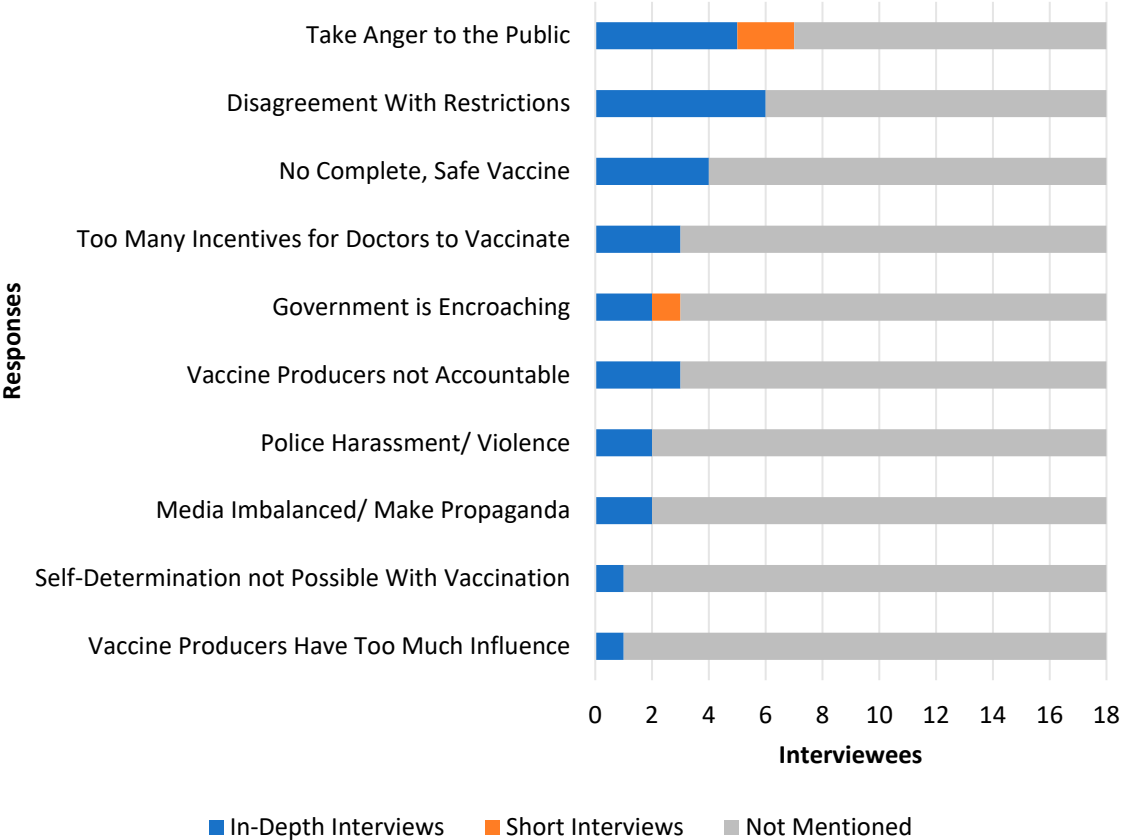


Figure 44

The Group's Shared Values, Norms, and Orientations

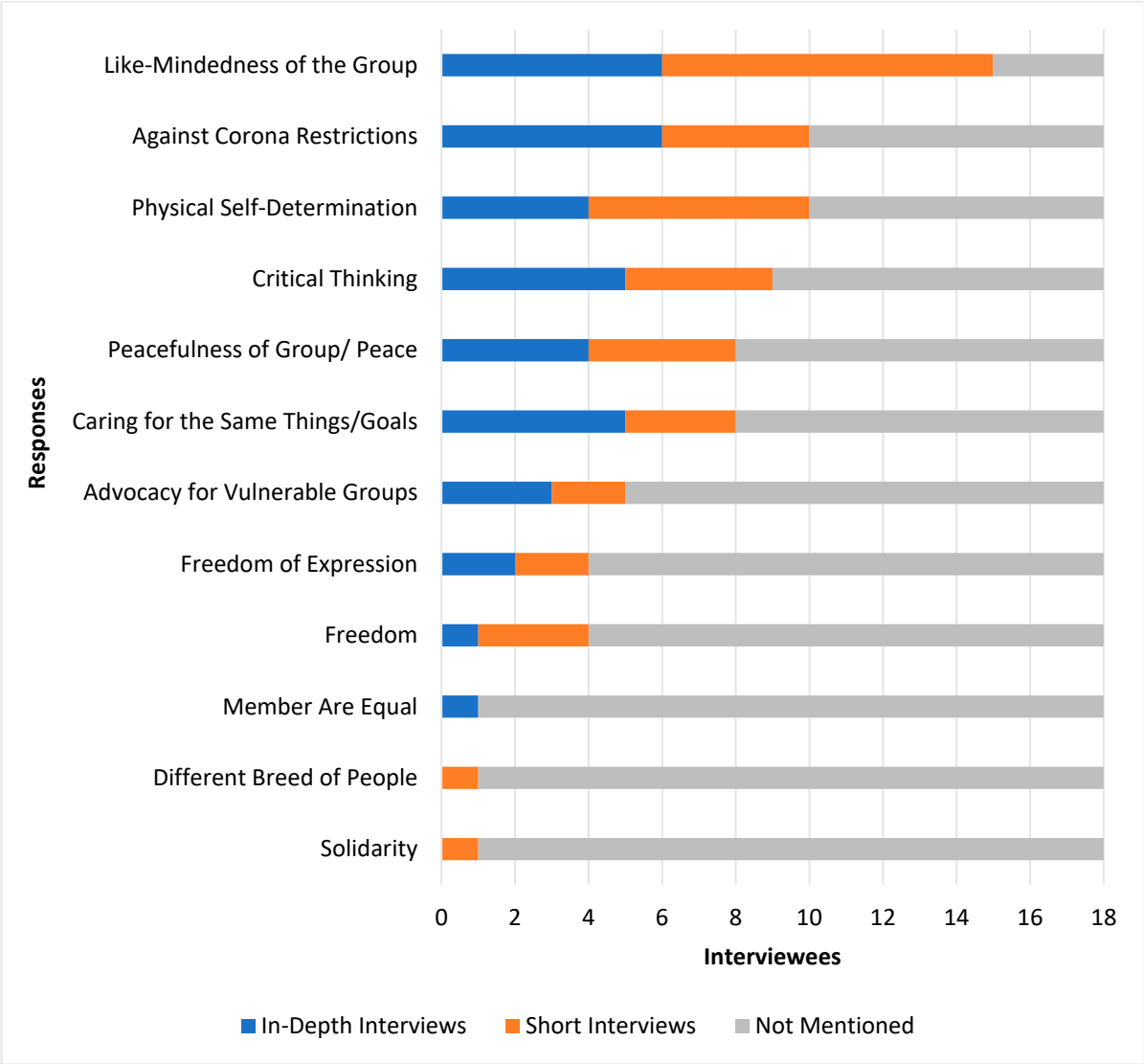


Figure 45

Perception of Personal Values, Norms, and Principles Being Violated

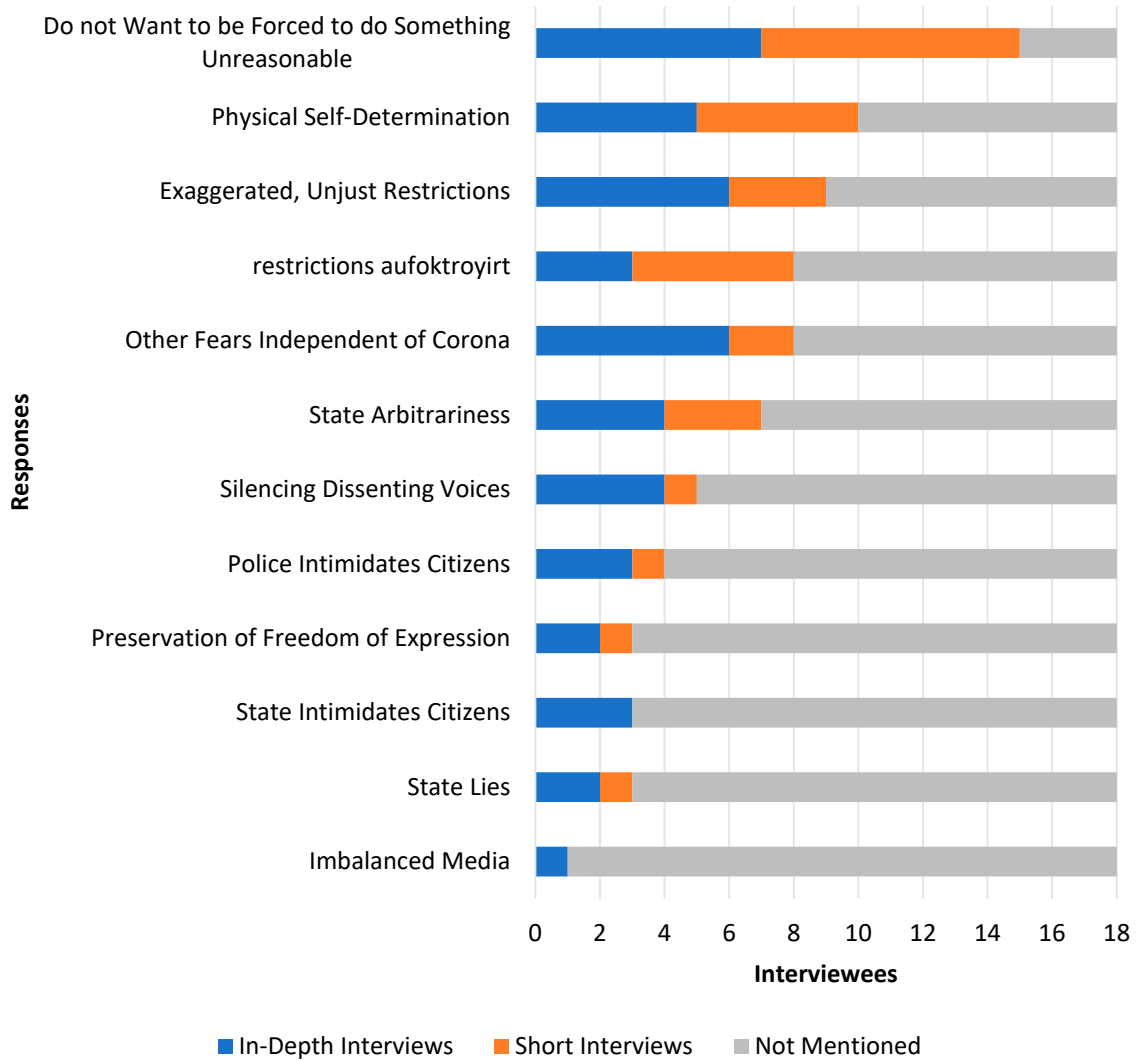


Figure 46

Perception That The Group's Worries are Ignored on State Level

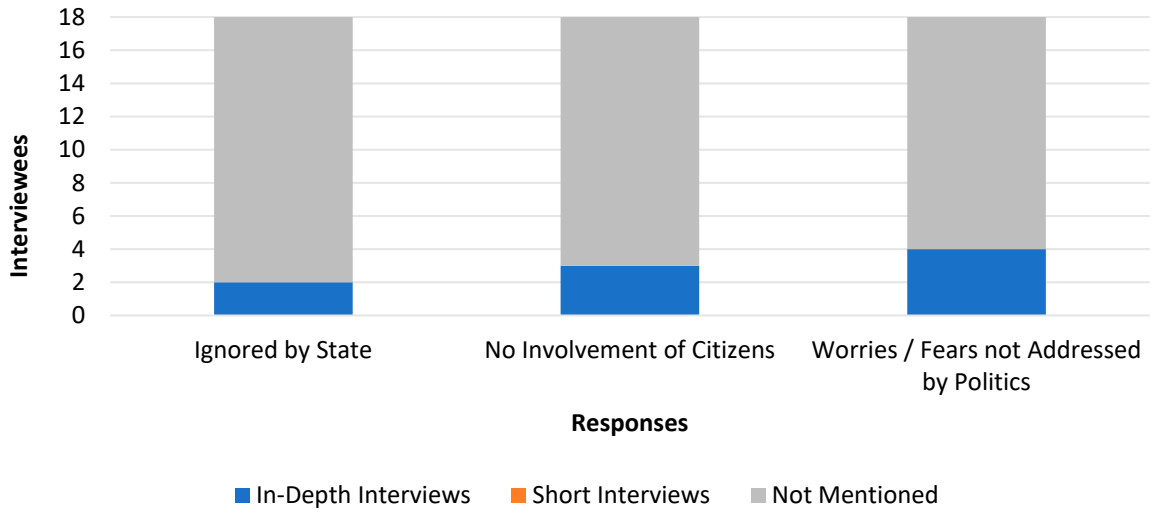


Figure 47

How the Group Tries to Reach Out to Villagers

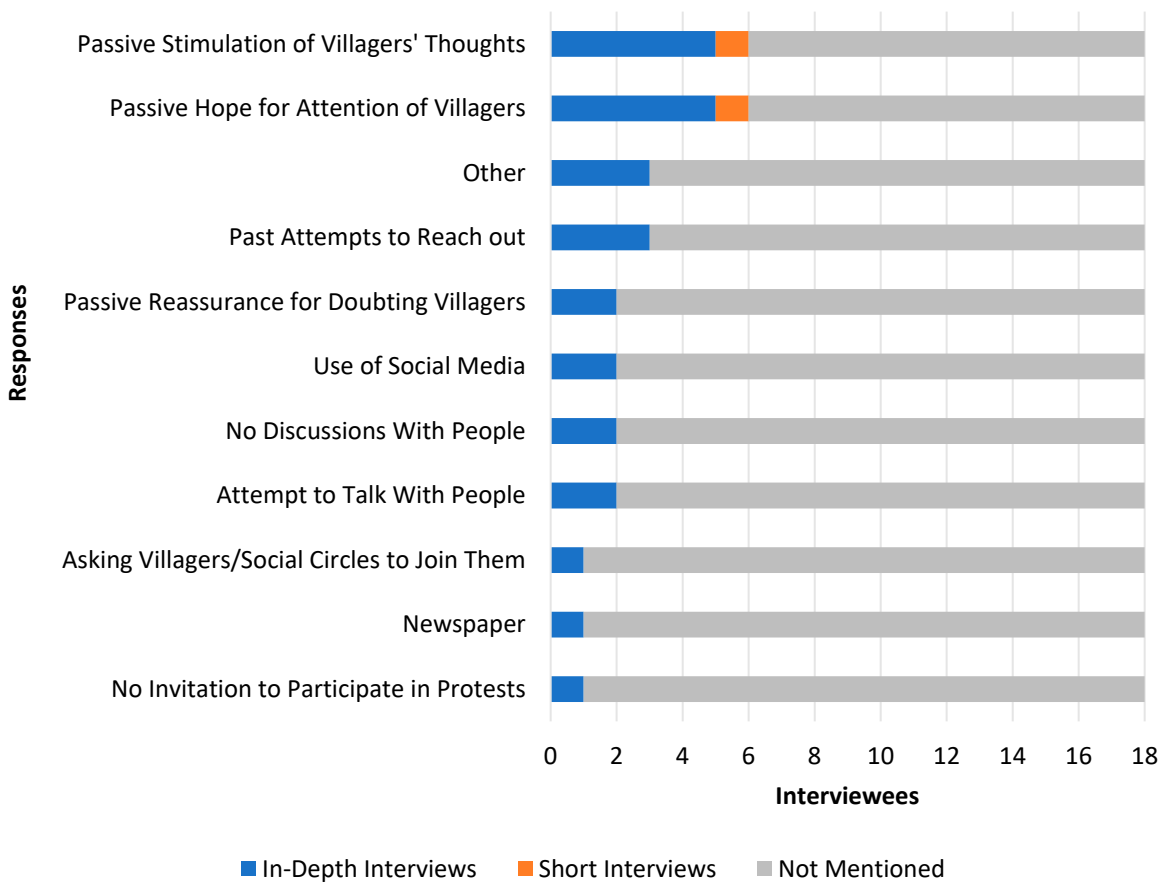


Figure 48

Positive Reactions That the Group Received

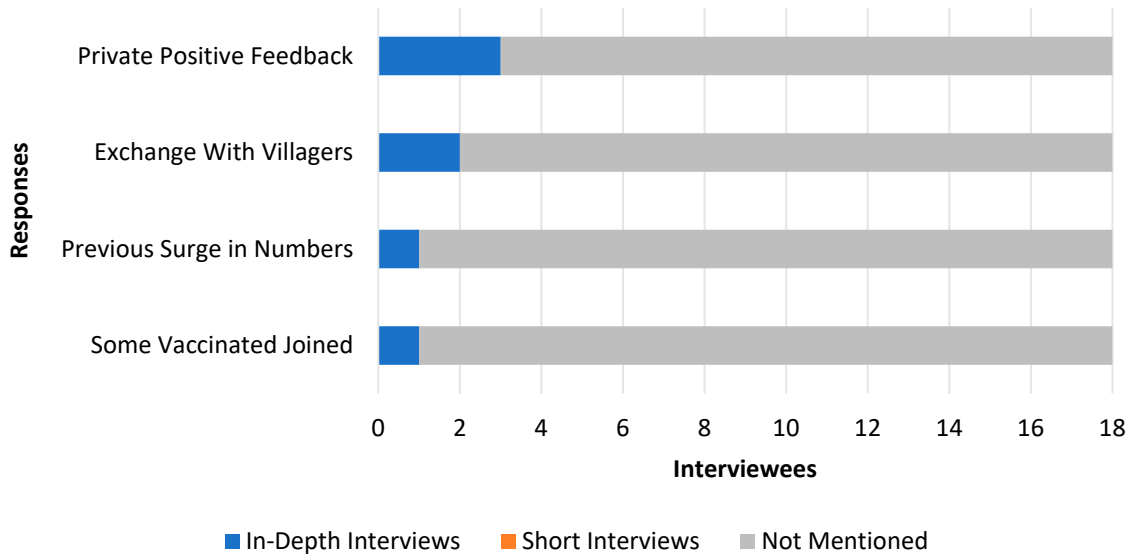


Figure 49

Negative Reactions That the Group Received

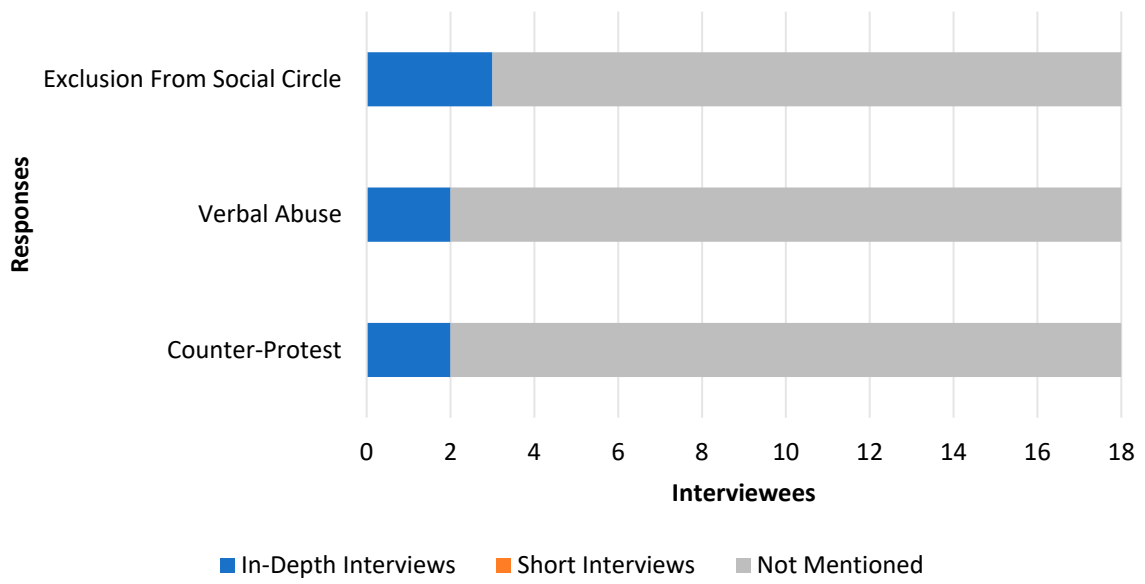


Figure 50

Collective Action Directed Towards Future Developments

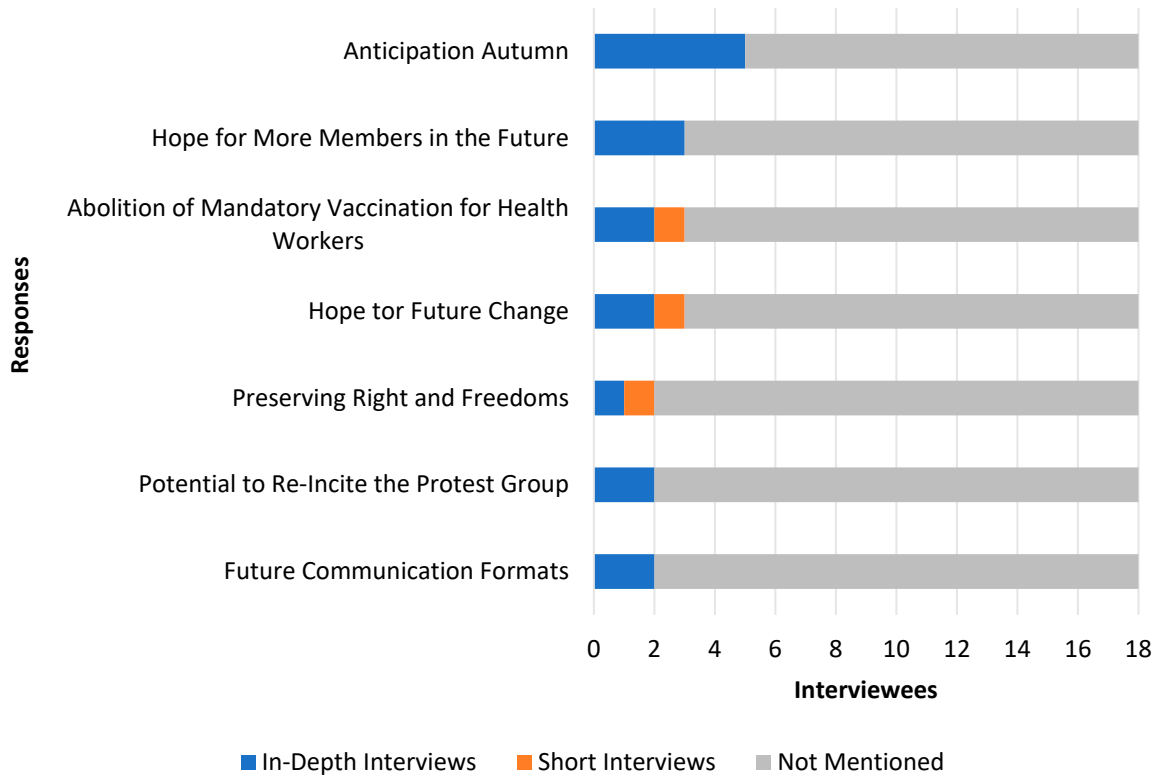


Figure 51

What Form of Compensation Does the Group Seek?

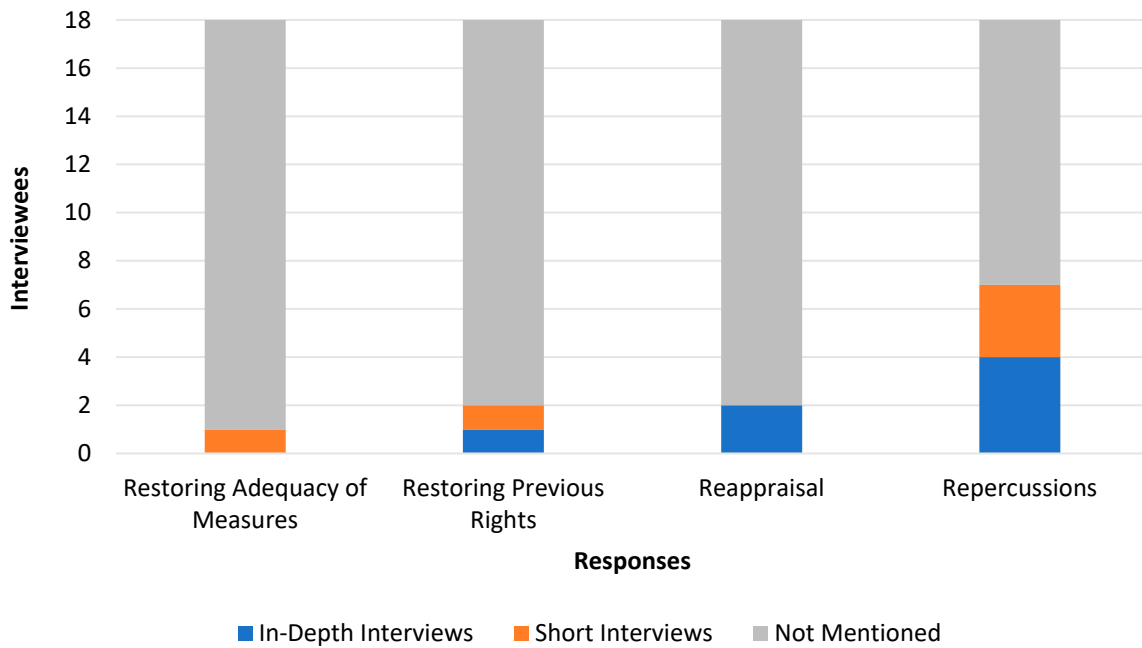


Figure 52

The Group's Belief That Collective Action Paves the Way for Change

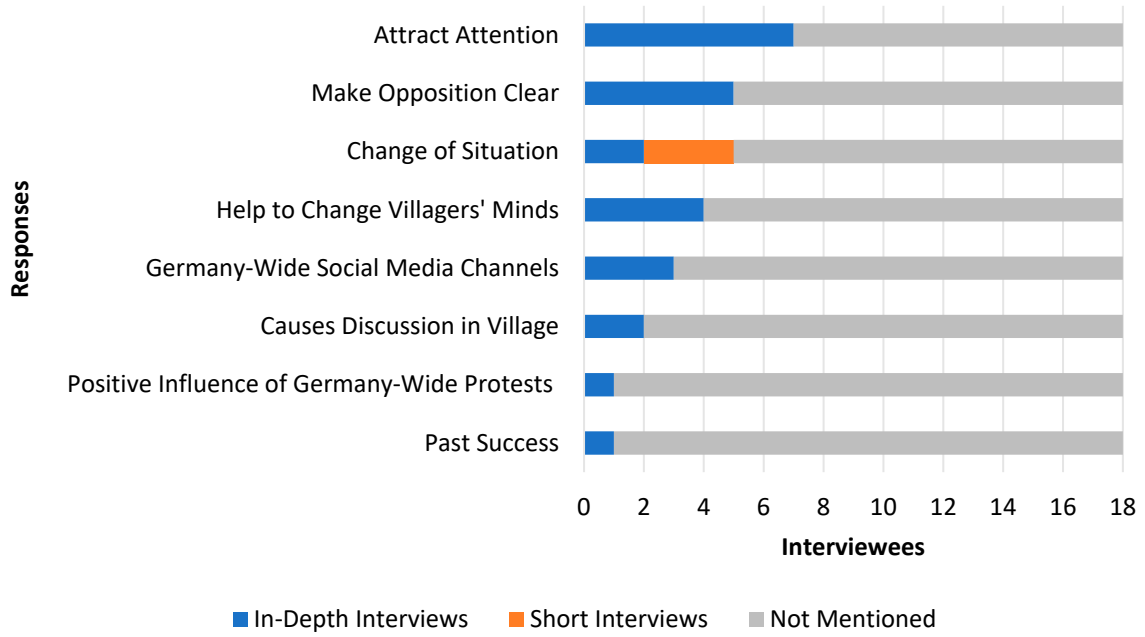


Figure 53

Doubts Whether the Group is Capable to Achieve its Goals

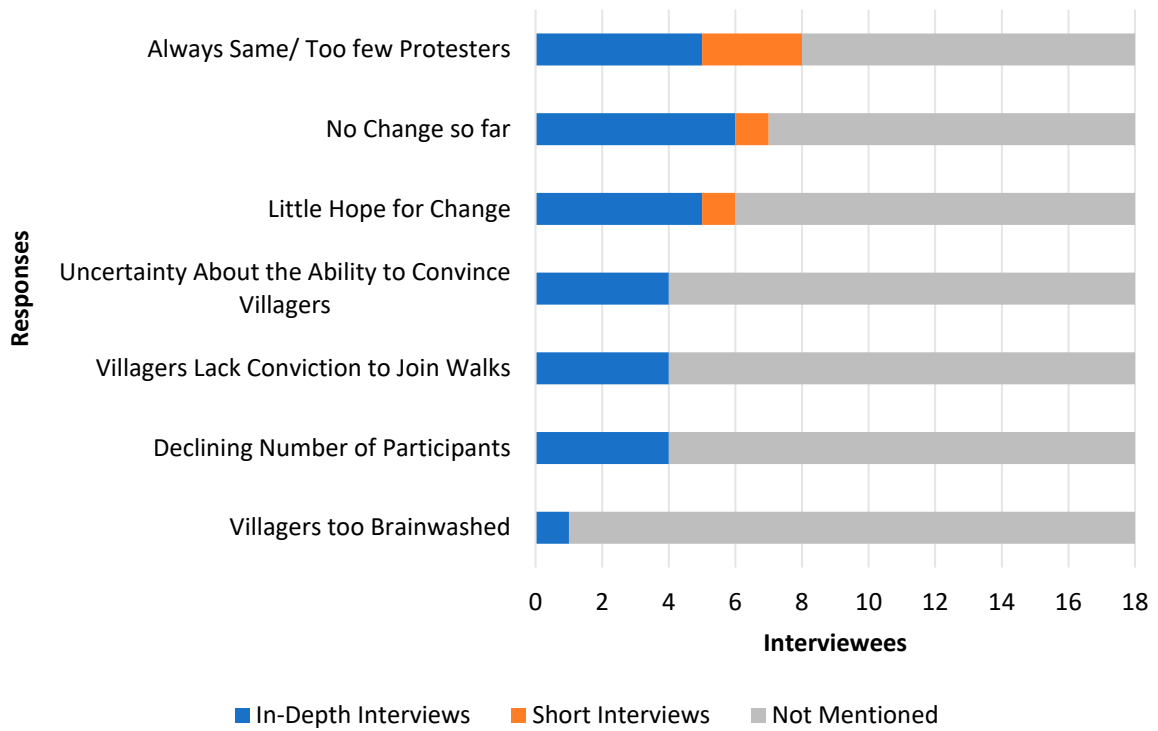


Figure 54

Does the Group Wants to Convey Something to the Public, and if yes, What?

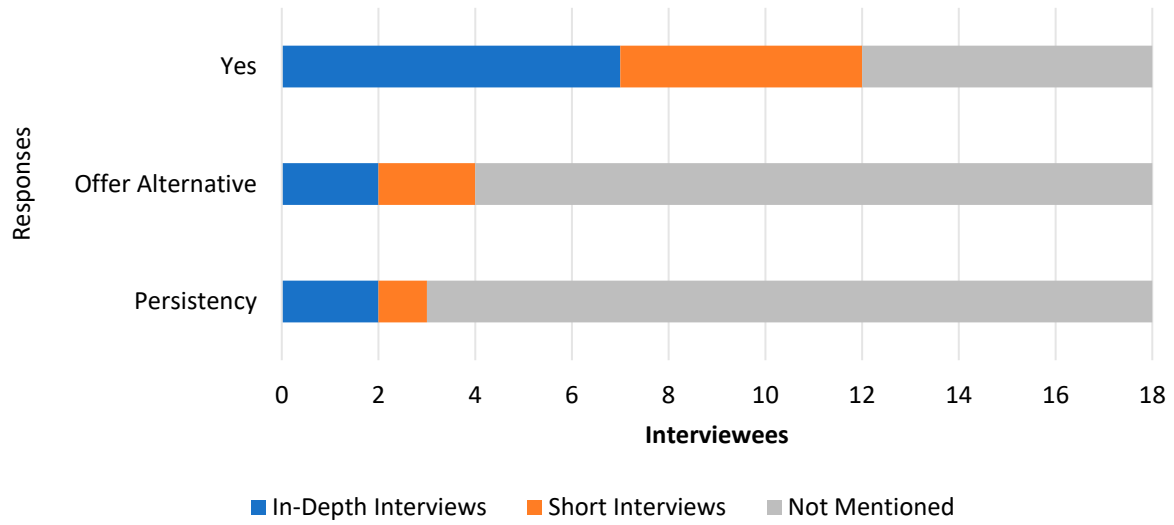


Figure 55

Why do the Group Members Experience a Sense of Agency?

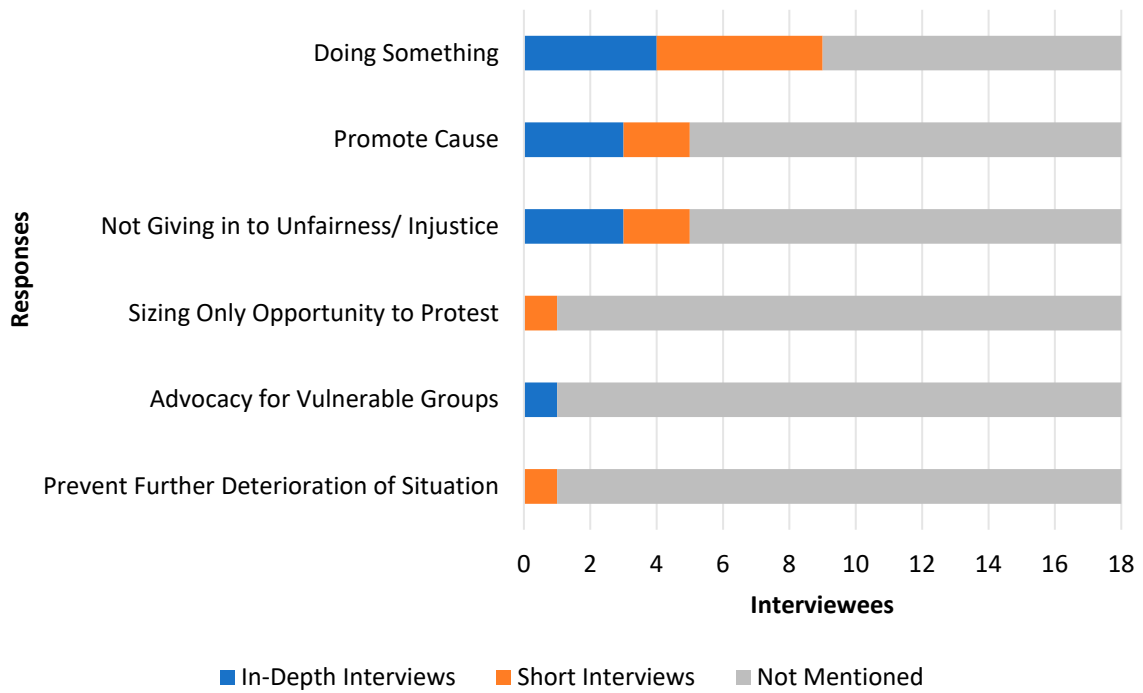


Figure 56

Perceived Unfairness Against the Group

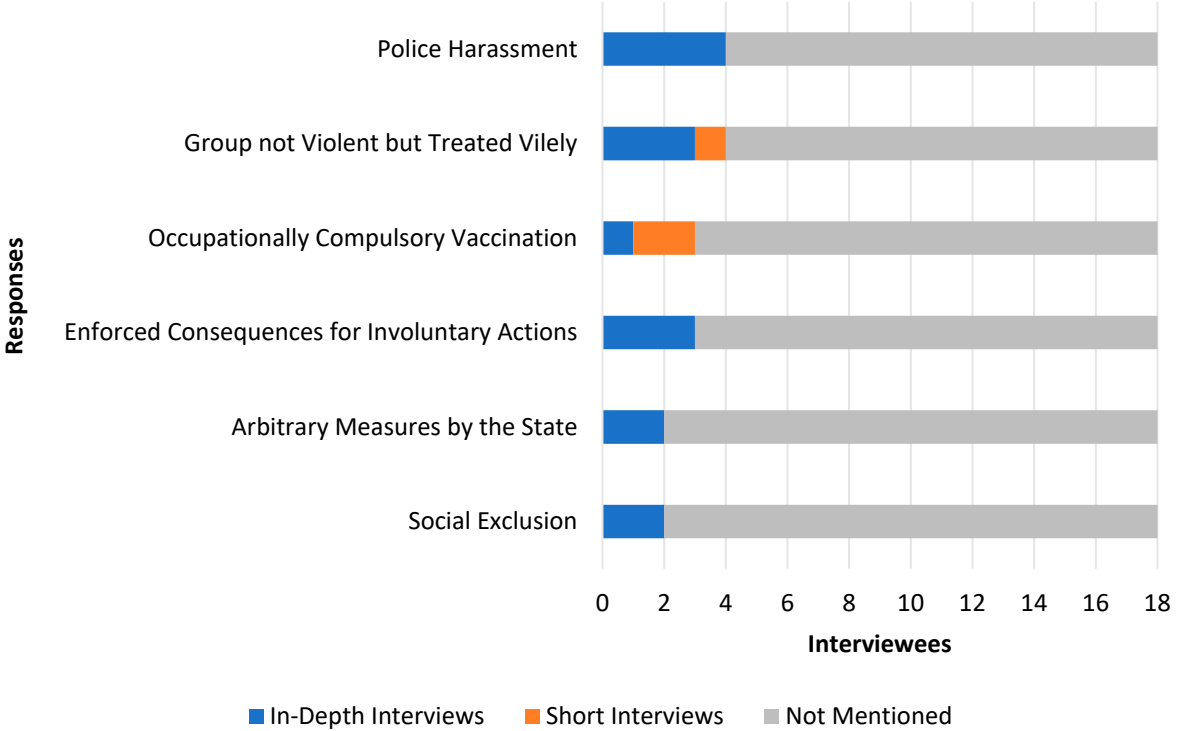


Figure 57

Perceived Violation of the Group's Norms and Principles

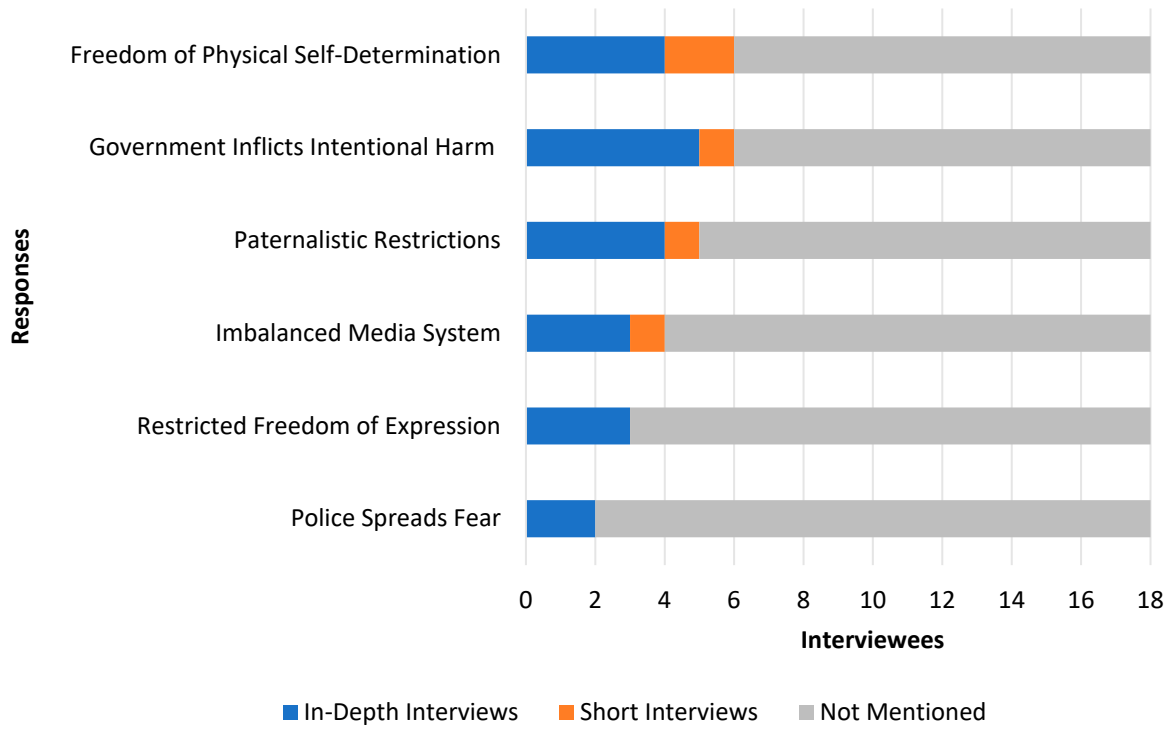
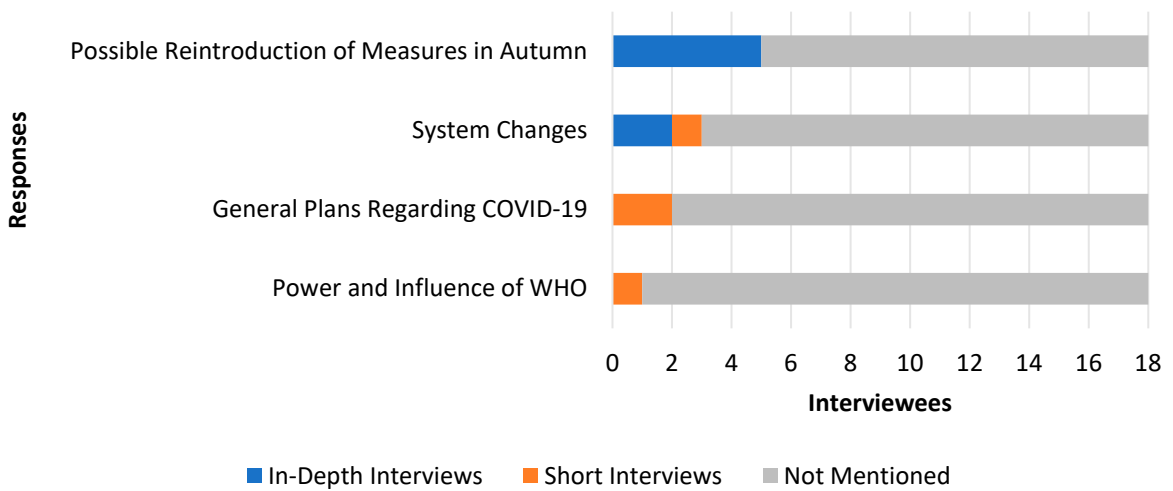


Figure 58

Perceived Threat of the Group's Norms and Principles



APPENDIX A.8 TRANSCRIPTION

The interviews were then transcribed with the help of the software *Sonix*. In total, fourteen short interviews and seven in-depth interviews were conducted. The individual responses to the questions in the interviews are the *Units of Coding*. Exclamations such as “Hmm” that are used to signify that the researcher is listening are ignored in the analysis in order to avoid systematic errors that would arise from an artificially split of coherent answers and which would lead to an overestimation of motives.

RULES FOR TRANSCRIPTION:

[] : Comments by the researcher for contextualisation

(word ?): The word or sentence could not be clearly understood

... : Noticeable Pause

Cursive: This word was emphasised

APPENDIX A.9 CODEBOOK

The codebook used for the analysis of the interviews is based on the indicators derived from the literature about demonstrations, protests, and social movements, described in Table 1. It also includes elements that emerged inductively during the interviews.

Table 5*Codebook*

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
Boundaries Between Own and Other Groups	Differentiation Within Group		Average Age	References to the average age range of the protest group
			Being on Guard	The group views themselves as being on guard, in comparison to former participants
			Conspiracy Theorists Tendencies	References to other members' conspiracist tendencies
			Different Key Issues	Group members mention that the participants have different key issues
			Different Opinions	Group members acknowledge the different opinions within the group
			Different Scrutiny of Information	Group members acknowledge that the participants have different approaches to verify information
			Different Social Strata	References to the different social and economic backgrounds of group members
	Differentiation Within Group		Former Protesters Intimidated	Perception of former Protesters as being intimidated
			Former Protesters Lulled/ Feel Safe	Perception of former Protesters as being lulled by softened measures and that they feel safe (for) now

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
Boundaries Between Own and Other Groups		Differentiation Within Group	Former Protesters Tired	Perception of former protesters as being tired
			Former Protesters Want to be Anonymous	Perception that former protesters only demonstrated when they could maintain their anonymity
			Medical Certificates	References that some of the participants have medical certificates to exempt them from wearing mask
			Momentary Focus on Oneself	Perception that former protesters focus on themselves now
			Do not Want to Speak for Others	Emphasis that interviewee does not want to speak for other group members
			Other	Other References
			Participation Frequency	References to varying participation of group members
			Similar Life Situations	Reference to the protesters' similar life situations
			Vaccinated and Unvaccinated Protesters	Emphasis that both vaccinated and unvaccinated protesters participate
				Actors Have Malicious Intents for Society

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
Boundaries Between Own and Other Groups		Actors Have Malicious Intents for Society	Economic Issues	Reference to actors who have economically harmful intentions
			Government Does not Inform Citizens	About Corona measures
			Government Controls Doctors	The government would control doctors
			Government is Lying	
			Lately Less Harassment by the Police	Reference that recently the police harassment got less
			Media Incites Fear, Intimidates	Through news and press coverage
			Government Tries to Abolish Political System	
			Creation of Rift in Society	
			Beyond/Before Corona Pandemic	Reference to distrust of political actors before the corona pandemic and beyond this issue
			Suppression of Dissenting Voices	
			Shielding of Pharmaceutical Industry	
			Restrictions Ineffective	
			Government Ignores Side-Effects and Deaths	
			Government Incites Fear, Intimidates	
			Government Breaks Law	
			Police Intimidates	
			Introduction of Repressive Containment Measures	
Media Inflates, Omits, Makes Propaganda				
Government Officially Deceives About Situation				

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations			
Boundaries Between Own and Other Groups	Expression of Distinctions From Other Groups	Outgroup	Vaccination not a Real Vaccination/ Citizens as Test Objects				
			Government Controls Police Administration				
			Ominous Group in the Background				
			Political System/State				
			International Organisations				
			Doctors/Health System				
			Unclear	Unspecified.			
			Pharmaceutical Industry				
			Police				
			Media				
			Government				
			Demarcation Against Other Groups/Society			Tired Society	
						Villagers/ Social Circle Breaks Ties	Not the protester would break ties with their social environment, but the others
						Lack of Understanding for Situation of Unvaccinated	Vaccinated people would have no understanding of the legal and practical situation of unvaccinated people
Other	Responses that do not fit the other response categories						
Intimidated Society							
			Brainwashed Villagers				

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations		
Boundaries Between Own and Other Groups	Expression of Distinctions From Other Groups	Demarcation Against Other Groups/Society	Villagers Unaware Of Dangerousness of Vaccine/ Situation			
			Intimidated Villagers			
			Conformist Villagers			
			Society Lacks Conviction	Society would lack conviction to demonstrate		
			Uncritical Villagers			
			Worries about public image	Society/ Media Depicts Group as Being Against Vaccinations		
				Distancing From Conspiracy Theorists		
		Toleration/ Justification of Conspiracy Theorists				
		Reference to Public Misrepresentation				
		Society/ Media Focus On Right-Wing Extremism				
		Society/ Media Focus On Conspiracy Theorists				
		Emphasising Group's Peacefulness				
		Consciousness for Group Membership	Involvement and Commitment	Feeling as Part of the Group	Society/ Media Depicts Group As Being Against Vaccinations	
					Solidarity	
Different Breed of People						
Echo Chamber and Mutual Reassurance						
Members are Equal						
Freedom						
Freedom of Expression						
Advocacy for Vulnerable Groups						

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations	
Consciousness for Group Membership	Involvement and Commitment	Feeling as Part of the Group	Caring for the Same Things/Goals		
			Peacefulness of Group/ Peace		
			Critical Thinking		
			Physical Self-Determination		
			Against Corona Restrictions		
			In Core Group	Reference that only the core group constitutes/feels like a community	
			Equality, no Discrimination, Safe Space		
			Experience That one is not Alone		
			Yes	General reference that interviewee feels like part of the protest group	
			Similar Experiences		
			Same Purpose		
			Same Interests		
			Sense of Solidarity Within Group		
			Superficial Social Contact		
			Critical Thinking		
			Physical Self-Determination		
			Against Corona Restrictions		
			Active Relationship With Other Protesters	Only With Organiser	Reference to active interaction with the organiser
				Meeting Outside the Walks	
				Previous Contact	
	Shared Information on Social Media				
	Getting to Know Each Other Superficially During Walks				

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations			
Consciousness for Group Membership	Involvement and Commitment	Passive Relationship With Other Protesters	Not Anymore	There has been some contact in the past			
			Anonymity	Focus too heavily on anonymity to create closer acquaintances			
			Friendship is not a Goal				
			Do not Know Them				
			Not Reaching out				
			Know Each Other by Sight				
			No Contact Outside the Walks				
		No Feeling of the Group Being a Community	General Feeling	Instead of reason for feeling like the group is not a community, they have a general feeling			
			Constant Need for Re-Establishment	The group constantly needs to rebuild the sense of community			
			No	Explicitly expressed that they do not think that the group is a community			
			Too few Protesters				
			Little Solidarity				
			Group-Based Anger	Bringing Anger Into Public	Reasons for Publicly Expressing the Group's Anger	Self-Determination not Possible With Vaccination	
						Media Imbalanced/ Make Propaganda	
Police Harassment/ Violence							
Vaccine Producers not Accountable							
Government is Encroaching							
Too Many Incentives For Doctors To Vaccinate	For example, "They even get money when they ask if they've been						

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations			
Group-Based Anger	Bringing Anger Into Public	Reasons for Publicly Expressing the Group's Anger	Too Many Incentives For Doctors To Vaccinate	vaccinated. If you say "No", then they get €10!" (II.6)			
			No Complete, Safe Vaccine				
			Disagreement With Restrictions				
			Take Anger to the Public		Reference to the desire to express anger, without further elaboration		
			Vaccine Producers Have too Much Influence				
	Feelings of Relative Deprivation		Social Discrimination Based on Vaccination Status				
			Societal Backlash Although Group is Peaceful				
			Discrimination of Unvaccinated by Law				
			Moral Beliefs	Self-Empowerment	Experiencing Sense of Agency	Prevent Further Deterioration of the Group's Situation	Sense that their activism may prevent a further deterioration of their situation
						Advocacy for Vulnerable Groups	Sense that with the demonstrations, they are also standing up for vulnerable groups, like children and the elderly
Sizing Only Opportunity to Protest							
Not Giving in to Unfairness/ Injustice							
Promote Cause	Feeling that they can promote their cause						
Doing Something							

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
Moral Beliefs	Self-Empowerment	Showing Courage		Reference to standing up to repression, facing police harassment, and not caving in
	Expressing and Performing Identity	Publicly Conveying What the Group Stands for	Persistency Offer Alternative Yes	They want to express their views
	Feelings of Unfairness	Feeling of Unfairness Against the Group Based on Moral or Ethnic Terms	Social Exclusion Arbitrary Measures by The State Enforced Consequences for Involuntary Actions Occupationally Compulsory Vaccination Group not Violent but Treated Vilely Police Harassment	e.g., pressure to be vaccinated without regard to possible side effects e.g., the group is peaceful at the demonstrations while villagers would verbally harass them, or the police would harass them Through excessive measures taken at the demonstration, excessive conditions for the demonstrations, or arbitrary behaviour
Moral Beliefs	Perceived Threat of Violation of Norms or Principles	Feeling That own or the Group's Norms or Principles are in Danger	Power and Influence of WHO	Reference to alleged undue Influence and Power of the WHO in the

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
Moral Beliefs	Perceived Threat of Violation of Norms or Principles	Feeling That own or the Group's Norms or Principles are in Danger	General Plans Regarding COVID-19	background
				Future policies regarding COVID-19 might endanger the group's principles, without further details
			System Changes	Reference to ominous potential changes in the political system
			Possible Reintroduction of Measures in Autumn	
		Feeling That the Groups Values and Principles are Violated	Police Spreads Fear	
			Restricted Freedom of Expression	
			Imbalanced Media System	
			Paternalistic Restrictions	
			Government Inflicts Intentional Harm	
		Feeling That Own Values and Principles are Violated	Freedom of Physical Self-Determination	
	Imbalanced Media			
	State Lies			
	State Intimidates Citizens			
	Preservation of Freedom of Expression			
	Police Intimidates Citizens			
	Silencing Dissenting Voices			
	State Arbitrariness			

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
		Feeling That Own Values and Principles are Violated	Other Fears Independent of Corona	Reference to other personal fears independent of Corona, such as pensions
			Exaggerated, Unjust Restrictions	Perception of the containment measures as exaggerated and unjust
			Physical Self-Determination	
Moral Beliefs	Perceived Threat of Violation of Norms or Principles	Feeling That Own Values and Principles are Violated	Do not Want to be Forced to do Something Unreasonable	Reference to the requirement for protesters to comply despite their opposition to the COVID-19 policies and vaccination
Perception of Shared Status	Economic	Feeling of Group's Common Economic Disadvantage	Refusal of Business	e.g., people would reject business with the protesters
			Potential Fines	Reference to possible fine when infringing COVID-19 policies
			Potential Job Loss	Reference to possible job losses in the health sector due to refusal to be vaccinated
	Political	Feeling of Group's Common Political Disadvantage	Repercussions for Being Unvaccinated	
			Particularly Harsh Police Measures	
			In General	No further elaboration
Social	Feeling of Group's Common Social Disadvantage	Situation Improves	Reference that the discrimination by the villagers has decreased	
		Perception as Conspiracy Theorists	Society and Villagers would view the protesters as conspiracy theorists	

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
Perception of Shared Status	Social	Feeling of Group's Common Social Disadvantage	Social Pressure to Vaccinate	
			Perception as Right-Wing	Society and Villagers would view the protesters as right-wing extremists
			Perception as Carrier of the Virus	Society and Villagers would view the protesters as transmitting COVID-19
Perception of Shared Status	Social	Feeling of Group's Common Social Disadvantage	Rifts in Family/Social Circle	
			General Discrimination	
Social Marginality	Feeling of not Being Seen by Politicians	Feeling That Their Needs and Worries are not Taken Into Account at State Level	Ignored by State	
			No Involvement of Citizens	Perception that the government would not incorporate citizens' views into COVID-19 policy
			Worries / Fears not Addressed by Politics	
		Feeling That Their Needs and Worries are not Taken Into Account at Local Level	Yes	A general category; Indicator mentioned once
Why Ottersberg as Protest Place		Reasons to Protest in Ottersberg	Reputation of Ottersberg	Mostly because of the University of applied sciences and arts, the village has a reputation for being rather alternative

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
Why Ottersberg as Protest Place		Reasons to Protest in Ottersberg	Fewer Counterprotests	In cities, in contrast, there are counterprotests by e.g., Antifa
			Settled in	Interviewees settled for Ottersberg as a protest place
			Wherever it Fits	Interviewees go to those protest that happen to be convenient
			Search For Places With Small Groups	Interviewees search for places with small protest group to support them
			Through Personal Contact/Hear-Say	
			Local Level Only Feasible Political Venue	Perception that the local level is supposedly the only feasible political venue for protests
			Distance	The distance to Ottersberg
Individuals' Belief in the Group's Efficacy	Belief in the Group's Capabilities	Collective Action Towards the Future Development	Future Communication Formats	Reference to possible future communication formats with the villagers, such as a roundtable
			Potential to Re-Incite the Protest Group	Reference to the villagers' potential to strengthen or re-join the protest group
			Preserving Right and Freedoms	Hope to preserve rights and freedoms
			Hope for Future Change	
			Abolition of Mandatory Vaccination for Health Workers	
			Hope for More Members in the Future	
			Anticipation Autumn	

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
		Belief Collective Action Paves the way for Change	Past Success	
			Positive Influence of Germany-Wide Protests	
			Germany-Wide Social Media Channels	
			Help To Change Villagers' Minds	
			Change Of Situation	
			Make Opposition Clear	
			Attract Attention	
Attempts of Contact		Attempt to Reach out to Villagers	Newspaper	Attempt to use newspapers
			Asking Villagers/Social Circles to Join Protest	Protesters do not invite passers-By to join the protests
			Attempt to Talk With People	
			No Discussions With People	
			Use of Social Media	e.g., local Facebook groups
			Passive Reassurance for Doubting Villagers	In case villagers doubt their position on Corona, the protesters would like to offer reassurance by their protests
			Past Attempts to Reach out	
			Other	Miscellaneous
			Passive Hope for Attention of Villagers	Hope that the demonstrations attract attention without the protesters ac- tively approaching the villagers

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations		
Attempts of Contact		Attempt to Reach out to Villagers	Passive Stimulation of Villagers' Thought	Hope that the demonstrations make villagers think without actively and directly addressing them		
		Getting positive reactions	Some Vaccinated Joined			
			Previous Surge in Numbers			
			Exchange With Villagers			
		negative reactions	Private Positive Feedback			
			Counter-Protest			
			Verbal Abuse			
			Shunning From Social Circle			
		Intrinsic Motivation	For Participating in Protesting	Counter Representation In Media		
				Exchange With Others		
Force Oneself to Protest After Work				Despite the daily workload, the protester still gathers strength to demonstrate		
Keeping Freedoms and Rights						
Maintain Self Value, Pure Conscience, Act						
Model Monday Walks in GDR				Reference that protesters see themselves in the tradition of the Monday Demonstrations in the GDR		
No Real Motivation						
Other						
Persistence						
Show Presence						
Side-Effects In Family/ Social Circle						

Dimension	Subdimension	Indicator	Responses	Additional Explanations
			Solidarity With Group	
