Post-political Numbness of a Digital Society

The Political Condition of Environmental Activism on Twitter

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Over the past decades, a widespread consensus has emerged regarding the anthropogenic causes and negative impacts of climate change. For instance, the environmental pollution reaches alarming dimensions on a global level implying immanent dangers to the future of humankind and nature. The need to take action in order to maintain the integrity of human and environmental systems has long been recognised by most political elites, business leaders, activists and the scientific community. Yet, it seems that political and economic institutions do not move on fast enough from words to actions. At the same time, a depoliticisation of the public sphere is observed repressing a radical critical discourse. Several political theorists and philosophers debate about the emergence of a post-political and post-democratic condition, implying a state of politics of consensus. The thesis at hand aimed to investigate the post-political condition of climate change activism in the online realm by means of the case of a rather recent trend of environmental activism, the zero waste movement.

A quantitative content analysis was conducted studying 500 #zerowaste tweets that were posted in April 2018. The content characteristics of the Twitter postings were analysed and a coding system developed to measure the post-political condition of communication practices in the environmental pollution debate on Twitter.

The study finds that in particular civic actors (citizen and public personalities), commercial and non-profit organisations engaged in the zero waste debate distributing informative content mobilising the public to make certain lifestyle decisions. It is furthermore revealed that the #zerowaste debate on Twitter is evidently depoliticised. The communication practices on the social media platform incorporated in many ways discursive strategies such as universalisation and externalisation resulting in a rationalised and moralised representation of the problem of environmental pollution.

*Keywords*: Post-politics, depoliticisation, climate change, zero waste movement, environmental activism, social media, Twitter, quantitative content analysis
“My generation, whatever this may be, is supposed to be more political again. It might seem like we’d be more political, because there are clear-cut fronts again. Nazis are back in the Reichstag, Donald Trump’s in the White House… Vladimir Putin, Erdogan… Of course, you’re against that. I do believe however, that most people of my generation are basically non-political. Politics have become such a big part of youth culture that we begin to forget that our "Fuck Nazis" phone cases do not lead to an end to the ruling system playing off weak against weak. You might think that our ‘Fairtrade’ chocolate is better than any other, but only a radical and determined fight for redistribution in our world is capable of making every product fair.

Generations that came before us, still thought about utopias.
We gave up.”

[Prologue „DRUCK“¹ Season 1, Episode 1]

¹ “DRUCK” is the German adaption of the Norwegian teen drama web series “SKAM”.
1. INTRODUCTION

“It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”
(Jameson 2003, 76)

Without doubt climate change is one of the most omnipresent, alarming issues of our time and one of the greatest societal challenges that humanity faces. Over the past decades, a widespread consensus has emerged regarding the anthropogenic causes and negative impacts of climate change. The need to take global action in order to maintain the integrity of human and environmental systems has long been recognised by most political elites, business leaders, activists and the scientific community (Arlt et al. 2018; Swyngedouw 2010, 215). Swyngedouw (2010, 215) claims that “the imminent danger to the future of our common human and non-human world calls for radical changes in all manner of domains, from the way we produce and organise the transformation and socio-physical metabolism of nature to routines and cultures of consumption.” Yet, initiating sustainable practices and tackling the causes of the problem has been considered to impose costs on industry and restrain economic growth which kept politicians from promoting the ambitious solutions it would need. Hence, it still seems to be a long way from translating the understanding of the global climate change problem into effective action (Arlt et al. 2018; Rootes 2012; Rothe 2011; Swyngedouw 2010). In a society where politically instituted social systems and practices are embodied by market-driven, neoliberal globalisation, while the latter is causing significant destructions for the environment, scholars argue that it is crucial that the public actively engages in the public discourses on climate change and climate politics (Arlt et al. 2018; Carvalho 2017). At this point, the Internet and social media platforms play a pivotal role for environmental activist movements. They provide new opportunities to connect, organise and mobilise people towards a common goal broadening the opportunities for political participation on a global level (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Castells 2015).

One environmental issue that is of particular interest in the recent public climate change debate is the pollution of air, land and soil, freshwater, oceans and coasts. Pollutants, which are in particular human-made chemicals, emissions and domestic and industrial waste, “are
impairing the quality of the air that we breathe, the water we drink, the soil in which we
grow our food and the oceans on which millions depend for their livelihoods” (UN
Environment 2017, 4). Per year, approximately 1.3 tonnes of waste are generated, almost
half of the world’s waste produced by OECD countries (World Bank 2012; UN
Environment 2017), and the plastic production and waste to landfills contribute to a great
extent to human-made CO² emission causing global warming. A relatively recent trend of
environmental activism, the zero waste movement, aims to counteract plastic pollution and
reduce waste.

1.1. Framing the problem

The thesis at hand will problematize the debate about climate change issues in the context
of an increasing depoliticised society and will look into the potential role of communication
on social media platforms: For one thing, as mentioned before, it is argued that there has
emerged a consensus throughout (Western) societies over the anthropogenic condition of
global climate and its serious consequences for human kind and nature. With the recent
‘climate boom’ as Berglez and Olausson (2014, 68) picture it, “more or less everybody is
now able to ‘see’, talk about, and in practical ways deal with climate change”. It is generally
recognised that it needs immediate political action and interventions to counteract the severe
danger climate change presents to civilisation (Swyngedouw 2010). Yet, for another thing,
at the same time a depoliticisation of the public sphere is observed. Several political theorists
and philosophers debate about the emergence of a post-political and post-democratic
condition, implying a state of politics of consensus on a global scale. It is criticised that the
universal system of liberal democratic capitalism is widely accepted, “naturalised”, and not
further questioned although neoliberalism reinforces hegemonic structures that compromise
democracy (Zizek 2009; Mouffe 2005). Scholars claim that also the climate change
discourse has entered the post-political sphere (De Goede and Randalls 2009; Swyngedouw
2010). The consensual debate surrounding environmental issues is assumed to imply a
repression of radical political discourse. Even though citizens assumingly get engaged in
counteracting climate change evermore, the engagement is done in a rather non-political
manner. Consequentially, the fundamental cause for climate change – the capitalist order –
is not challenged and protected from critical questioning (Berglez and Olausson 2014, 68).
For instance, on the one side people acknowledge the causes of climate change and try to bring about ecological sustainability. It is recognised that the pollution of our planet inducing climate change derives from market-driven, neoliberal systems and practices – which makes the issue highly political. Yet, on the other side it seems that our societies’ capitalist strive for economic growth and increasing economic wealth is higher. People are only willing to alter their consumerist habits to a certain extent – only so far that they do not have to give up on habits and comforts. This illustrates a great contradiction and dilemma of our todays’ capitalist society. We all know about the environmental pollution, we know about its harmful implications, yet, we are too comfortable in our system and do not dare to change it profoundly.

Accordingly, the problem becomes apparent of an increasing climate change issue on the one side and a depoliticised public sphere on the other side. In times of late modern democracies where (mostly young) people tend to dissociate themselves from political parties it seems necessary to engage people differently in topics such as climate politics. Carvalho et al. (2017, 131) claim that it is crucial to look at the connection between citizens and the political world when it comes to understanding the current state of climate change and where it will go prospectively. Civic political engagement can “challenge the power arrangements and value systems that feed climate change” and communication is the key to political engagement.

1.2. Structure of the thesis

The thesis at hand begins with introducing some background information on the zero waste movement and the social media platform Twitter. In the next chapter, the previous research that has been conducted in the field of civic political engagement, climate change activism and the post-political condition of climate change will be analysed. A theoretical framework of the concepts of political participation and post-politics will be elaborated followed by a description of the methodology and material. Thereafter, the analysis and results of the research are presented. The thesis completes with a final chapter of concluding discussion.
2. PURPOSE, AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Broadly speaking, the aim of the study is to contribute to an understanding of citizens’ political engagement with environmental issues on online platforms and to empirically explore the ways in which the post-political condition of climate change can be identified in this context. The role of media and communication within a social and political movement shall be examined illustrating how different actors actively participate in public discourses online through sharing information or expressing own views. The study intends to illustrate how active social media users are contributing in the discussion around the reduction of waste and the combat of plastic pollution on the social media platform Twitter. It shall be explored who is talking about the topic, how, and what meanings the different actors assign to their messages.

Of special interest for this study is the political nature of communication of citizens that engage via social media platforms on this specific environmental issue. The study aims to deconstruct the discussions on ‘zero waste’ to identify potential underlying post-political patterns. It shall be analysed to what extent citizens accept, question or contest climate change issues and how they (re)construct an understanding of their political roles and opportunities. It will be interesting to see to what extent the actors align with the consensual understanding of climate change and whether pro-environmental messages address anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist arguments. Hence, it shall be looked at whether a connection between the capitalist structure of our society and the environmental crisis is drawn.

Looking more closely at Twitter as a tool for political communication it is of interest for the study to see how political the social media platform is or, rather, how political the vast majority of active Twitter users is that engage in a political environmental topic. The following research questions can be derived from the purpose of the study:

RQ 1: Who are the actors involved in the debate on reducing waste and preventing environmental pollution?

RQ 2: How do actors on the social media platform Twitter communicate and debate about zero waste and the counteraction of environmental pollution?
RQ 3: Can one identify patterns of the post-political condition of climate change in the zero waste debate on Twitter?

Apart from adding to the research on citizens’ political engagement, the research shall contribute to an operationalisation of the framework of the post-political in the context of environmental activism on social media platforms. The study shall give an idea on how to empirically analyse post-political tendencies in online debates.
3. BACKGROUND

The following chapter will give some background information on the zero waste movement and on the social media platform Twitter as an instrument for political communication. It will be elaborated why it is interesting and relevant to study the both.

3.1. The zero waste movement

Zero waste is a philosophy encouraging a circular economy. The basic principle is to redesign the life cycle of resources and manage products and processes in a way as to avoid waste and conserve and recover resources instead of burning or burying them. The general idea is that “if the community cannot reuse, repair, recycle or compost it [a product], industry shouldn’t be making it” (Connett 2006, 14). Zero waste is about eliminating waste and thereby eliminating pollution (and at the same time reducing costs due to a decreasing need for raw materials). Already since the 1980s, citizens and environmental activists argue for recycling and composting measures, opposing waste incineration and landfills. Yet, the question remains on what to do with the things that we cannot recycle or compost. Building up on that, the idea of zero waste reasons that if one does not create pollution and waste that cannot recover in the natural cycle in the first place, one can avoid great damages threatening the health of nature and living beings (Connett 2006). Hence, “the best approach to deal with waste is not to create it” (UN Environment 2017, 30).

To reach zero waste goals it needs governmental regulations on the one side, influencing industries and their production processes. On the other side, the movement aims to give direction to people in changing their lifestyles towards minimising their impact on the earth’s resources. Therefore, zero waste is the attempt to combine the responsibility of the community with the responsibility of industry and politics. In the past decades, an increasing number of cities and communities announced zero waste programmes setting goals to be waste free (or at least send substantially less waste to landfills), such as Canberra, Australia, back in 1996 or San Francisco and New York City more recently (Connett 2006).

The zero waste movement is insofar interesting and relevant to study as it has grown to be a relatively stable movement during the past decades, yet, with the growing interest of societies in sustainable measures, it gains more and more attention in recent debates. It is not a niche topic of eco-activists anymore, but rather of great interest for a wider public as
well as for organisations and politics. With the increasing engagement in the topic, zero waste has also taken hold on social media. On various platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or personal blogs, the environmental issue is discussed by a growing zero waste community. Zero waste activists claim that the success of the movement depends in particular on the people. As a consumer one has the power to decide whether to support sustainable or unsustainable practices and thereby direct companies in a certain way - every purchase is a vote (Chapman 2017). Against this backdrop, consumer decisions are highly political. But how political is the debate around zero waste in actual fact?

3.2. Twitter and Political Communication

The microblogging platform Twitter, launched in 2006, is the one of the most popular social networking sites after Facebook, Youtube and Instagram. With 336 million monthly users (Statista 2018) it is the largest microblogging service. Microblogging is a small scale format of blogging with Twitter postings, so called tweets, that comprehend no more than 280 characters. Twitter user can share textual content, pictures, videos or links to news stories. Since every account is open for everyone to follow, anyone can access information on the profiles and engage in discussions with other users (Aharony 2012; Park 2013). The brevity, fast pace and openness of the network differentiate it from other social media platforms. Individuals can get involved easily and create broad networks with other users. However, accordingly the thought investment when producing content is lower, the content possibly less profound and volatile (Vargo 2014).

In the context of this thesis is it in particular interesting to look at Twitter as an instrument of political communication because different political actors use the platform for different reasons. For one thing, Twitter is used by politicians and political parties worldwide in particular prior to elections for campaigning reasons to set a political agenda and reach the audience directly (Yang et al. 2016). One popular example of a politician using the social network is the acting President of the United States, Donald Trump, who introduced a new level of social media campaigning (Wengel 2017). But not only politicians use the platform to react to current topics, Twitter is also very popular with activists and citizens engaging in social and political debates. Twitter is an important instrument to facilitate communication, to inform the public and mobilise people in situations of social unrest, for instance to organise protest action (Gleason 2013, 967). This could be observed for example
during the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey (e.g. Varnali and Gorgulu 2015) or during the Occupy Wall Street (e.g. Gleason 2013). Varnali and Gorgulu (2015, 3) describe a “rapid transformation of Twitter into a new politically oriented expressive platform” during protest action.

The social media platform Twitter is in particular interesting to analyse for social and political movements since it is “suited for the rapid and widespread diffusion of calls for action on account of its digital architecture”. Twitters’ technological interface is beneficial to quickly spread content on a large scale especially due to the hashtag feature and the retweet function (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta 2017, 1628). Twitters’ structure allows to disperse conversation throughout the entire network and is not constraining conversation within a certain group as for instance on Facebook. Therefore, the platform has great potential for groups and individuals to interact without any pre-existent connection or prior knowledge of each other. Scholars introduced the term ‘hashtag activism’ when referring to the use of Twitter’s hashtags as a tool of Internet activism or “propaganda of social cause” (Pang and Law 2017, 55; Varnali and Gorgulu 2015).

Sceptics question whether posting tweets can be said to constitute public participation. It is assumed that a voice on social media platforms can only be meaningful when a substantial number of people are listening. Hence, the success of a tweet is said to depend on the actual reach of a posting (Couldry 2010). Uldam and Askanus (2013, 1191) suggest that active participation through commenting and debating on platforms “however insignificant in terms of ranks and views, should be assessed and interrogated as meaningful performances through which people construct their political selves”.

Apart from that, Twitter is insofar interesting for this study, since political participation on social media platforms is assumed to strengthen the potential of democracy (see chapter 4.1). Yet, for another thing, it is has been argued that “the post-political condition of late modernity, with its depoliticization of the public sphere, is detrimental to democracy” (Berglez and Olausson 2014, 69). This study aims to make the connection between social media and the post-political condition to see to what extent the communication on Twitter is fundamentally political and enhancing democracy or whether active Twitter users rather align with the consensus.
4. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The following chapter is mapping the field of the study. Previous research and relevant literature on online civic political participation, climate change activism and the post-political condition will be reviewed. Eventually, the research gap that the study will fill shall be illustrated.

4.1. The potential and strategies of online civic political participation

It was argued beforehand that the topic climate change, calling for radical action which politicians and industries are unable to pursue, needs the public to actively engage in the discourse to encourage transformation. Civic engagement implies the efforts of civic actors “addressing issues of public concern beyond the rights and obligations of liberal citizenship” (Uldam and Vestergaard 2015, 2). This can be in both political and non-political actions. Recognising climate change as a political issue, research on political participation is of interest here. Political participation can be conceptualised as citizens’ attempts “to influence government actions through different activities, either directly by affecting the creation or implementation of public policy, or indirectly by influencing the people that make those choices”. Therefore, it can be considered as the “core element of a healthy democracy” (Varnali and Grogulu 2015, 3).

While political engagement and participation before the Internet would have been associated with the participation in organisations, memberships in parties or the support of a certain ideology it nowadays gets a different meaning with social media developing new forms of participation. Husted (2015, 153) states that in recent years the conception of public participation in politics has changed with protest movements bypassing traditional institutions of liberal democracy. While “media have always played a central role in bringing about social change” (Uldam and Askanius 2013, 1186), with the rise of web 2.0 and various social media platforms scholars discuss the new forms of participation possibilities it offers but also the downsides and challenges it poses.

On the one side, enthusiasts celebrate social media for supporting political participation by broadening and strengthening the potential of democracy. It is claimed that digital technologies, in particular online platforms allowing social interaction may serve forms of civic political participation. Social media platforms enable participation beyond the rights
and obligations of citizenship (such as voting) and give possibilities for direct democracy, self-organisation, and taking action bottom-up circumventing gatekeepers (Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Castells 2015). Individuals as well as organisations are able to express opinions, connect, share information, mobilise and engage citizens for collective action more effective regardless of geographical distances, cost, or censorship (for the most part) encouraging to develop leaderless, non-hierarchical movements (Carvalho et al. 2017; Castells 2015; Dahlgren 2012; Husted 2015; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker 2017). Dahlgren (2012, 5) therefore describes social media as civic media. The boundaries between the producer and the consumer blur and every consumer can produce and spread content (Castells 2015; Husted 2015, 154). Brunsting and Postmes (2002, 528-530) point out that the Internet offers a clear potential for collective action despite of the individualistic manner of it. They figure the paradox of the medium is that a “socially isolating medium can reinforce social unity”. Their research shows that social influence is strong even when group members are separated from each other. Yet, it shows that the motives for online participation are different from those of offline collective action and social movements. “Online action might be driven somewhat more strongly by cognitive calculations than by movement identification” (529). And because of this changing nature of collective action in the online realm the authors consider the Internet as “especially suited to persuasive collective action rather than confrontational action” (550).

In general, scholars talk about the ‘potential’ of the Internet and social media platforms to support collective actions and movements of all sorts but one has to consider that “it remains to be seen to what extent this potential is realized in practice” (Bunsting and Postmes 2002, 526). Even though the vision of social media as an instrument for democratic participation is compelling, Dahlgren (2012, 4) states that one has to see the ambivalent picture of social media. One “should note that they [social media] are embedded in the larger web environment, which in turn is enveloped by the broader society at large with its prevailing patterns of power, hierarchy, and ideological currents.”

Opponents of an optimistic view of the democratic potential of social media platforms argue that users are much more passive than is usually claimed, as a matter of fact the user is more a consumer than a prosumer (Van Dijck 2009). Van Dijck (2009) differentiating three types of online participants – creators, spectators and inactives – finds that 80% of all users rank
among the passive type of user. Indicating that the great majority of people only consumes would mean that the democratic potential is not made use of by many. This would indicate that movements on social media platforms are “neither leaderless nor horizontal” (Husted 2015, 154). Apart from that, the digital divide excludes an immense part of world citizens from the digital democracy resulting in a great inequality (Zavestoski and Shulman 2002).

Furthermore, scholars criticize the dominance of commercial interest due to the ownership of social media platforms by major corporate entities. Due to that, the assumed empowerment of citizens by social media platforms is confronted by power relations in which citizens are subordinate (Dahlgren 2012; Dahlgren 2014; Fuchs 2017; Polat 2005). Fuchs (2017, 75) claims that large media corporations are controlling a great amount of resources and are therefore privileged when it comes to online attention. The fact that corporations control great parts of the Internet means also that companies are able to monitor actions of social movements and civic participation making the movements more vulnerable (Fuchs 2017; Uldam 2018).

Apart from that, Dahlgren (2014, 266) observes that people develop patterns of interaction through social media that they transport into the political realm. This can mean assets such as networking and sociality, but at the same time it could also imply that one establishes networks with merely like-minded people. Even though this is a human tendency and the requirement for activists and social movement groups, yet, it “runs the risk of promoting a solipsistic public sphere, were actors filter information and can only see in the world from the horizons of their own ‘cocoons’”. This development can be seen in current democracies where citizens in the public sphere with “enclave mentalities” are not able to openly discuss and argue with one another. Moreover, Dahlgren (2014, 266) suggests that “the more political participation becomes exclusively or even largely a screen-based experience, the less effective it ultimately becomes”. Hence, the power of bonding and the commitment that movements transport in the offline realm diminish in the online realm. According to Dahlgren, the bonds of the online networks are weaker and lack the experience of physical interaction with other citizens organizing and mobilising civic movements.

It becomes evident that a growing body of research suggests that social media has a significant influence on the political participation of citizens. Fewer studies focus on how citizens use social media for the purpose of a political movement – which is of interest for
this study. As mentioned earlier, some political actors, for instance politicians and parties, use social media for campaigning purposes to mobilise voters, whereas citizens use social networks to mobilise protest (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta 2017, 1626). The study at hand is interested in the latter.

Scholars show that the internet increases the number of participatory actions with interactivity and information distribution as central elements (Smith 2010). New modes of online political participation include for instance “sharing political views on social networks sites, commenting posts in online forums or publishing one’s own posts on issues have emerged” (Arlt et al. 2018, 85). Hence, participation on online platforms is rather a form of political self-expression then targeting to actually influence policy-making processes (Hosch-Dayican 2014). Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta (2017), analysing to what extent citizens use Twitter to mobilise in an electoral process, show that civic actors use the social media platform to post own content with calls for action in-text or in hashtag format, or sharing mobilising content. Bennett and Segerberg (2011, 201) point out the role of social media platforms as organising mechanisms when it comes to communicating and raising awareness for certain events and initiatives. In the context of protest action, social networks can “help structure relations among different actors, issues and events”. With a changing dynamic over times, online platforms can be used in different ways for instance before protest action to distribute rich informational content, or brief logistical information during demonstrations.

4.2. Climate change activism

Since this study focuses on an environmental movement that is part of the broader climate change discourse, it is furthermore of interest of this study how citizens engage within social, political and environmental movements. In general, those movements can be described as “forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands” (Horn 2013, 19). Activist movements aim to “establish change in existing field frames, changing what is considered as the normal mode of operation, in order to make the dominant frames fit better with their own interests and ideologies.” To achieve that activists have to question existing dominant frames, develop an alternative that has to be accepted and supported by field
members, to then tactically engage in abandoning and deinstitutionalising the existing frame (De Bakker 2015, 26).

Scholars studying climate change activism examine movements that are institutionally driven “from above” (e.g. Ciszek 2017) or on grassroots movements “from below” (e.g. Brunner 2017), the impacts movements from either side can have (e.g. Middlemiss and Parrish 2010; North 2011), the importance of online media in mobilising activists, influencing media and communicating with the public (Ciszek 2017; De Bakker 2015), the effects of media and interpersonal communication on participation in climate discourse (Arlt et al. 2018), and the key role of ‘the political’ for citizens’ engagement with climate politics (Carvalho et al. 2017).

Ever since scientists talk about the impact of human made CO2 emissions on the climate change activist movements emerged and with them scholars researching the protest participation. According to De Bakker (2015, 26) it is still relatively undeveloped how movements create favourable political context for the diffusion and translation of alternatives. Yet, some scholars argue that people and movements acting from the bottom up can have a great impact influencing others to change social structures. It is claimed that grassroots activism has the ability to affect policy makers (Carvalho et al. 2017; Middlemiss and Parrish 2010). Then again, other scholars doubt the power of grassroots movements. For instance, North (2011, 1596) is concerned that local activism may be “too small scale, too hidden from view, and involve too few people promoting lifestyles that are not attractive enough to millions to trigger a systemic move to a low-carbon economy and society, avoiding catastrophic climate change and resource crunches.” It is questioned whether individuals that are excluded from power positions in politics or economy are able to transform complex systems through grassroots movements. Therefore, North (2012, 1596) figures that “adaptation to unavoidable climate change and mitigation of its worst effects requires a fundamental transformation of the way we organize human society.”

Carvalho et al. (2017, 124), advocating a rather agonistic conception of democratic politics, point out that “any significant advances require enacting fundamental political changes as there are numerous indications that continuing to walk the same political paths will not lead to a sustainable future”. To do so, climate change activism needs to question existing arrangements and challenge the power and value system of the market-driven, neoliberal
globalisation. The authors suggest that political engagement with climate change issues needs to encourage opposition towards dominant policies rather than accepting of centrally defined goals. To stimulate the climate change engagement it requires “critique and rebellion against political goals, structures and/or processes that keep contributing to climate change”. And it is argued that citizen engagement, in terms of bottom-up processes, will be pivotal when it is about opposing current power structures and implementing sustainable changes within climate politics (Carvalho et al. 2017, 125).

4.3. The post-political condition of climate change

It was argued before that during the last decades a climate consensus has been established in the Western societies about the anthropogenic condition of global climate and its serious consequences for human kind and nature. Also, it has been contended that, yet, (most) citizens in today’s neoliberal society withdraw from debates on climate politics. People are demobilised from engaging politically with climate change not knowing of the methods and importance of political action.

Apart from the theoretical approaches on the post-political condition of climate change (e.g. De Goede and Randalls 2009; Kenis and Lievens 2015; Swyngedouw 2010) there has been done little empirical research on the depoliticised nature of communication practices on climate change. Research conducted by Berglez and Olausson (2014) and Pepermans (2015) concentrates on the depoliticisation of citizens’ climate change while Pepermans furthermore studies media organisations.

Analysing the news coverage on climate change, Pepermans (2015) identifies a depoliticisation of media discourse. He finds different ideological cultures, drawing from (de)politicising discursive strategies, which differ in terms of their underlying assumptions and in their extent to which they provide space for a democratic debate. Apart from that, Berglez and Olausson (2014) and Pepermans (2015) explore in what ways the post-political condition of climate change can be found in public discourse. They show that there exists an overall consensus on the anthropogenic character of climate change and that, yet, citizens seem to engage in a rather non-political manner. It is found that the depoliticisation of the issue is driven by naturalised beliefs in climate science, emotional indifference, and individual micro-action.
4.4. The research gap

The literature review shows that a great amount of research has been conducted on online civic participation. The potential of public engagement has been sufficiently discussed and the role and impacts of social media in political movements have been analysed. Also, climate change activism has been debated on different levels. Yet, little is known about how political the engagement of citizens in environmental issues is. The post-political condition of climate change has been approached on a theoretical level (e.g. Carvalho et al. 2017; De Goede and Randalls 2009; Swyngedouw 2010) while little empirical research has been conducted in the field. Until now, as far as I am aware, only Berglez and Olausson (2014) and Pepermans (2015) empirically explore the post-political condition of climate change discourse focusing on the perspective of citizens using a qualitative approach. The study at hand aims to start from there and develop and widen the approach on the post-political condition of citizens’ political engagement. Due to the increasing significance of social media platforms for civic political participation this research intends to apply the post-political condition on climate change communication in the online realm. Different form Berglez and Olausson (2014) or Pepermans (2015) a quantitative research on the post-political shall be introduced. In order to do so, a model shall be elaborated to quantitatively observe post-political condition of communication practices of citizens on the social media platform. Simply put, the study aims to draw the connection between civic political communication, social media and the post-political condition. Looking at the communication practices of citizens in climate change debates and its political condition is insofar relevant since it helps to understand the current state of climate change and where it will go perspectival. The research is essential to understand the conditions of political engagement and its potential power to challenge the ruling system (Carvalho et al 2017).
5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS

The study aims to analyse phenomena of civic online political participation with a focus on the analysis of ‘the political’ implied in tweets about the environmental pollution. Therefore, concepts of online political participation and post-politicisation will be of interest for this study – reviewed in the following.

5.1. Online political participation

Given the increasing importance of the Internet and social network sites, the number of participatory actions is growing and people politically engage in a variety of forms and degrees. Since the study at hand aims to analyse who is engaging how (and with what intention) in climate change discourse on a social network sites it is pivotal to find a way to conceptualise a typology of online participation.

Broadly speaking, one can identify three modes of online participation, as there are: sharing messages, commenting on messages or publishing own messages (Taddicken and Reif 2016). In the context of this study solely the latter is of interest. Hosch-Dayican et al. (2016, 138) differentiate low-threshold activities from high-threshold activities. While the former can include activities such as following certain personalities, forwarding messages or sharing content, the latter describes agenda setting activities as for instance formulating and filtering political messages. Ekman and Amnå (2012) make a similar comparison distinguishing between latent and manifest political participation. Latent participation implies activities that contribute to political awareness and show a personal interest in politics (e.g. reading political news and debating in a private setting), whereas manifest participation accounts for concrete activities that citizens take to affect politics in any ways (e.g. signing petitions, joining demonstrations). Contributing to this approach, Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta (2017, 1628) introduce a typology of citizens’ political participation that is categorising the content of posts explaining different intentions of political engagement on social media platforms. The authors differentiate four categories: “information (original content without call for action), diffusion (shared content without a call for action), promotion (shared content containing a call for action), and instruction (original content containing a call for action)”. This typology distinguishes on the one side
content and on the other side latent participation considering whether there has been a call for action and whether the post was of the author’s own composition or shared.

This study will pick up different aspects of the previous stated. The focus will be on the content of postings and to whether the posted involves informational content and/or mobilising content. The aspect of sharing is not crucial for the purpose of the study since it the focus is rather on the content matter and not on the manner of sharing it. Yet, it is intended to analyse whether the political engagement is rather low-threshold or high-threshold.

5.2. The post-political condition

Post-politics refers to a global depoliticisation, the emergence of a politics of consensus and the abolishment of disagreements in the public sphere based on the acknowledgment of the neoliberal market logic in the post-crisis era. The post-political condition is framed by the assumption that with the discursive formation of consensus concerning the current social, environmental and economic order, capitalism and the existing market economy are perceived as inevitable and naturalised as the sole basic organisational structure that is without any alternative (Dean 2009; Swyngedouw 2010).

In order to understand the debate about the post-political it is pivotal to make the distinction between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’. Mouffe (2005, 9) describes ‘the political’ as the dimension of antagonism, conflict and power that is constitutive of human societies. The political is a rather broad discursive or symbolic order representing the social and acknowledging conflicts and power struggles in society (Kenis and Lievens 2014). ‘Politics’ on the other hand shall be understood as “the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organising human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political” (Mouffe 2005, 9).

Introduced by philosophers as for instance Slavoj Žižek (2009), Jacques Rancière (1998) and Chantal Mouffe (2005) the (critical) concept of the post-political asserts that the current condition of the public space is one of post-democracy. Meaning that while modern democracies maintain the facade of formal democratic principles they are effectively controlled by privileged elites. The critique of the post-democratic predicates that the proper
democratic political recognises heterogeneities and antagonism concerning the content and direction of socio-ecological life, whereas the post-political abolishes those antagonist struggles and conflicts. Disagreements and problems are solved by compromise and consensus, politics are made without dividing and separating (Mouffe 2005; Swyngedouw 2010, 225). Rancière (1998, 102) describes this post-democracy as “a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests”.

Giddens’, who is taking a different stance on the post-political sphere arguing very much in favour of a politics of consensus, claims that the left/right divide lost its meaning and that our modern democracy does not require to define an adversary. Following his approach, the dimension of antagonism gets removed from the political and instead politics of the centre are supported. For Mouffe (2005) the antagonistic contradiction is the most important aspect of the political and cannot be resolved by compromise. She argues that politics is always determined by the power of one opponent over the other. Yet, a process of a political shift to the middle can be observed in the political landscape of many European countries. Centre-left parties accepting the framework adapted by neoliberal hegemony do not try to challenge the system and capitulate to neoliberalism. Several scholars explain the popular support of neoliberalism with the failings of the left. The left is claimed to be incapable of envisioning an alternative to neoliberalism which is resulting in greatly negative consequences for democracy. With the disappearance of an agonistic debate and centre-right and centre-left representing the same ideas, people lose their choice of a real alternative. Hence, not providing a persuasive opposition to the neoliberal ideology leads to a lack of interest in politics and vibrant political debates disappear (e.g. Dean 2009, Mouffe 2005; Žižek 2009).

It is furthermore argued, that with the hegemony of neoliberalism and the absence of an alternative to the neoliberal globalisation, democratic institutions are emptied. Political questions become technical ones, political debates are replaced by expert opinions. Politics in a post-political public sphere are not only marked by dialogical forms of consensus formation but also by the predominance of managerial logic. The political is reduced to administration “where decision-making is increasingly considered to be a question of expert knowledge and not of political position”. The traditional state operates jointly with experts, NGOs and other partners and “they operate with a generally accepted consensus of a global
and largely (neo)liberal capitalism, the right of individual choice, an ecological awareness and the necessity to continue this, to sustain the state of the situation. Discussion and dispute are tolerated, even encouraged, in so far as the general frame is not contested.” Hence, political institutions of government seemingly get replaced by post-democratic institutions of governance that coordinate consensual policing arrangements (e.g. Kyoto Protocol). Taking the example of climate change, one agrees on the fact that it needs radical transformation, yet the change has to be organised within the neoliberal order (Swyngedouw 2010, 225).

### 5.3. The depoliticisation of climate change

Even though the discursive logic of the post-political becomes apparent throughout society as a whole, it is particularly constant in the mainstream communication practices on environmental politics (Kenis and Lievens 2014). Swyngedouw (2010, 216) argues that the climate change argument and the environmental question in general is “one of the markers through which post-politicisation is wrought”. According to him environmentalism is more likely to be depoliticised compared to other social and political movements since it lacks a “privileged subject of change” (223) that can be found in other social and political movements as for instance the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, or the labour movement. While in those movements the subjects of oppression – women, African-Americans, or workers – are struggling, they “are amongst the first to speak out about what is wrong and what needs to change” (Kenis and Lievens 2014, 538). A debate can be initiated when a certain emancipatory language is applied to politicise the condition of the oppressed and eventually induce change. The environment cannot act equally but instead needs someone to speak in its interest. Since the environmental debate is about how we as a society relate to the planet “everybody (or nobody?) seems to be in a position to speak in nature’s name”. Since everybody is affected in a way it appears that we have to reach a consensus in pivotal questions surrounding climate change – evidently resulting in post-politics (Kenis and Lievens 2014, 538/539). It appears that the depoliticisation of environmental questions is the result of a lack of political subjectivity on the one side and emancipatory struggles on the other side.
The discursive strategies of rationalisation and moralisation are found to sustain the post-political condition of climate change and contribute to a naturalisation of the capitalist order.

5.3.1. The rationalisation of climate change
The rationalisation of climate change refers to the scientisation of the debate “which makes scientific expertise, often referred to as ‘the scientific consensus’ on the physical causes and consequences of climate change, the foundation and guarantee for policymaking” (Pepermans 2015, 35). Politics of climate change are made by translating the consensus regarding the anthropogenic nature of climate change into a political consensus (Carvalho et al. 2017). In that sense, climate change is solely understood as a scientific or technical problem. Decision-making happens on basis of technocrat expert knowledge and rationality claims rather than political position. This approach is problematic in the sense that scientisation positions ‘believers’ of presumed superior rational decision-making against ‘non-believers’ of presumed inferior and more inefficient judgment of politics or citizens (Carvalho et al. 2017; Swyngedouw, 2010).

5.3.2. The moralisation of climate change
The moralisation of climate change invokes that the issue and potential solutions are understood “by the moral dichotomy right/wrong”, “replacing the political categories of left/right” (Pepermans 2015, 36). Discursively constructing climate change in a moral way therefore encourages a depoliticisation of the topic. In this context, climate change is represented as a humanitarian struggle and CO2 is framed as the externalised enemy of humanity. The struggle against climate change is pictured as the “struggle of “us” versus CO2” (Carvalho et al. 2017 128). Those communication practices constrain citizen political engagement. For one thing, because it assumes that the solution for climate change is the elimination of the enemy (CO2), while the socio-economic system that produces it is not questioned. Secondly, “this representation of the climate change debate as a humanitarian challenge implies that anyone who disagrees with what is presented as the consensus is a morally deficient enemy of humanity and nature, rather than a political opponent” (Pepermans 2015, 37). Thirdly, by evoking a homogenous global ‘us’ that is responsible for the climate condition and for preserving the current system, climate change becomes a
humanitarian challenge (Pepermas 2015). “In the end, the moralization of climate change contributes to framing particular choices as either good or bad “for the climate,” implying that anyone who opposes a particular policy consensus is “bad for the climate” and in favour of its potential apocalyptic consequences” (Carvalho et al. 2017, 128). Swyngedouw (2010, 221) argues that the moralisation of climate change is reflected in the “use of apocalyptic imaginaries, the science-politics short-circuiting and the privatization of the climate through the commodification of CO2”.

5.3.3. The naturalisation of climate change
In the end, the discourse strategies of moralisation and rationalisation aim to impose a certain way of thinking and acting upon climate change issues. Thereby, actors that do not agree with particular policy choices are excluded. “Nature or the climate are invoked in a discursive strategy of naturalization as a sort of guarantee of a scientific and moral truth to naturalize essentially partisan, ideological arguments and render these permanent, objective and beyond questioning” (Pepermas 2015, 38). As a consequence, the naturalisation of climate change naturalises the capitalist system. Kenis and Lievens (2015) argue that climate change is discursively appropriated in ways that serve the agenda of continuous economic growth. International institutions as for instance the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) reframe the discourse of sustainable development using terminologies like “Green Economy” or “Green Growth” to promote a ‘green capitalism’. By changing the debate in these terms the aspect of “the economic and political structures at the basis of the current environmental crisis” are left out (Carvalho et al. 2017, 128). The neoliberal globalisation is not questioned but rather accepted as inevitable grounds of the system.

The ultimate problem of the post-political approach is not the objective of consensus itself but rather that instead of supporting politics that encourage new visions of the future for environment and society, a consensual climate change discourse will only have the effect as to maintain the socio-political status quo (Swyngedouw 2010). Berglez and Olausson (2014, 68) figure that, even though one can notice the positive development that the general public nowadays is aware of environmental issues such as climate change and citizens get
involved in fighting it, yet, “they do so in a rather nonpolitical and socially “harmonious” fashion”. “In a context of depoliticizing communication practices, citizens’ political engagement is constrained as people are pushed into a role of passive spectators rather than active participants in the articulation and shaping of alternative futures beyond the status-quo”. Therefore, reaching a consensus in the climate change debate is argued to discourage people from critically questioning the neoliberal system as we know it (Carvalho et al 2017, 128).
6. METHODOLOGY, METHODS AND MATERIAL

This chapter introduces the methodological approach of the study. First, it will be elaborated how the sample was selected, and the process of data collection will be presented. Thereafter, the coding framework, the instrument of analysis, will be discussed to then give an insight on how the data was analysed quantitatively. Finally, the methodology will be evaluated critically, strengths and weaknesses and effects on validity and reliability will be reflected upon.

6.1. Methodological approach

The research at hand is of descriptive nature. Descriptive research attempts to determine, describe or identify a population or phenomenon. The aim is to shed light on current issues or problems by collecting data and study different aspects of the phenomenon (Hansen and Machin 2013). In the framework of this study, the purpose is to analyse content from a social network in order to investigate the phenomenon of depoliticisation of civic climate change discourse. Therefore, the study uses a deductive approach. Based on the theoretical framework of post-politics and political participation and the body of previous research, own assumptions are formulated and observed to ultimately find a confirmation of the original theories. Since the purpose of the study is to summarise, describe and analyse a large quantity of data to detect replicable patterns, this research pursues a quantitative approach (Hansen and Machin 2013).

To investigate how different social media users use Twitter to engage in the discourse of an environmental issue, as for instance the zero waste movement, and to examine patterns of a post-political condition, a quantitative content analysis will be conducted. Content analysis is “one of the most efficient and most widely used research methods for the systematic and quantitative analysis of media output/content”. Since content analysis is “well suited for revealing trends and patterns in the large quantities of communication and symbolic content characteristics of modern societies” it seems to be an appropriate measurement technique in the context of this study (Hansen and Machin 2013, 85).

Broadly speaking, content analysis provides a structured way to systematically study text to identify patterns of specified characteristics. Riffe et al. (2014, 19) define quantitative
content analysis as a “systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption.” To begin the content analysis with, precise hypotheses, expectations or questions about a phenomena based on theories are developed. The communication phenomenon is then reduced to manageable data by operationalising the concept, sampling the data, constructing a coding schedule and coding it (Riffle et al. 2014).

Potential weaknesses of the quantitative content analysis arise within the process of sampling and coding. Even though content analysis is about breaking up text into constituent parts which can be counted, the development of a coding scheme of quantitative variables and their analysis involves interpretation which can introduce bias (Hansen and Machin 2013). Therefore, it is pivotal to ensure the reliability and validity of the research to make “replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (Krippendorff 2004, 18).

6.2. Data collection

To operationalise the research question and investigate the (potentially depoliticised) communication practices of Twitter users on the subject of zero waste, original Twitter content (tweets) were collected. During the time period of one month (1st April – 30th April 2018) a sample of 500 tweets was assembled. This specific time period was chosen randomly since the sample was intended to consist of tweets that represent general day-to-day communication, yet, the sample ought to be as current as possible. The sample scope of 500 tweets was chosen (hence, on average around 17 tweets per day) to be able to make relevant assumptions about the researched content taking the limited scope of the study into account. To collect the data the Twitter-own advanced search function was used which allowed to tailor the search results to a specific date range (the month of April), the language of the posts (English) and a certain hashtag (#zerowaste). Thereby, all Twitter postings within this particular framework would appear: tweets from any account, at any geographic
location, containing the hashtag #zerowaste posted in April 2018 in English. It was decided that the sample should comprise unique English-language posts to capture the movement on an international level. The selection criterion of the hashtag #zerowaste was chosen because it represents the main hashtag of the movement and “citizens predominantly expressed political calls for action through Twitter’s hashtag feature”. This method has been successfully employed by other studies on Twitter data (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta 2017, 1625). The first 17 tweets of each day were collected and manually recorded. The full text of each post, along with the author of the tweet, was captured. Even though this study generally focuses on textual analysis, it became apparent while collecting the data that the majority of Twitter users posting content with the hashtag #zerowaste also included another message element such as a picture, a video or an article. Since it repeatedly seemed that the (visual) tweet attachment was directly connected to and complementing the textual content and would therefore be pivotal for its interpretation, it was decided to include the contents of the different types of message elements in the sample.

6.3. Data analysis

After collecting the relevant data, the sample was examined and the content classified. To do so, a coding system was developed defining the different dimensions that shall be analysed. Hansen and Machin (2013, 98) describe this procedure as “the most taxing aspect of any content analysis”. The development of coding categories proceeded deductively through adaption of relevant characteristics from previous research and the theoretical framework. To measure the “who and how” of political participation and the post-political condition of users’ communication practices on Twitter in the context of the zero waste

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2 Although I cannot be entirely sure whether Twitter shows all the existing tweets or whether it is only a percentage of all the tweets that were posted. Granted that Twitter shows all the posted tweets, I believe that the collected sample is close to the overall amount of tweets posted during April 2018 with the hashtag # zerowaste.

3 I could observe that tweets were posted from all sorts of geographic locations, yet, the majority of tweets seem to be posted from English speaking countries such as the United States and United Kingdom.
movement the main characteristics and indicators of the different theoretical concepts were defined as categories and a summarised in a manual codebook.

First of all, the Twitter users engaging in the zero waste debate were categorised according to their actor type. The different types of actors were identified first of all through the profile description or, when that was unclear, through further information on the user’s profile such as the picture, linked websites and Twitter activity. It was distinguished between civic actors (distinguishing citizens and public personalities), media organisations, political and governmental organisations, corporate organisations and non-governmental organisations. Further on, the content of the tweet was classified. Analysing the content of tweets is pivotal for understanding patterns of engagement and the post-political dimension. The informational content (news and facts, opinion and self-expression, events and projects, or products and brands), the mobilisation content (information and education, sustainable lifestyle, commercial promotion, or event promotion) as well as the mobilisation aim (individual citizen, politics and governments, or industries) and degree (neutral, reformist, or radical) were identified.

The second part of the data analysis comprises the categorisation of the degree of depoliticisation. The coding framework was inspired by previous research on the depoliticisation of citizen discourse about climate change (e.g. Pepermas 2015; Berglez and Olausson 2014). The post-political criterions those previous qualitative studies came up with and the theoretical concepts discussed beforehand were used to outline quantitative measurements. To identify to what extent the Twitter users included strategies of depoliticisation (moralisation, rationalisation and naturalisation) in their communication practices, three main questions were asked: First, does the posting imply how the pollution is experienced, second, what causes of pollution and waste are identified by the users/who is said to be causing the pollution, and third, what can be done about the pollution and waste issue according to the user? 4

4 The codebook and more extensive coding instructions can be found in the appendix.
The coding data was entered straight into the data analysis programme SPSS. Each tweet was coded manually by categorizing them fitting the corresponding definitions.

6.4. Discussion of methodology

The following chapter will discuss strength and weaknesses of the methodological framework and reflect upon the reliability of the research.

To begin with, as mentioned before, it is pivotal to reflect upon the reliability of the research design to ensure that the results achieved through the quantitative content analysis are replicable. Hence, the data collection and coding has to be consistent insofar that a repetition of the measurement would show the same results. This would mean that “researchers working at different points in time and perhaps under different circumstances should get the same results when applying the same technique to the same data” (Krippendorff 2004, 18).

To assure the consistency of the coding practice over time, a test coding of a small sub-sample (ten percent of the material) was performed two days before conducting the main coding. This pre-test should not only test the practicability of the coding categories and find inconsistencies but also examine the intra-coder reliability. Even though this pre-test was conducted a limitation that might restrain the reliability of the research is the fact that solely an individual coder was conducting the categorisation of the sample.

One of the main difficulties that appeared during the process of formulating categories is the seemingly challenging operationalisation of the concept of (de) politicisation of citizens’ discourse as a frame to make it “countable”. Pepermas (2015), analysing the (de) politicised representation of climate change in media content and citizens discourse, argues that therefore a quantitative analysis is not suitable to conduct. I agree to some extent, yet, since I aim to obtain a picture of an overall atmosphere and idea of a broader quantity of content posted on Twitter and its potential post-political tendencies a quantitative analysis is the most suitable method to use. However, to ensure the comprehensibility of the category and the consistency of the coding a detailed codebook including explicit coding instructions was developed that can be found in the appendix of the thesis.

Relating to the above-mentioned, for instance, it appears to be problematic to code whether an author of a Twitter post approves a general consensus on the environmental pollution
since it is not always explicitly stated or expressed according to the defined coding guidelines. Yet, one could assume that users that actively engage in the zero waste debate by posting a tweet with the #zerowaste hashtag in general consents that there is a problem with waste and pollution even though it is not explicitly phrased.

Apart from the potential difficulties with a reasonable operationalisation and coding of the data, the weaknesses of the investigated platform, Twitter, shall be addressed. First of all, it becomes apparent that it can be complicated to measure underlying values and opinions on Twitter because of the rather short small message content. With a word count of only 280 characters a message can only include superficial demonstrations.

Moreover, when using Twitter data for empirical analysis to examine a variety of patterns one has to bear in mind that Twitter users are not representative of the global population and that accounts and users are not homogenous in the way they use the platform and with what purposes (e.g. not all users are participating but only ‘listening’). “Twitter does not represent ‘all people’, and it is an error to assume ‘people’ and ‘Twitter users’ are synonymous: they are a very particular sub-set” (Boyd and Crawford 2012, 669).

Boyd and Crawford (2012) furthermore argue that the completeness of the Twitter postings that Twitter Inc. makes available through the APIs is questionable. Even though it theoretically shall contain all public tweets posted one cannot be entirely certain that the tweets listed according to the search query are complete or whether some do not appear/are missing. Also Bennett and Segerberg (2011, 202) figure that one has to keep in mind that “data from Twitter only contains a slice of the collective action space and that what the slice looks like may change as other elements in the evolving environment interact with the users and managers of the stream. Depending on where one cuts into a Twitter stream, then, one may find different actors and different kinds of activity going on”. Since this study analyses a random sample of tweets anyways this is rather irrelevant, yet, should be mentioned to understand the workings of the analysed platform and potential quality claims of the data.
7. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In the following chapter, the analysis and results of the study will be presented. The structure follows the layout of the research questions asking for the who, the what and the how of the #zerowaste movement on Twitter. Throughout the analysis examples of Twitter posts will be shown to make the connection between the empirical material and the argumentation transparent. The examples were chosen from a larger body of material and shall illustrate typical examples of the Twitter postings. Specific words or phrases that were pivotal for the interpretation and analysis are set in bold font.

7.1. The who: Authors of #zerowaste tweets

To begin this analysis with, it shall be looked into the distribution of different actors that contributed to the zero waste conversation on Twitter. Since the topic of civic engagement and how citizens can contribute in political debates was discussed in-depth earlier on, it is crucial to see to what extent it is actual citizens in relation to other actors engaging in the social and political movement.

![Figure 1. Distribution by actor type](image)

Note: The circular chart displays how the different actors (N = 500) engaging in the zero waste debate on Twitter are distributed. It is distinguished between citizens, public personalities, commercial organisations, non-profit organisations, political institutions, and media outlets.
Figure 1 shows that, among the tweets that were collected throughout April 2018 with the #zerowaste hashtag, civic actors accounted for 41% of the Twitter posts with citizens issuing a quarter (24%) and public personalities (e.g. influencers, activists) 17% of the #zerowaste postings. Other main actors were organisations with commercial interests (30%) on the one side and non-profit organisations and initiatives (23%) on the other side. Media outlets (2%) and political and governmental institutions (3%) accounted for the smallest part of the sample.

### 7.2. The what: Content of #zerowaste tweets

During the sampling it became apparent that the great majority of #zerowaste tweets include some kind of message element. Therefore, before looking at the textual content of the postings, it shall be examined to what extent the #zerowaste debaters use different kinds of message elements linked to their tweet. Figure 2 shows that only 10% of the sample are solely textual postings that do not include an added video, photo, shares or links to articles. It is in particular striking that a great majority of 65% of the tweets are linked to a picture. Furthermore, around 15% of the sample embedded links to articles, and a small amount of tweets used videos or shared another tweet (each around 5%).

![Inclusion of message element](image)

**Figure 2.** Inclusion of message element

*Note:* The bar chart displays what type of message element the actors included in their #zerowaste tweets (*N* = 500) in cases they used one. It is distinguished whether the user embedded a picture, a video, a link to an article, shared another tweet or did not include a message element at all.
To furthermore explore people’s participation in zero waste discourse, as a next step, the textual content of the Twitter postings is analysed on an informational and mobilising level. First, the Twitter postings were analysed on the information they contained. The results show that in 98.4% of the cases Twitter was used to distribute some kind of information. It was found that the information content of the majority of tweets contained opinions and statements of self-expression (42.4%). Personal experiences were shared concerning the zero waste lifestyle or for instance opinions on products or initiatives were expressed.

“Ditch Now... If you poste like pro with all that food stuff canned in plastic then actually you are not so cool.. It time to be like pro by ditching plastic... #zerowaste #ditchplastic #ecofriendly #reuserevolution #lesswaste #happyEarth” [23].

One quarter of the #zerowaste tweets included news and facts (25.6%). Information about recent media coverage, findings of scientific research or facts concerning the pollution and waste problem were shared.

“Cotton buds and plastic straws could be banned in England next year [link] ... #zerowaste” [267].

“Scientists created a mutant enzyme derived from bacteria that rapidly devours plastic [link] #TXCT #bacteria #enzyme #plasticpollution #plastic #zerowaste” [498].

The rest was divided by information concerning events and projects (15.2%) and information about products and brands (15.2%).

After finding that almost all of the tweets included informational content, it shall be analysed whether the tweets also include mobilising content and to what extent the platform was used for initiating (political) calls for action to support the zero waste movement. It shows that in over half of the cases the Twitter user implied a call for action (54.8%). Within these Twitter postings that call for action one can distinguish different themes of mobilisation. Around half of the mobilising tweets promote a certain lifestyle according to zero waste standards (48.2%). In those cases, Twitter users for instance encourage the reader to reduce
their waste consumption, to reuse resources, to recycle and to pass on single-use (plastic) packaging.

“Challenge everyone to reduce plastic use and in the meantime pick up a #pieceofplasticaday #zerowaste. Keep straws etc out of the ocean.” [57].

Around a fifth of the tweets with mobilising content (20,8%) included calls for action aimed at promoting information, for example ‘watch this video’, ‘read this article’, ‘click to find out more’. The tweets had the purpose of encouraging the reader to seek out information and educate him- or herself about the pollution and waste problem to, eventually, reach certain conclusions.

“I’ve just completed my first month of going plastic-free & this is what I started with, bamboo toothbrushes & toothpaste in a glass jar. Read the full article: [link] #plasticfreefriday #plasticfree #zerowaste #blogger #bloggerstripe” [92].

“Have you ever wondered about the plastic in the Ocean? Read this article, it will give you a good idea of this critical issue [...] #zerowaste #plasticfree #ecofriendly #sustainableliving” [40].

Another fifth of the tweets concerned the promotion of events, initiatives and projects on the topic of waste reduction and counteracting pollution (19,0%). In those cases, the authors promoted events and projects that are somehow related to zero waste such as for example, fairs, demonstrations, or markets. With encouragements as for example ‘join us’ or ‘come meet us’ the audience were invited to actively participate.

“This is a key moment in the fight to make Maryland a ZERO WASTE state call your Senators, urge them to support SB282 and END tax breaks for toxic trash burning incinerators including the BRESCO incinerator that is the WORST air polluter in the city #zerowaste #unitednotblighted” [90].

The smallest share of mobilisation tweets comprised commercial promotion (12,0%). These tweets aimed for advertising a brand or a product and encourage the reader to make a purchase.
“It’s the day before #EarthDay, so why not get started on your quest to #EndPlasticPollution! Recycle all your plastic packaging with our #ZeroWaste Box and use code RECYCLESREE to save” [303].

“Venture Cafe’s answer to #zerowaste: B.Y.O. MUG! Keep them at your desks, bring them to Cafe Nights for your refreshments and enjoy. PRE-ORDER NOW https://buff.ly/2Hcwpho” [266].

The results show that half of the sample include a call for action and aim to mobilise the reader in a certain way. For most of the cases, the purpose is to influence lifestyle choices. Furthermore, the reader is encouraged to seek out information, to extend the knowledge in the topic of waste and pollution, and to attend events and engage in projects that aim to counteract pollution.

Even though the tweets are above all of informative nature, it becomes apparent that Twitter provides a platform to initiate calls for action for a social and political movement such as the zero waste movement. Users acknowledging the societal and political misconduct use the platform to communicate their mobilising intentions.

7.3 The how: The (de)politicisation of the waste and pollution debate

After looking at the substance of the #zerowaste tweets and classifying their informative and mobilising content, this chapter will focus on analysing patterns of (de)politicisation. In the following, the communication practices of people debating about #zerowaste, which is viewed in the context of climate change discourse, shall be examined in terms of the post-political condition. Various scholars (e.g. Carvalho 2017; Kenis and Lievens 2014; Swyngedouw 2010; Pepermas 2015) argue that the depoliticisation of climate change is perpetuated by discursive strategies of rationalisation and moralisation that have been found to contribute to the naturalisation of the neoliberal system.

Rationalisation

The rationalisation of climate change refers to a scientisation of the debate. Scientific expertise develops to be the consensus whereby the causes and consequences of climate
change are generally agreed on. Looking at the zero waste movement as an environmentalist movement concerned with climate change, it is of interest to understand how and to what extent people rationalise the problem of waste and pollution. Therefore, to begin with, it shall be examined how the situation of environmental pollution is experienced and represented in general and if there is an overall consensus on the waste problem.

Across the sample, over one fourth of the tweets (28.6%) mirror a consensual understanding of the pollution problem. A consensus on (scientific) theories, arguments and conclusions about the waste problem, generally acknowledged and problematized it. People describe the pollution quite tangible and comprehensible with examples from the everyday life. The focus of the zero waste debaters appears to be the waste that people produce on a daily basis, in particular by consuming single-use plastic.

“@albertheijn please consider providing paper bags in the pastry section instead of plastic. We love your croissants but can't keep buying them without a plastic free option. As you know plastic is a massive global issue. Please help. #plasticfree #zerowaste #ecofriendly #recycle” [63].

“Thank you @thenationaluae for giving your #frontpage space to this nonglamorous topic of #Zerowaste #sustainability & featuring my story: journey towards zero waste in #UAE Waste is the topic of urgent attention & action.[... ]” [169].

There is found consensus to a certain extent regarding the fact that environmental pollution is happening. The next question that appears is to what extent the #zerowaste debaters acknowledge who or what is causing the pollution. The analysis shows that, first and foremost, the great majority of tweets (84.6%) does not include a reference to an instance causing the pollution. It is talked about the problem, but not who or what is responsible for it. The small share of tweets that indicate the responsibilities and identify the polluters, holds for one thing individuals and for another thing the industry responsible for the waste and pollution issue. Governments and politics are not held accountable at all. In 7.9% of the tweets individuals and their lifestyles are blamed to create enormous amounts of waste, in
particular through the use of single use plastics, which is landing in the oceans, polluting the environment.

“We need to stop treating our oceans like garbage cans! Video via @bbc. #plasticpollution #stopuseplasticbag #noplastic #singleuseplastic #ocean #environment #saveourplanet #zerowaste #climateaction #climatechange” [286].

Around the same amount of #zerowaste debaters finds that the industry and their actions are causing pollution damaging the environment. In focus of criticism of the Twitter users is first and foremost the food industry and their packaging economy. Then, also, the waste of food in the industrial sector and the environmentally hazardous techniques of waste disposal are denounced.

“@AldiUK you’ve taken a step backwards. Oats used to come packaged in a paper bag and spring onions just banded together with a rubber band. Today, oats were in plastic and onions in plastic. #why #PlasticFree #zerowaste #PlasticAttack #PlasticFreeAisle” [144].

“Seriously @sainsburys! When will you offer your customers other options than “plastic vegetables”? #sainsburys #plasticfree #stopplasticpollution #SUP #paddle #protectourplanet #saveourplanet #zerowaste #ecofriendly #stopsingleuseplastics #lessplastic” [115].

While only a relatively small part of the debate on #zerowaste deals with the causes of the environmental pollution, a great part of the discussion (46,4 %) implies solutions for the environmental pollution and defines agents that shall induce change. It is of interest to see how Twitter users assess the responsibilities and which agents are found to be responsible for driving solutions. In this regard, the results are quite clear:
As figure 3 pictures, within those actors proposing solutions for the pollution and waste issue, the majority (73%) implies that it needs behavioural changes of individuals and society as a whole. The individual as part of the society is seen as the instance that is able to induce change, in particular through sustainable and conscious consumerism. Individuals are first of all encouraged to prevent waste and pollution, to reuse and recycle items and resources, and to dispose waste reasonably. The most prominent topic is the reduction of plastic waste, in particular of single-use plastics such as plastic straws or single use cups, and the promotion usage of reusable items.

“Worried about a plastic planet? Most of us recycle, but there’s still a long way to go. Do your bit and put all plastic bottles, pots, tubs and trays to your recycling bin or box. #plasticplanet #plasticfreefriday #recycle #reducereuse #plastic #zerowaste #litter” [86].

“Can’t find what you want in #glass in the supermarket? Tell them! Small actions like this add up to #ZeroWaste!” [142].

Figure 3. Agent driving solution for environmental pollution

Note: The circular chart displays those users implying a solution for the environmental pollution (N = 232) and distinguishes whether those users anticipate the individual, the industry or politics to be the driver of change.
One fifth of the tweets (19.9\%) that propose solutions of the waste issue find that change needs to be induced by industry. Also here the concern and focus is on the visible pollution and waste production that the consumer encounters on a daily basis.

“Great to see @WOOLWORTHS_SA reduce waste by reducing their packaging specs. They are finally listening to the needs to their consumers to have #zerowaste Well done Woolies!” [78].

“#PlasticAttack, 1st #Brussels edition. When it comes to cutting on packaging, supermarkets do have a big role to play! #breakfreefromplastic #rethinkplastic #zerowaste” [104].

Only 7.1\% find that change needs to be induced by governments and politics. The small share of the sample that indicates policy induces solutions talks about how municipalities and states reduce their pollution and waste production.

CityOfBoston (23.04.2018): “We're working to transform #Boston into a #ZeroWaste city – here's how: [link] #EarthWeek2018” [321]


Besides that it is striking to see that an overwhelming majority of the users suggesting solutions to counteract environmental pollution do that in a rather non-political manner.

All in all, it seems that there is not only found evidence for a consensus on the existence of the pollution problem, but also, it becomes apparent that the #zerowaste debaters generally agree on the fact that it is the individual that has to induce change. Only a small part of the sample include a mention on the causes of the environmental pollution, however, there is a focus on the solution of the problem.

**Moralisation**

As a next step, the material was analysed in terms of potential moralising discourse construction of climate change issues which is claimed to furthermore strengthen a depoliticisation and therefore constraining citizens’ political engagement.
First of all, the material was examined to identify whether there is one factor that reappears throughout the debate and that is said to be the one main aspect contributing to environmental pollution. Hence, the aim was to see whether the debate was reduced to a single object as a polluter. It was found that in more than a third of the sample plastic is ascribed as the ‘main evil’ causing bad for nature and humankind. 37.5% of the sample include a reference that figures plastic as the problem of environmental pollution.

“Plastic is killing cows in India - here’s what you can do to help! Please use reusable shopping bags & wrap vegetable peelings in newspaper not plastic bags #plasticcowsofindia #cows #india #plasticfree #plasticwaste #eco #zerowaste #segregatwaste #recycle [...]” [158].

“Summer is coming, and the monster of waste is taking over. Hands off my beautiful park! #zerowaste #breakfreefromplastic” [112].

What also triggers the moralisation of the pollution and waste debate is the universalisation of the discourse and the representation of the issue as a problem and responsibility of all. Even though the share is quite small (7.2% of the #zerowaste tweets), yet, it appears that to some extent users understand the pollution issue as a concern of society as a whole.

“Humanity has produced 9.1 billion tonnes of plastic and we’ve recycled just 10% of it 🌍🌿♻️😞 #ZeroWaste #PlasticFree” [127].

“We waste 1.3 billion tons of food every year. We can change our habits together. Let’s turn this thing around. #360fortheplanet #earthmonth #zerowaste #pollution” [72].

It is furthermore argued, that the contemporary (depoliticised) environmental discourse, which is framed as a global humanitarian cause, entails apocalyptic rhetoric and that environmental problems are framed as threatening to humankind and nature (Carvalho et al. 2017; Swyngedouw 2010). It is found that in the debate about the humanitarian struggle of the individual against (plastic) pollution similar evidence of apocalyptic imaginary appears. A small share of the sample (8%) shows evidence of apocalyptic rhetoric. Users describe
the environmental pollution with threatening images to express the serious socio-ecological conditions and the harmful implications for nature and humankind. An image is drawn of society polluting the oceans [269], the “garbage can of humankind” [286], with far-reaching damaging effects on the nature and biodiversity [370], abusing animals [158, 403] and eventually having harmful impacts on people [403].

"8 million tons of plastics enter our oceans annually — the equivalent of dumping one New York City garbage truck full of plastic into the ocean every minute of every day for an entire year." #zerowaste” [197].

“Recent studies estimate that fish off the west coast ingest over 12000 tons of plastic a year #ThursdayThoughts: "What goes in the ocean goes in you." #SaveTheSeas #SaveTheEarth #plasticpollution #ZeroWaste #BeMindful #YouAreWhatYouEat” [403].

“The time to act is, erm, ya know, about 50 years ago... (but today will do) Record levels of plastic discovered in Arctic sea ice [link] #zerowaste” [370].

Even though this study focuses on text analysis, it became apparent in an early stage of the research, during the data collection, that images were included in the majority of the tweets (as mentioned before) and that these images were pivotal to underpin the message of the Twitter postings. Since scholars talk about the apocalyptic rhetoric that is used in text, it was of interest to see whether this imagery is reflected in the actual images. With 70% of the sample including visual content, either as a picture or a video, it was therefore looked into the connotation of the visual. It was intended to find whether the imagery is rather “environmental positive” with “green” pictures or whether the imagery is more likely “environmental negative” with apocalyptic images. It is found that around one fifth (21.4%) of the tweets with visual content include images that reflect a rather environmental critical situation. Most of the time piles of waste are displayed or the pollution of the environment, in particular the ocean. Animals suffering under the pollution. The rest of the sample includes images that are either neutral or environmental uncritical and positive. This includes images of the ‘healthy’ environment and solutions for a zero waste lifestyle.
Naturalisation

Eventually, it is argued that the discursive strategies of rationalisation and moralisation contribute to a naturalisation of capitalism and the idea of neoliberal globalisation. The results of the previous analysis gave an indication of extent of this naturalisation of the climate change debate on Twitter. Scholars claim that “the discourse of sustainable development has been re-appropriated and reframed” in certain terms inducing that society has fully acclimated to capitalism as the system without alternatives (Carvalho et al. 2017, 128). To a very small extent, users participating in the #zerowaste debate also made use of terms that would indicate the latter. In less than one tenth of the sample #zerowaste debaters include terms such as for example ‘green economy’, ‘green beauty’, or ‘green building’. Adding a ‘green’ in front of a term that implies commercial, economic practices implying such a thing as ‘green capitalism’. 
7.4. Answering the research questions

To conclude this chapter and summarise the results, the three research questions that were posed in the beginning will be answered briefly before the findings will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

**RQ 1: Who are the actors involved in the debate on reducing waste and preventing environmental pollution?**

Civic actors accounted with 41% for the majority of the #zerowaste tweets with citizens issuing 24% and public personalities 17% of the sample. Commercial (30%) and non-profit organisations (23%) were other main actors, while the rest is divided between media outlets (2%) and political and governmental institutions (3%).

**RQ 2: How do actors on the social media platform Twitter communicate and promote the reduction of waste?**

The Twitter users disseminate most of all informational content (98.4%). Around half of the sample furthermore includes mobilising content. Hence, the different actors use the platform to inform and to a great extent also call for action to support the zero waste movement. 90% of the actors embedded a message element, whereof two third of the sample use a picture to support their textual content.

**RQ 3: Can one identify patterns of the post-political condition of climate change in the zero waste debate on Twitter?**

Yes, one can identify discursive strategies of rationalisation and moralisation in the #zerowaste debate. The results show clear evidence for a depoliticised debate: it is found that there is a general consensus on the issue of environmental pollution, and an overall understanding that it is the individual/society that has to induce change (rather than politics or the industry). Plastic is widely framed as the externalised enemy and the authors make use of apocalyptic imaginary.
8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter will discuss and conclude the findings of this study. The results presented in the last chapter will be discussed in-depth connecting them to previous research and the theoretical framework. The communication practices of the zero waste debate on Twitter will be examined and the post-political condition of the movement elaborated.

The who

First of all, the interest of this study was to find out who the actors are that involve in the debate on reducing waste and preventing environmental pollution. It was found that civic actors (citizens and public personalities) accounted for around 40% of the Twitter posts and therefore demonstrate the most influential users in the #zerowaste conversation. Comparing the results to prior research, Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta (2017), studying political participation on Twitter in an electoral context, find comparable figures. Even though the movements themselves are not fully equivalent with regards to their substance it is the only research at hand that is breaking down Twitter users engaging in a political movement in the same manner. One can see that the amount of citizens engaging in the debate is very much equal to the results of this study while the share of other actors varies. What is striking is that in Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta’s study (2017) the share of political actors and media outlets is significantly bigger. By contrast, the study at hand finds that after civic actors, other main users are organisations with a commercial interest and non-profit initiatives. This result may indicate that the platform and the movement is widely used for marketing efforts of organisations promoting commercial and non-commercial purposes. At the same time, the contribution of media and political actors is so small that one could consider it insignificant. Taking into account that the other political movement obtains a rather broad amount of political actors and media outlets engaging in the debate, one could assume that the zero waste movement is of less political significance.

On a more general note, in chapter four of the thesis, it was debated about the possible democratic potential of online civic political engagement. Even though civic actors account for 40% of the zero waste debaters, and thereby demonstrate the biggest share of actors, it is questionable whether, in this context, one can call the social media ‘civic media’, as
Dahlgren (2012) does. Considering that around a third of the sample is contributed by organisations with a commercial interest, civic users that engage in the debate seem to be to a great extent confronted by power relations in which they are subordinate. Therefore, the question arises whether the platform Twitter is a forum for civic actors engaging in debates and ‘carrying out’ their democratic potential or if the high amount of commercial entities engaging in the discussion influences the latter, blurring the potential of the social network by using it for commercial interests.

The what

Analysing the content of the #zerowaste tweets revealed that the overwhelming majority of Twitter postings included a message element, most of them adding a picture to the post. This finding is insofar interesting since research on other political movements on Twitter does not indicate such a high inclusion of visual content. Smith et al. (2015), analysing the user engagement on Twitter during a political protest movement, find similar results when it comes to the overall amount of attached message elements. Yet, the distribution varies, with a smaller amount of picture content and a significantly higher share of links (around 40% including a picture, 7% a video, and over 40% a link). Studies show that including images can positively affect the engagement of people in terms of retweeting, clicks and favourites (likes) (Enge 2014). Hence, even though this will not be proven within the scope of the study, one can assume that visual content (image and video) was included to the Twitter posting to enhance the impact on social media engagement. Compared to the findings of Smith et al. (2015) one could suppose that the content of the zero waste movement is likely to be more superficial since only a rather small amount of articles was shared that are likely to go more in depth of the topic than for instance a picture.

Looking at the informative content of the tweets, which more or less every #zerowaste posting included, it is found that actors are most likely to share opinions and statements of self-expression, or second most commonly, disseminate (scientific) facts and information concerning the pollution and waste problem. Apart from the informative attribute of the postings, further findings suggest that Twitter is widely used as a platform for initiating calls for action. Most of those mobilising contents promote a zero waste lifestyle, while a smaller amount aims towards mobilising the reader to inform and educate. What is interesting with
those results is that both show that the users engaging in the zero waste debate first and foremost share information aiming to encourage the reader in making certain lifestyle choices. Educating and mobilising people on a political level happens on a rather small scale.

The how

It was argued beforehand that in the context of climate change discursive strategies of rationalisation and moralisation are found to sustain a consensual, post-political condition contributing to a naturalisation of the capitalist order. The findings of the quantitative content analysis show evidence on several diverse levels supporting the claim of a depoliticisation of the zero waste debate on Twitter. To some extent actors engaging in the debate in general understand environmental pollution and the massive production of waste as a real existing problem. What is striking is that the share is in a way smaller than expected beforehand. It was assumed that the empirical results would mirror an overall consensus on the issue of pollution and waste with the vast majority of the #zerowaste tweets including the acknowledgment of the global waste problem. Yet, at the same time, one has to consider that everyone involving in the debate on Twitter in the first place most likely aligns with the consensus. One can assume that there is an implicit consensus for all of the zero waste debaters, since these users already actively engage in the debate counteracting waste by posting a tweet. Those people allegedly must approve that there is a problem otherwise they would not engage in counteracting it. Hence, it is assumed that there is an implicit consensus that the global community faces a problem of environmental pollution and has to take action to work against the negative impacts.

While one can assume an overall implicit consensus concerning environmental pollution within the zero waste movement, it appears that the #zerowaste debate Twitter is not greatly covering the debate on the cause of the problem. There seems to be less consensus on what or who is driving the environmental problem. Yet, by the time it is mentioned, users claim that the causes are either of anthropogenic nature or induced by the industry. The environmental pollution is seen as a consequence of the sum of individual consumer choices and the operating principles of the economy. The (in)activity of politics and governments is not held responsible for the issue of waste and pollution. Pepermans (2015, 185) finds
similar outcomes showing that climate change is not greatly represented through its societal causes. He argues that “the deeper societal causes [...] are concealed, leaving them unquestioned, unchallenged and subsequently naturalized”. Hence, the fact that the public does not really touch upon the ‘bigger picture’ shows evidence for a post-political condition of the zero waste movement. Users engaging in the debate do not reflect upon the entities polluting the environment on a large scale, thus, the system keeping the consumerist cycle turning is not questioned and therefore remains unchallenged.

This picture becomes even clearer when it comes to the solutions that #zerowaste debaters suggest and when users define the entities that are assumed to be responsible for inducing change. The majority of actors imply that it needs changes of individual behaviour to counteract the environmental pollution. The individual is considered as the ‘problem-solver’ and it is said that the individual, the society, has to alter their everyday behaviour to prevent the global pollution. The individual as part of the society is seen as the instance that is able to induce change, in particular through sustainable and conscious consumerism. It was argued beforehand that the issue of waste and pollution is first and foremost caused by the workings of the neoliberal society and the capitalist system and that it would need ambitious and radical changes on a political level, also inducing change on an economical level. Yet, what is particularity striking is that only a tiny part of the share finds that change needs to be induced by governments and politics. The zero waste movement on Twitter seems to neglect the ‘big players’ in power that are the singular cause of environmental pollution and that would have the actual power to induce sustainable changes on a grand scale. The movement rather focuses on how every individual can change everyday habits to make a difference. Berglez and Olausson (2014) argue that this is a result of our individualistic neoliberal society in which the individual is supposed to manage problems by him- or herself. One consequence is that people act on a micro level (e.g. recycling) out of a certain societal pressure to be environmentally friendly. Yet, the necessity for radical political changes of the society is not recognised.

One could argue at this point that this does not entirely has to imply a depoliticisation of the movement. As circumscribed in the example below, any individual choices counteracting (plastic) pollution are potentially made with the ulterior motive of influencing society as a whole and its political and economic institutions:
“The simplest way to stop plastic pollution is to stop buying plastic disposable products! If people stopped buying disposable razors, companies such as #Gillette #bic & many others would have to change! #jointhemutiny #plasticwaste #plasticpollution #zerowaste #eco #Oceanplastic” [469].

Yet, what the example also shows and what is even more essential is that the individual actions that are proposed remain all on a micro-political level. The actors engaging in the debate promote solutions such as recycling, buying reusable articles of daily use, and passing on the plastic bag at the supermarket. All the suggested activities remain on a level that could be described as latent engagement as described by Ekman and Amnå (2012). Only an extremely small amount of the #zerowaste debaters calls for actions that are on a level of manifest participation when, for instance, mobilising the reader to sign a petition or join a demonstration. The activities countering environmental pollution that are suggested in the zero waste discussion are primarily activities contributing to a political awareness but are practically never concrete activities that citizens could take to affect politics. “The (neurotic) practices do not in any way interfere with our taken-for-granted ways of living in the world, nor do they pose any challenge to the capitalist system—instead, they must be regarded as being part of and reinforcing this very order” (Berglez and Olausson 2014, 68).

Finding that only such a small part of the sample sees the solution of environmental pollution in the policy making of governments or municipalities, one could furthermore argue that people developed a disbelief in the power and capacity of liberal democracy in inducing a socio-ecological change. People do not trust in the agency of politics and the state in presenting alternatives for the current state (Pepermans 2015).

The aspects demonstrated until here overall show evidence for a rationalisation of the zero waste debate. The global pollution is acknowledged and framed as a societal/individual problem. The zero waste movement implies that change has to happen (or at least begin) on the micro-political level of the individual.

The research furthermore indicates a moralisation of the zero waste debate. The findings show that there is one factor that reappears throughout the debate that is assumed to be the main aspect contributing to environmental pollution: plastic. It was mentioned before that scholars find that in the general climate change debate the socio-political status-quo is
reinforced by reducing factors contributing to climate change to a single object. This can be observed in the contemporary depoliticised climate change debate where one does not oppose particular practices or specific social actors that are accountable for climate change, but one opposes CO2. The result is that climate change is framed as the struggle of humankind against CO2. Carbon dioxide is externalised as the enemy to fight which confines politics to techno-managerial negotiations but does not challenge the system that produces it (Carvalho et al. 2017; Kenis and Lievens 2014; Swyngedouw 2010). One can find similar approaches in the debate around zero waste. If CO2 is the enemy of climate change, then plastic is the enemy of the environmental pollution. Plastic is ascribed as the ‘main evil’ causing bad for nature and humankind. The movement vastly communicates the situation as a humanitarian struggle of the people against plastic. Plastic is framed as the externalised enemy that society has to fight. It is not certain actors that we have to oppose, as for instance the industry producing it, but ‘the monster of waste’ [112], the plastic pollution.

What is furthermore crucial is the universalisation of the problem and the representation of the issue as a responsibility of all. As Pepermas (2015) portrays, by invoking this comprehensive ‘us’ and implying a homogenisation of people, the environmental pollution becomes a challenge of humankind. This is insofar problematic as it ignores and veils social inequalities and conflicts. Berglez and Olausson (2014) state that it furthermore encourages a neutralisation of climate change dimensions. They claim that “the more climate science is embraced by all of society, by rightists and leftists, by the young and the elderly, the more diluted its political dimension becomes” (Berglez and Olausson 2014, 62). Hence, by invoking that environmental pollution is a challenge of the whole of society it becomes easier to evade and shirk responsibilities and we have excuses to postpone our engagement. It appears that framing the problem as the responsibility of everyone might end up in everyone thinking that someone else will solve it.

It is similarly argued that depicting the struggle against environmental pollution as the responsibility of the individual divides people into categorises of those who life a green, morally correct lifestyle and those who life a “not green”, immoral life. By doing so, the moralisation of environmental pollution frames lifestyle choices, for whatever reasons they might have been made, as either good or bad for the environment “implying that anyone
who opposes a particular policy consensus is “bad for the climate” and in favour of its potential apocalyptic consequences” (Carvolho et al. 2017, 129). Hence, it is implicitly assumed that a great part of what we do and how we consume in our everyday life is morally wrong since it is contributing to the pollution of the planet. This approach is insofar difficult as it contributes to feelings of anxiety and guilt which more likely let people suppress the problem, rather than trying to find solutions for it (Pepermans 2015).

Lastly, contributing to a moralisation of the zero waste movement is the use of apocalyptic rhetoric. Swyngedouw (2010, 217) claims that “in this consensual setting, environmental problems are generally staged as universally threatening to the survival of humankind”. The study finds that the environmental narrative, in text as well as in pictures, is fed with imaginaries of fear and danger. With regard to climate change this ‘apocalyptic imaginary’, as Swyngedouw (2010) puts it, includes the visual language describing a destabilised and threatened nature out of control: endemic water shortages, droughts and floods, disintegrating icebergs causing rising the sea levels, alarming reduction of biodiversity, the threat of diseases, and so forth. In the same vein, the pollution of the environment is pictured. Threatening images of polluted oceans and nature, animals that have been killed by plastic waste, massive piles of plastic waste are either described in the text of Twitter postings or are even attached as picture to the post.

Concluding words

Finally, what remains at this point it to conclude the thesis at hand. The aim of this study was to understand how the public uses social media platforms to participate in the zero waste debate and to what extent the communication practices show evidence for a depoliticisation of the public discourse. In general, it was found that in particular civic actors (citizens and public personalities), commercial and non-profit organisations engage in the debate. The platform Twitter is above all used to distribute informative content, but also, to mobilise the public to make certain lifestyle decisions on a micro-political level. The study furthermore shows that the #zerowaste debate on Twitter is evidently depoliticised. The communication incorporated in many ways discursive strategies such as universalisation and externalisation resulting in a rationalised and moralised representation of the problem of environmental pollution.
The study reveals that there exists a general post-political numbness of society in the online sphere. We all know about the environmental pollution, we know about its harmful implications, yet, we are too comfortable in our system and do not dare to change it profoundly. We only change on a micro-level to soothe our conscience. But as a matter of fact, we are numb. Political engagement with climate change needs to question existing power arrangements, encourage opposition and critique against the dominant system, and motivate to think beyond mainstream sustainability. The thesis leaves us with the important question on how we can shift the depoliticisation to a repoliticisation of the society.

**Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The main limitation of the study is that the research, looking into activism against pollution and waste, is reduced to the #zerowaste hashtag. The problem with this is that the movement itself could be described as an outcome of our post-political society since it is merely meant to concentrate on the individual itself and less on the bigger political and economic entities causing pollution. In that sense, the results of the study were expectable. It might have been beneficial for the study to aim for a broader picture and not only focus on one movement/one hashtag, but to include various hashtags that would show postings that contain content on activism against pollution on a more general level. Apart from that, it seems problematic that tweets with their limited word count most likely cannot illustrate all the different aspects of the complex concept of post-politics but only a certain part of it. Therefore the results are not quite distinct. For this reasons, future research could for one thing look into communication practices on different social network sites such as Facebook. The latter is a platform that enables users to speak their mind rather broadly which could give more comprehensive results. Furthermore, it should be looked at environmental activism counteracting pollution on a more general level, and not reduce it to a single hashtag/movement.
REFERENCES


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## APPENDICES

*Appendix 1: Codebook*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NR</th>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>VALUES</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CATEGORIES RELATED TO POST AND AUTHOR OF POST</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1  | TYPE OF USER | (1) Citizen  
(2) Public personality  
(3) Media organisation  
(4) Political/governmental organisation  
(5) Commercial/corporate organisation  
(6) Non-governmental organisation, initiatives, grassroots movement | | |
| 2  | MESSAGE ELEMENT | (0) Not included  
(1) Picture  
(2) Video  
(3) Link  
(4) Share of Tweet | | |
|    | **CATEGORIES RELATED TO CONTENT OF POST** | | |
| 3  | INFORMATION | (0) Not included  
(1) News and facts  
(2) Opinion, self-expression, humour, recommendations  
(3) Event, initiatives, projects  
(4) Product and brands  
(5) other | | |
| 4  | MOBILISATION  
Call for action | (0) Not included  
(1) Information, education  
(2) Eco-friendly lifestyle  
(3) Commercial promotion  
(4) Event promotion  
(5) other |  
“[…] come thru and buy my stuff he he” (431)  
#passonplastic #refusethestraw |
|    | **THE POST-POLITICIAL CONDITION OF CLIMATE CHANGE** | | |
| 5  | NATURALISATION OF POLLUTION AND WASTE ISSUE | (0) Reference not made  
(1) Reference made | “Recent studies estimate that […]” (403)  
“[…] plastic is a massive global issue.” (63)  
“Only 9% of the plastic that has ever been created has been recycled […]” (181) |
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<tr>
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<td>“Who else is frustrated with our planet’s plastic problem?” (429)</td>
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<td>“… plastic is a massive global issue.” (63)</td>
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<td>USE OF APOCALYPTIC IMAGINARIES (TEXT)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Did you know that each year the US uses 30 billion plastic bags requiring 12 million barrels of oil to produce?” (319)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“[…] war on plastic” (399)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“[…] fish of the west coast ingest over 12,000 tons of plastic a year” (403)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VISUAL CONNOTATION</td>
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<td>No image included</td>
<td>Positive: Non-critical, pro-environmental image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative: Critical, apocalyptic image</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive images: picture of environment, greens, environmental friendly product solutions</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative images: plastic in ocean, piles of plastic bottles, animals caught in plastic waste</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**CAUSES OF POLLUTION AND WASTE ISSUE** (What causes pollution?)

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<th>Reference not made</th>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Industry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It is us, we are responsible”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It is so obvious that human beings have done this”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“[…] perfectly good food is wasted every day in food production.” (333)</td>
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**SOLUTION FOR POLLUTION AND WASTE ISSUE** (What can we do against pollution?)

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<th>Change of individual behaviour</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industry induced</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politic induced</td>
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**CONNOTATION OF SOLUTION**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manifest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UNIVERSALISATION</td>
<td>Representation of pollution as humanitarian struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(1) Reference made</td>
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Appendix 2: Coding instructions

I. AUTHOR OF POST

TYPE OF USER: Who is the author of the post? The category included the variables: citizen, public personality, media organisations, political and governmental organisations, commercial organisations and non-profit organisations. As public personality were people coded who were in the centre of public attention to some extent. This could include public speakers, actors, activists, influencers, blogger etc. as long as they had a reach of over 1000 followers on Twitter. Any initiative, grassroots movement, or non-governmental organisation that did not have any commercial interest was coded as non-profit organisation. As soon as a profit interest was recognisable it was coded as commercial organisation.

II. CONTENT OF POST

INFORMATION: A tweet was coded as information, when it included informational character in any sense. The information was categorised in one of the following: news and facts when it included a media story or facts on the topic of pollution and waste for instance; opinions and recommendations when it contained statements of self-expression; events and initiatives when it contained information about specific projects; products and brands when the information contained commercial character.

MOBILISATION: Mobilisation is operationalized as a call for action. Hence, the author of the post is instructing the reader to do something "expressed linguistically as an imperative verb" (e.g. ‘Join’, ‘Donate’, ‘Buy’, ‘Sign’) (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta 2017, 1627). This can be either be included as part of the text or through a hashtag command (for example #passonplastic or #refusethestraw)

III. THE POST-POLITICAL DIMENSION

NATURALISATION OF POLLUTION AND WASTE ISSUE: Does the author acknowledge that there is a problem concerning the environmental pollution? A tweet was coded in this category as soon as the tweet implied acknowledgement concerning a consensus on the scientific theories, arguments and conclusions about environmental pollution. The problem of (plastic) waste and pollution is approved to be a (global) issue.

In case one post would contain several values of one variable, the first value was coded. However, this case only occurred five times during the entire coding process.
PERPETRATOR PLASTIC: Does the author refer to plastic either in the text or as a hashtag? In this category it is counted whether a reference about plastic is made and whether it is implied that plastic is the perpetrator of the environmental pollution.

USE OF APOCALYPTIC IMAGINARIES (TEXT): Does the author use apocalyptic rhetoric and is the environmental problem framed as threatening to humankind and nature? A tweet is coded in this category when the users describe the environmental pollution with threatening images to express the serious socio-ecological conditions and the harmful implications for nature and humankind.

USE OF APOCALYPTIC IMAGINARIES (IMAGE): If the user includes a picture in the tweet, does it show a positive, neutral of rather negative situation? A positive image includes for instance picture of the unharmed environment, greens, or environmental friendly product solutions. A picture is coded as negative when it includes images of pollution and waste as for instance plastic in ocean, piles of plastic bottles, animals caught in plastic waste.

CAUSES OF POLLUTION AND WASTE ISSUE: Does the author mention what instance causes the pollution of the environment? The category differentiates between the individual/society ("we", "us"), political institutions, and the industry.

SOLUTION FOR POLLUTION AND WASTE ISSUE: Does the author of the tweet imply who or what can solve the issue of pollution? The category differentiates between: change of individual behaviour (e.g. are everyday practices mentioned that counteract waste?), industry induced change, and politics induced change.

UNIVERSALISATION: Is environmental pollution represented as a struggle of humanity as a whole? Is there a homogenised and universalised conception of humanity (opposing (plastic) pollution as the externalised enemy)? A tweet is counted in this category when it included a mention of "us", "we", "everybody" or similar.