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**‘Heimat’—More than a Sense of Home:  
Reviving a Medieval Concept for Communication Research**

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### **Abstract**

*Heimat* represents our home, but the medieval German term stands for more than this: it is the place where we grew up, people to whom we feel connected, landscapes, language or dialect, traditions and customs, and feelings of security, safety, contentment, and coziness. Due to growing global threats and challenges, people all over the world have developed a strong need for these positive feelings in recent years, and politics and the media are increasingly catering to this need. There has been little empirical research on these phenomena. Therefore, by reviving the concept of *Heimat* this article provides a fruitful theoretical foundation as well as various research perspectives as inspiring starting points for communication research on *Heimat* in the media.

**Keywords:** Heimat, sense of home, home-related media offerings, social identity, media use

**‘Heimat’—More than a Sense of Home:****Reviving a Medieval Concept for Communication Research**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century with its globalization and global threats becomes an increasing challenge for more and more populations. Large parts of these populations, including the younger generations, suffer from insecurities and psychological distress (e.g., Berman et al., 2014), resulting in a stronger need for familiarity, attachment, safety, and regional belonging. The rediscovery of such a regional affiliation can be understood as a social countermovement to globalization (Ratter & Gee, 2012). The experiences associated with globalization, such as growing digitalization, climatic and environmental changes, job-related demand for higher flexibility and mobility, or the increased uniformity of large cities, can reinforce the need for local or regional belonging, as illustrated by the following quotation:

This is not just a matter of nostalgia. An active desire for the particularity of place—for what is truly “local” or “regional”—is aroused by such increasingly common experiences. Place brings with it the very elements sheared off in the planiformity of site: identity, character, nuance [...] (Casey, 1997, p. xiii)

For several years, the trend of placing particular emphasis on regional aspects of media offerings has also been apparent. Examples of this include travel/nature/historical documentaries, advertisements about regional products, or films and television series about people from large cities who move back home or to a village, finding happiness, idyllic landscapes, and true love (e.g., *Sweet Home Alabama*, *Hart of Dixie*, and *Virgin River*). The awareness of the particularity of one’s home place has also been triggered in current political events at national and regional levels: The former United States president talked about making one’s own nation “great” again, and the British focused on their own country by leaving the European Union. The elections in Bavaria (Germany) in 2018 were also marked by preserving one’s own region, attaching this issue to the concept of *Heimat* (‘Home’): Many of the major parties campaigned with slogans like “Heimat—Unsere bayrische Lebensart erhalten”

(“*Heimat*—preserving our Bavarian way of life”; Christian Social Union). On social networks such as Instagram, the hashtags *home* (168 million posts), *hometown* (6.2 million posts), *Heimat* (2.8 million posts), *Heimatliebe* (‘Heimat love’; 1.8 million posts) are also very popular (counts as of March 2021).

How can we explain these phenomena of supply, use, and effect observed in media offerings and in society? What makes up these home-related media offerings, and why are they used by so many people? What needs are satisfied by the reception of such offerings, and what benefits do people expect from using them? What benefits or effects does the use of home-related content have, and are media offerings strategically designed by the producers, program planners, and campaigners with conscious consideration of these effects? These questions only begin to outline the research needs arising in communication science.

There has been little empirical research on these home-related phenomena. As *Heimat* as a medieval concept includes home and the sense of home, but stands for even more nowadays, it could be a fruitful conceptual frame and theoretical foundation for research on home-related media phenomena. Therefore, after framing and elaborating the concepts of *Heimat* and *Heimatgefühl* (‘sense of home’) in the first part of this article, also pointing out parallels with and differences from related international concepts, the second part of this article aims at sketching various research perspectives as inspiring starting points for communication research on *Heimat* in the media.

### **The Concepts of Heimat and Heimatgefühl**

#### **Heimat**

*Heimat*, simply translated, is the German word meaning home, homeland, or native region (Ross, 2019), but the term actually covers much more than this. No term with the same meaning exists in English or in other Latin-based or Eastern (e.g., Mandarin) languages (Ratter & Gee, 2012). For German-speaking individuals, the term has an intuitive meaning: According to a representative survey of the German electorate aged 18 years or older, *Heimat*

means “my home—where I live,” but it is also the place where one grew up, the people one loves and likes, landscapes, language or dialect, traditions and customs, and feelings of security, safety, contentment, and coziness (Schröter, 2016).

The concept of *Heimat* has its roots in the Gothic language of the early Middle Ages, where it was already used to mean the homely, comfortable, and peaceful place where one settles down. In the Middle Ages, the predecessors of the term ‘Heimat’ were used, first in Old High German (‘heimuoti’/‘heimoti’) and then in Middle High German (‘heimout(e)’), to refer to the place of residence as well as one’s own property or house and farm (Heller & Narr, 2011; Klose, 2013). The *Heimatrecht* (‘right of home’)—the right to be allowed to live in a certain place, to be protected against expulsion, and to be able to demand support in times of need—was conceptually connected to this concept (Heller & Narr, 2011; Röll, 2014). In *The German Dictionary*, the Brothers Grimm, who are internationally known as the authors of various fairy tales but who also worked as linguists and professors at the University of Göttingen, still defined *Heimat* in this sense as the country in which one was born and had the right to stay (Röll, 2014, p. 12).

Because of the transformation from a stationary agrarian society to a mobile industrial society during industrialization in the 19th century, the *Heimatrecht*, to a large extent, lost its function and was replaced by the *Niederlassungsrecht* (‘right of residence’). As the concept of home was thus a relic of a peasant society and therefore of village and rural structures, it increasingly came to be associated with idyllic villages (Heller & Narr, 2011). As many people moved from their villages to cities in the 19th century, *Heimat* was above all associated with *Heimweh* (‘homesickness’) and longing for the former place of residence. At the end of the 19th century, the *Heimat* movement, which opposed rapid social change and internationality, advocated the preservation of the traditional, and glorified the rural, reached an initial climax (Bastian, 1995).

After the establishment of the German Empire, the term *Heimat* was increasingly used as a synonym for fatherland and nation (Heller & Narr, 2011). In the years between the two world wars, both rural and national associations were increasingly mystified, ideologized, and finally misused by the National Socialists in propaganda as part of their ‘blood and soil’ ideology. In this ideology, *Heimat* was synonymous with, among other things, the exclusion of all non-Germans (Röll, 2014, p. 13). After the loss of the Second World War, many Germans initially focused on losing their *Heimat*, and a large number of refugees had to learn to distinguish between their old and new *Heimat* (Heller & Narr, 2011). The longing for an intact world and security in the post-war period were reflected in numerous *Heimat* films, novels, and songs until approximately 1960 (Röll, 2014). The 1960s marked a break with the historically charged concept of *Heimat*: Beginning in 1960, for example, *Heimatkundeunterricht* (‘lessons in local history studies’) were replaced in schools by *Sachkundeunterricht* (‘lessons in social studies’). Germany’s ‘1968 generation’ associated the concept of *Heimat* above all with the piety of the war generation and therefore rigorously rejected it (Heller & Narr, 2011).

The 1970s and 1980s brought a renaissance of the concept of *Heimat*, triggered by new civic initiatives and organizations, especially in the ecological context, which stood up for their region and for the environment and opposed a ruthless growth society and the threat to *Heimat* with which it was thought to be associated (Bausinger, 1983). However, in addition to environmental protection, *Heimat* also meant the improvement of quality of life—especially in the countryside (Pörner, 1990) but also in the cities (Bausinger, 1990). Thus, during these decades, the concept of *Heimat* was increasingly accepted by large segments of the population without negative connotations (Bastian, 1995).

Today, the concept of *Heimat* is highly significant across broad swaths of German society (e.g., during elections) because of its identity-forming quality (Heller & Narr, 2011). The concept of *Heimat* is currently widely used in Germany and is associated with positive

connotations by many people, regardless of age, education, or gender. The contextual uses of the term '*Heimat*' are correspondingly diverse (Schröter, 2016). Many people speak of their birthplaces when they speak of *Heimat*, whereas others regard the place where they currently live, which may be far away from their places of origin, as *Heimat*. Furthermore, *Heimat* can mean a district, a whole region, or even an entire country. A certain person, a smell, or a tradition can also be associated with *Heimat*, without the concept necessarily being spatially restricted.

The versatility of the concept of *Heimat* in everyday language is also reflected in scholarly work (e.g., Costadura & Ries, 2016). Röhl (2014, p. 12), for example, understands *Heimat* to be a constructed, imaginary hybrid space that contributes to the creation of meaning and the communalization of individuals, whereas Lutz and Fußmann (2014) characterize *Heimat* more generally, as a feeling of being accepted. The international literature does not offer an adequate translation of *Heimat*, and publications dealing with *Heimat* usually do so in the context of Germany's past (e.g., 'The German Idea of Heimat,' Applegate, 1990).

Mitzscherlich (1997) presented a pioneering work exploring *Heimat* in a psychological context. Among other things, Mitzscherlich's work attempts to create a broad definition of *Heimat* within the framework of her dissertation. Through qualitative interviews, she identifies 10 psychological dimensions of *Heimat* (p. 56): *Heimat* as a childhood family environment; *Heimat* as a cultural landscape; *Heimat* as the current network; *Heimat* as experience and emotional state; *Heimat* as inner design/outline; *Heimat* as a political-ideological construction; *Heimat* as a folklore world; *Heimat* as a loss experience; *Heimat* and foreigners; and *Heimat* as diversity. A modified form of these dimensions is used in Teubner-Guerra's (2014) *Heimat* Questionnaire, which provides a pool of 44 items for quantitatively measuring attachment to personal (e.g., family) and symbolized attachment objects (e.g., folklore).

## **Heimatgefühl**

In addition to the concept of *Heimat* itself, *Heimatgefühl* [sense/feeling of *Heimat*] is also of central importance in the empirical study of *Heimat*. The subjective emotional state of *Heimatgefühl* is sometimes explained in terms of a person's striving for security, familiarity, safety, and relaxation, as well as the chance to realize these emotional states in a certain environment (Mitzscherlich, 1997, pp. 79–80). Süper (2013), however, understands the subjective *Heimatgefühl* rather as a feeling of local attachment that is influenced by a person's individual attachment demand and by the attachment potential of a space; here, a distinction must be made between rational attachment to a place, social attachment to a place, emotional attachment to a place, and local identification. In contrast, Heller and Narr (2011) focus on territoriality regarding the need for security and identity in the form of the striving for harmony between man and the environment as the basis of *Heimatgefühl*.

To date, there is no working definition of the concept of *Heimatgefühl* that is comprehensive and exhaustive, although such a definition could be useful for home-related media offerings and thus for communication science. Therefore, we develop this definition below. Like Mitzscherlich (1997), who begins with several psychological dimensions of *Heimat*, our definition assumes various possible facets of *Heimatgefühl* on the emotional level that can be triggered by different spatiotemporal and/or sociocultural references and associations.

### ***Heimatgefühl as a Type of Emotion***

The emotional level is consistently found in existing approaches to defining *Heimat* and *Heimatgefühl* because ‘-gefühl’ [sense, feeling] already implies an affective component. The exact nature of this emotional level sometimes differs between authors. Lutz and Fußmann (2014), for example, understand it as the feeling of being accepted. In this sense, Zejnuni's (2012) study on migrants' media use also emphasizes the feeling of belonging in the context of *Heimat*. If, however, we look at Röhl's (2014) interpretation, security, trust, and reliability

are foregrounded. As Mitzscherlich's (1997) study showed, a sense of *Heimat* can also be associated with negative emotions, such as feelings of shame, contempt, and humiliation, for example when negative memories are linked with the childhood family environment or when the original *Heimat* has become unfamiliar or even lost (e.g., through war or flight). Feelings with a mixture of positive and negative emotional components (such as feelings of longing and nostalgia; cf. Barrett et al., 2010) are also conceivable, if, for example, one wishes for their 'happy childhood' back in their home country. *Heimatgefühl* is therefore by no means always positively valenced, and it can sometimes even be accompanied by negative feelings. Nevertheless, *Heimatgefühl* is generally likely to be fed by the positive feelings of belonging, security, safety, and/or familiarity.

### ***Spatiotemporal Associations as Triggers for Heimatgefühl***

In most publications about *Heimat*, there is a spatiotemporal level, or at least individual constructs that aim to capture a temporal or spatial dimension. In contrast to the emotional level, cognitions in the form of associations play a major role in the spatiotemporal level. This level seems particularly relevant in studies dealing with migrants and homesickness (e.g., Eggert, 2014; Geißler, 2010). Süper (2013) takes this even further by treating love of *Heimat* as synonymous with a sense of place (SoP) and assuming that temporal components such as duration of residence sometimes influence a person's desire to be bound to a place. Different authors agree that childhood environment and origin are closely related to personal *Heimatgefühl* (e.g., Geißler, 2010; Mitzscherlich, 1997). However, both Boltz (2008) and Zejnuni (2012) argue that *Heimat* is not necessarily the same as the childhood environment or place of origin: In a world characterized by increasing globalization and mobility, especially of young people, many people no longer have 'one *Heimat*'; rather, *Heimat* can change over the course of a lifetime, for example when one's place of residence changes. On the basis of these perspectives, we assume that spatiotemporal associations with a place of origin or refuge and its geographical environment (which usually corresponds to the childhood family

environment but can change or expand over the course of life as location of residence changes) are triggers for a *Heimatgefühl*.

### ***Sociocultural Associations as Triggers for Heimatgefühl***

Sociocultural associations include *Heimat*-related associations, which can range from political-ideological to cultural and linguistic and have been used in much previous work in the context of *Heimat*. Zejnuni (2012), for example, writes about Inuit people living in North America who try to preserve their *Heimat* with the help of media contact with language and tradition. Bausinger (1990) further assumes that in addition to the political facet, the legal facet in the form of the right to leave and return home is also decisive in the context of the *Heimatgefühl*. From this point, it is plausible to derive associations such as ‘coming home.’ Mitzscherlich (1997) also finds references to a sociocultural level, through which *Heimat* can be perceived as a cultural landscape and as a network, as well as a construction of political ideology and folklore. Mitzscherlich (1997) further finds indications that *Heimat* can also be regarded as a sensual experience in the context of an emotional state that is associated with or triggered by optical, acoustic, tactile or haptic, gustatory, and/or olfactory sensations of the local culture. Analogously, we also assume that sociocultural associations with aspects of culture (e.g., language, traditions, and lifestyle), social aspects (e.g., involvement in relationships and/or communities), and cultural-/political-ideological aspects (e.g., values and norms) are triggers for a *Heimatgefühl*. These considerations result in the following definition of *Heimatgefühl*:

*Heimatgefühl* manifests itself on an emotional level and is usually fed by positive feelings of belonging, security, safety, and/or familiarity.

*Heimatgefühl* is triggered by spatiotemporal associations with a place of origin and/or refuge and its geographical surroundings, which usually corresponds to the childhood family environment but can change or expand over the course of one’s life through changes in location of residence; sociocultural associations with aspects of culture

such as language, traditions, and lifestyle; and social aspects such as involvement in relationships and/or communities, as well as with cultural-ideological or political-ideological aspects such as values and norms.

### **Related Concepts**

Although the term ‘Heimat’ is used mainly in the German-speaking world, there are international concepts that show a certain similarity to *Heimat*. This is especially true for ‘place identity’, ‘place attachment’, and ‘sense of place’ (SoP). These constructs are mostly used in the field of environmental psychology and describe people’s (emotional) connection to a place (e.g., Lewicka, 2011). Some researchers use the three constructs hierarchically: According to Lynch (1998), place identity is the basis for the formation of a SoP, from which place attachment can subsequently result. Other researchers consider place identity and place attachment to represent dimensions of SoP (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001).

### ***Place Identity***

The concept of place identity describes the extent to which symbolic or physical properties of certain places contribute to individual self-awareness or identity (Proshansky et al., 1983). Place identity is understood by Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira (2016) as “a process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place” (p. 239). Like persons, objects, and activities, places are an integral part of the social world; as such, they become important mechanisms by which social identities are defined and situated (Proshansky et al., 1983). Therefore, the exploration of place identity has been linked to social identity theory (e.g., Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2016; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). The basic assumption of social identity theory is that people belong to different groups and groupings and that they form their social identity by evaluating these group memberships (cf. Mummendey, 1985; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Both ‘personal place identification’ (e.g., “Rome has become a part of me.”) and ‘social place identification’ (e.g., “I feel completely Roman.”) are important for identity formation in this way (Devine-Wright,

2009). A strong place identity may be associated with high (neighborhood) satisfaction, a preference for the in-group (e.g., the residents of one's neighborhood), and an aversion to out-groups (e.g., the residents of another neighborhood) (Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2016).

Because the familiar environment of *Heimat* should be of great importance as a form of place (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004), it is likely that individuals' classifications of themselves through their *Heimat* are especially strong and can thus be expected to influence their identity formation.

### ***Place Attachment***

The concept of place attachment, as a human–place relationship, has been researched for almost 50 years (Lewicka, 2011). Place attachment describes “the bonding that occurs between individuals and their meaningful environments” (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 1) and the “emotional bonds between people and a particular place or environment” (Seamon, 2014, p. 12). Place attachment is usually understood as a multidimensional construct including the components of person (i.e., individual and cultural group-specific factors), place (i.e., social and physical aspects), and the process of forming connectedness, which can include cognitive, affective, and conative aspects (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Important predictors of the extent of place attachment include the duration of residence and the strength of local ties (Lewicka, 2011).

Although the similarity between the constructs of place attachment and *Heimat* is noticeable, *Heimat* is distinct from place attachment. Place attachment can be created independently of a person's actual *Heimat*, meaning that the formation of a place attachment is possible without experiencing *Heimat*. The concept of place attachment is also used in tourism research, for example, to predict tourists' loyalty to a holiday destination (e.g., Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

Although tourists unquestionably have a certain level of place attachment, they would not call a resort their *Heimat*. Scientific evidence also suggests that a certain level of place attachment

is relatively quick to develop, whereas individuals take much longer to fully identify with a place, as is often the case with experiencing *Heimat* (Hernandez et al., 2007).

### ***Sense of Place***

Of the three concepts presented here, SoP probably most closely resembles *Heimat* (Ratter & Gee, 2012). The concept of SoP was introduced in the late 1970s and has different meanings. It describes the perception and specific characteristics of a place, as well as one's psychological connection to the place. Williams and Stewart (1998) define SoP as a "collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values and feelings that individuals or groups associate with a particular locality" (p. 19).

Here, too, a distinction can be made despite the conceptual similarity with the concept of *Heimat*. The importance of the long-term connection to a place and the relevance of the social experiences generated in this place are inherent in the concept of *Heimat*. Furthermore, feelings and emotions, such as the perception of security, play a greater role in the context of *Heimat*. Ratter and Gee (2012) also suggest that, although *Heimatgefühl* is inevitably associated with a strong SoP, SoP is possible without the emotional and social components of the *Heimat* experience.

As mentioned above, these three concepts have mainly been used in the context of environmental psychology and have not yet been explored in relation to media offerings. These concepts have mostly been used as non-experimentally influenced predictors, moderators, or independent variables (e.g., Lewika, 2011). Regarding *Heimatgefühl*, however, many types of media offerings could evoke or reinforce an individual sense/feeling of *Heimat*. Many offerings contain elements that could be associated with one's own *Heimat*, such as landscapes, dialects, or traditions. One example is films or television series that take place in certain regional areas. The film *Sweet Home Alabama* and the *Hart of Dixie* television series, for example, are about people living in sleepy Southern towns in the United States. The *Hart of Dixie* series includes many landscape shots, and the dialect of the inhabitants is depicted

realistically. Historical documentaries or reports on regional customs could also trigger or strengthen *Heimatgefühl* among some people who consume these types of media. However, the decisive factor in determining whether these media offerings actually evoke *Heimatgefühl* and not just any feelings at all is the extent to which the recipients can make spatiotemporal and/or sociocultural associations with their *Heimat*. The extent to which a media offering is capable of evoking *Heimatgefühl* therefore depends strongly on the individual recipient and his or her subjective understanding of *Heimat*. Although the television series *Hart of Dixie* may well evoke spatiotemporal associations in a recipient who grew up in a Southern state of the United States, it would probably not evoke the same types of associations in a recipient who grew up in New York. Conversely, when watching a documentary about the Thanksgiving parade in New York, a New Yorker would probably feel *Heimatgefühl*, whereas a Southerner would not, because of these individuals' different spatiotemporal and sociocultural associations.

### **Perspectives for Communication Research on Heimat in the Media**

As the previous section shows, it is plausible to define *Heimat*-related media offerings by their ability to evoke a *Heimatgefühl*. By doing this, we place a special focus on psychological reception processes and effects that could be associated with the use of these media offerings. Below, we briefly outline theories and concepts of media reception and effects research that can plausibly be linked to *Heimatgefühl*-evoking media offerings and can therefore serve as theoretical perspectives for future research on Heimat in the media.

### **Perspectives from Linking Theories and Concepts of Reception and Effects Research**

#### ***Social Identity***

As outlined above, the basic premise of social identity theory is that people assign themselves to different groups and form their social identities based on their evaluation of these group affiliations (Mummendey, 1985; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The theory also assigns a special role to social comparisons with other groups. Group members valorize themselves

and their social identity through positive evaluations of their own group (in-group), contrasting this with negative evaluations of other groups (out-groups), thus augmenting their self-esteem and stabilizing their emotional state (Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983). This social-psychological mechanism has already been discussed in the context of the reception of newspapers, music, and online and television content; it is assumed that people specifically select and use media and communication offerings that boost their self-esteem through reference to their own group and a positive portrayal of this group. This in-group can be, for example, an age group, a school class, an ethnic group, or an entire nation (Trepte, 2006). As stated above, for many people, *Heimat* equates to an affiliation with a region (place identity) and hence to a group of people living in this region. These people share various social experiences (e.g., through school, church, and fairs), a language or dialect, traditions, and customs. If they are presented in a positive way in certain *Heimat*-related media offerings, these offerings are likely to have a high level of attractiveness and positive effects among people who feel associated with the relevant regional groups. This understanding allows us to explain the positive effect of Southern movies such as *Sweet Home Alabama*, as well as the positive effects of *Heimat*-based politics, as discussed at the beginning of this article.

### ***Mood Management***

Mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988), a specific theory of selective exposure (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), explains the preference for specific media content and explores why people turn to particular media offerings when they are in certain moods. This theory assumes that people “function” in a primarily hedonistic way and that they always want to optimize their mood. Thus, they are seen as trying to maintain or intensify positive moods and to diminish or avoid negative moods. According to the theory, media offerings are selected rather unconsciously: People automatically turn to offerings a) with which they have had positive mood-regulating experiences in the past (that remain positive in their memory) or b) that promise a high probability positive mood-regulating experiences or minimize the risk of

an inappropriate media offering selection because of their genre or thematic references, for example in the title. *Heimat*-based media offerings are very suitable in this regard, as most of these offerings (e.g., music, travel, or cooking formats) reliably present *Heimat* topics in a positive way.

### ***Escapism***

According to the escapism thesis (Katz & Foulkes, 1962), people frequently use media offerings to temporarily escape the social reality in which they live because they suffer from estranged living and working conditions (sociological escapism), from other human beings and problematic relationships (social-psychological escapism), or from boredom and monotony, or because they do not know what to do with themselves (individual-psychological escapism; Henning & Vorderer, 2001). Media offerings, according to this thesis, provide an alternate social reality that is more interesting, more diversified, more exciting, and, especially, less problematic—a welcome escape from reality for the duration of the media exposure. Of all *Heimat*-related media offerings, “ideal world” offerings should be especially suitable for this function. Particularly if they are set in the individual’s *own* home region, this could even contribute to the viewer’s awareness of the beauty of their home or of networks of relationships in which they play a vital role and are appreciated as individuals. In this case, the effects of media use would not even be escapist in the sense of providing an escape from reality; they would instead serve the opposite function, generating an awareness of the beautiful, functioning aspects of everyday life.

### ***Eudaimonic Well-Being***

Our definition of *Heimatgefühl* emphasizes that sociocultural associations can be characterized by addressing values and norms that manifest in, for example, traditions and customs, and the “way of living” in a region and can therefore be meaningful. This emphasis on meaningfulness is an aspect of the eudaimonic well-being approach, which has been increasingly addressed over the past ten years in articles presenting alternate explanations for

entertainment (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth et al., 2012). In contrast to hedonic entertainment, which was mentioned in the context of mood management theory, eudaimonic entertainment explains the enjoyment of particularly moving stories or plots that cause the user to reflect upon them (Schramm & Wirth, 2010). Media offerings do not necessarily serve a purely hedonic entertainment purpose, but can also contribute to one's individual well-being. This well-being includes different dimensions, such as feelings of social integration, autonomy, and self-expression (Wirth et al., 2012). Thus, in addition to hedonic entertainment, dimensions of eudaimonic well-being should be increased through the reception of media offerings eliciting a *Heimatgefühl*.

### ***Nostalgia***

In deriving the definition of *Heimatgefühl* above, we mentioned that *Heimatgefühl* is in some cases (but not always) paired with nostalgic feelings, especially when one longingly thinks of the “good old days” in one's *Heimat*. Nostalgia has only been researched in the context of media reception in the past few years (e.g., Wulf & Rieger, 2018; Wulf et al., 2018), and has not yet been explored in the context of *Heimat*-related media offerings. Media offerings that review past happenstances in a documentary way and reruns of *Heimat*-based television shows from previous decades, in particular, could be expected to remind viewers of the “good old days” and therefore to evoke *Heimat*-related nostalgic feelings. This can apply to both personal nostalgia (e.g., a movie set in one's hometown during one's youth) and historic nostalgia (e.g., a movie set in one's hometown a century ago; Stern, 1992).

### ***Fluency and Flow***

For many people, an encounter with the familiar could be a central aspect of the selection of *Heimat*-related media and communication offerings. Familiar things have an especially positive effect on many people because, unlike unfamiliar things, they have already been “processed” and are therefore more easily or “fluently” interpreted by people's brains. This reception mechanism is called the *fluency* effect (Reber et al., 1998). It explains both the

phenomenon of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) used in reception and entertainment research (Sherry, 2004) and the positive effects of familiar arguments and messages such as those examined in (political) persuasion research (Koch & Zerback, 2011). There are different types of fluency, including perceptual fluency (i.e., the ability to process perceptual cues with ease) and conceptual fluency (i.e., the ability to recall information from memory with ease; Lee & Labroo, 2004), both of which can be triggered by different aspects of *Heimat*-related media offerings. For example, a landscape in a movie that is very similar to the landscape of one's *Heimat* will be easily discernible (perceptual fluency), and the actual meaning of a regional saying that is quickly available in one's knowledge structure will be easily comprehensible (conceptual fluency). More fluent processing of a piece of information is, for instance, linked to a more positive aesthetic perception (Reber et al., 2004), which could be another good explanation for people perceiving their *Heimat* as being beautiful.

### **Perspectives from Linking Different Communication Research Contexts**

Although a few studies have explored local reporting and identity formation through cultural media content, the status of knowledge on the specific area of media offerings that evoke feelings of *Heimat* can be described simply as a tremendous research gap. In this section, we therefore outline some broader research contexts to open promising perspectives on future research on *Heimat* in the media.

#### ***Heimat Media Offerings and Their Users***

To better understand the current trend of *Heimat* in the media, a reasonable first step would be to further analyze what this trend looks like and how it has changed over the past few years. At this point, both qualitative and quantitative approaches could offer added value. A qualitative classification of different media offerings regarding *Heimat* could, for example, help to generate understanding of the program structures of our current media landscape through content analysis. Although a few initial content analytical examinations of local media offerings have already been conducted (e.g., Montiel et al., 2014), the existing studies

are focused almost exclusively on (local) news reporting. It remains unclear how entertainment media (films, series, game and quiz shows, cook shows, music shows) and other information media content than news (political and economic magazines, historical and cultural documentaries, travel and nature documentaries) is related to Heimat, what exactly that looks like, and whether recurring structures or program concepts are identifiable. It would be very interesting to examine whether the number and nature of Heimat-related media offerings has changed in the last few years, with the purpose of pinpointing how and when the trend toward Heimat developed, as well as whether this trend continues to grow, has stagnated, or is receding.

Once *Heimat*'s role and nature in our current media landscape are known, another promising line of inquiry would be to investigate who uses *Heimat*-related media offerings and for what reasons. In exploring these questions, information on media users' demographic characteristics such as age, income, and biographical background could be useful. Moreover, additional variables such as individual need for affect or patriotism could be examined in relation to the use of *Heimat*-related media offerings. With the goal of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the motivation for selecting and using such media content, in addition to well-known and central communication science motives (e.g., the need for information or the need for entertainment), other motives that may be especially applicable to the context of *Heimat* should also be examined. These motives could include, for example, the need for nostalgia, the need for an idyllic world, or a yearning for social integration or safety. Additionally, in this research context, scholars could examine whether the central motive for the use of *Heimat*-related media content is actually its identity-forming function, as Trepte (2004) assumes in the context of cultural media content.

In this article, *Heimat*-related media offerings are categorized as media offerings evoking *Heimatgefühl*. Because *Heimatgefühl* is understood here as a continuum, it would be possible to empirically determine at what intensity users begin to perceive media offerings as

“*Heimat*-related media offerings.” Is a weak affect developed from a selective *Heimat*-related sociocultural or spatiotemporal association enough, or is it necessary to elicit a stronger and ongoing emotional reaction in users? Answering this question could, among other things, contribute to a more accurate selection of stimuli for empirical studies. Obtaining a concrete understanding of which formal, content-related, and aesthetic attributes are essential for a media offering to have for certain groups of users to perceive a strong *Heimatgefühl* is a challenge for future research. Through this line of research, differentiated classifications of media offerings potentially evoking a *Heimatgefühl* would be conceivable.

Additionally, a comparative perspective on *Heimat*-related media offerings in different countries would be interesting, especially because it is plausible to expect countries with a strong sense of national identity to highly value media offerings that are related to *Heimat* and able to evoke *Heimatgefühl*. Moreover, a comparison between different cultural regions within specific countries (e.g., northern vs. southern States of the USA, West-Germany vs. East-Germany, England vs. Scotland, European vs. Asian part of Russia, urban vs. agrarian part of China) could be a fruitful perspective. Therefore, both most-dissimilar-systems designs (MDSD) as well as most-similar-systems designs (MSSD; Przeworski & Teune, 1970) should be taken into account (cf., in the context of entertainment and emotions: Schramm & Oliver, 2012).

### ***The Measurement of Heimatgefühl***

*Heimatgefühl*, as it is described in this article, has not yet been empirically examined. Whether the components of *Heimatgefühl* derived from the literature are actually able to represent users’ subjective emotions cannot be determined without empirical research. A crucial next step is examining the structure of *Heimatgefühl*, as defined here, for example by asking people about their associations with the topic of *Heimat* and related emotions. This would simplify the operationalization of *Heimatgefühl* and could result in gaining knowledge that will be central for future studies because *Heimatgefühl* would no longer be a merely

theoretical explanation for effects; rather, the influence of the reception of a *Heimat*-related media offering on recipients' psychological well-being via *Heimatgefühl*, for example, would be directly measurable. In this vein, future studies could examine whether *Heimat*-related entertainment media are capable of evoking *Heimatgefühl* and therefore of relieving users' subjective homesickness.

A first measurement for *Heimatgefühl* was developed by ourselves in a former study (cf. for details: [source blinded for anonymous review]): We conducted an online survey in Germany with a combination of qualitative and quantitative elements. 100 Participants (balanced for age, gender, and education) were asked in form of an open question to list their feelings associated with their Heimat. Then, we presented them a spectrum of 34 different emotions and asked them to rate how much they experience each emotion when they think of their Heimat on a 5-point Likert-scale. These 34 emotions represented a broad range of possible emotional associations with Heimat, included both negative and positive emotions, and were selected from the *Emotion Scales EMO 16* (Schmidt-Atzert & Hüppe, 1996), from the *Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale* (Richter et al., 2009), and from previous research on the sense of Heimat by Mitzscherlich (1997). In order to create a wide enough but not disproportionately extensive measurement of *Heimatgefühl*, we used the overlap of 13 emotions that were freely associated and those that achieved ratings above-average. A factor analysis on the 13 items justified a one-factor solution that matched the definition of *Heimatgefühl* as described and defined in this article very well. Based on these findings, *Heimatgefühl* can be understood as a construct that is reflected by longing, joy, proudness, safety, warmth, feelings of well-being, comfort, affection, belonging, happiness, solidarity, familiarity, and emotional security. A validation of this measurement solution in other countries/cultural regions as well as the development of alternative and competing measurements would be highly desirable.

### *Effects and Consequences of Exposure to Heimat-related Media Offerings*

Along with the former questions of how *Heimat*-related media offerings are composed, who uses them for what reasons, and how much Heimatgefühl they are able to evoke, another broader set of questions involves how people are affected by being exposed to them. It has been shown that the reception of local reporting can have positive effects, such as supporting the consolidation of values (e.g., Fleming et al., 2006). However, the implications and consequences arising as results of the reception of *Heimat*-related media content beyond news coverage have not yet been empirically investigated (Mously, 2007).

A potential positive implication of the use of *Heimat*-related media content is the development or augmentation of feelings such as security. The reduction of stress and fear and the improvement of users' psychological well-being may also be possible. Reducing fears of foreign infiltration because of an increased sense of security in connection with one's *Heimat* is a specific potential positive implication of the use of *Heimat*-related media offerings that could be investigated in future studies. These positively experienced emotions might also affect users' openness to other cultures and attitudes toward refugees by reminding users that their *Heimat* still exists and is not threatened.

Considering a different point of view, negative effects following the reception of *Heimat*-related media are also possible. This could happen, for example, if viewers feel nostalgic during the reception of *Heimat*-related media offerings and perceive this *Heimat* as completely altered, leading to anger because they perceive their *Heimat* to no longer be what it used to be. These feelings can indirectly fuel a fear of foreign infiltration. This, in turn, might lead to an increase in perceived distance from refugees and a preference for right-wing parties. The effects of the three related constructs presented in this article (place identity, place attachment, and SoP) on such attitudes have not yet been sufficiently tested because the experimental manipulation of these constructs has mostly been absent. For example, existing studies have only conducted correlative assessments to examine whether the constructs are

positively related to the evaluation of one's own in-group and negatively related to the evaluation of out-groups (e.g., Aleshinloye et al., 2019; Mannarini et al., 2012; Ufkes et al., 2012).

Finally, when examining the implications of the reception of *Heimat*-related media, it is important to remember that these implications probably do not apply to all people in exactly the same way. It is essential to learn more about the conditions under which the reception of a *Heimat*-related media offering weakens or fuels fears of foreign infiltration, for example, to gain a true understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Thus, examinations of *Heimat*-related media content should also include information on the personal characteristics of the users, such as age and education, as well as their personality traits, such as openness to experience and neuroticism, to obtain a holistic understanding of the effects of these types of media.

### ***Implications of the Use of Heimat in Persuasive Contexts***

As already described in the introduction, a visible trend is the deliberate and strategic use of *Heimat* in *persuasive contexts*, especially in *political election campaigns*. However, its persuasive effectiveness has not yet been verified. Future studies could address this research question by examining, for example, whether spatiotemporal and/or sociocultural associations are elicited by relating election campaigns to *Heimat*, which, in turn, might evoke feelings of security and comfort. If these feelings are developed as part of a *Heimat*-related political campaign, this could have positive effects on the campaigning party or its politicians if these feelings of security are misattributed and transferred onto the party or the politicians (for example because of the “affect-as-information effect”; Schwarz & Clore, 1988).

As part of *environmental communication*, the use of *Heimat* could also lead to an improvement in the persuasiveness of messages. Existing work has demonstrated that under certain circumstances, the perceived distance to an environment predicts the extent to which people are affected and therefore willing to practice eco-friendly behavior (McDonald et al.,

2015). In addition to improving the persuasive effectiveness of an environmental message by reducing the perceived distance between the target group and the geographical location in question, there is another possible mode of action. Especially in the context of environmental communication, an explicit relation to *Heimat* could constitute a central argument that, beyond the abovementioned misattribution of affect, may increase the message's persuasive effectiveness, even under the condition of deeper involvement with the message. Against this background and with the assumption that a relation to *Heimat* can reduce the perceived psychological distance (refer to construal level theory; Trope & Liberman, 2010), a campaign for eco-friendly behavior to stop climate change, for example, could be made more effective by referring to the user's own (protection-worthy) *Heimat* instead of citing implications for the entire planet. Whether and how the instrumental use of *Heimat* in environmental communication leads to an increase in persuasive effectiveness and potential explanations for this increase have not yet been empirically examined and constitute another potentially fruitful area of study for future research.

As a final point, we would like to mention classic *marketing communication*, such as advertisements for a particular product, in the context of *Heimat*. Here, analogous to political communication, spatiotemporal and/or sociocultural associations may be elicited by *Heimat*-related advertisements, which may lead to feelings of security and subsequently have a positive effect on the product evaluation and purchase intention because of misattribution on the user's part. It is also possible that a relation to *Heimat* could serve as a central argument in users' cognitive processing (analogous to environmental communication) if the feeling of supporting one's *Heimat* is elicited through the purchase of a product. Furthermore, multiple studies have found that feelings of nostalgia, which are often associated with *Heimat*, can have positive effects in marketing communication (e.g., Muehling & Pascal, 2011). How the use of a relation to *Heimat* in marketing communication can improve the communication's persuasive effectiveness is a question that should be addressed by future studies.

### Conclusion

The examination of the derivation of the term “*Heimat*” at the beginning of this article gave the impression that this concept is something that Germans are especially familiar with and that has been shaped mostly by Germany’s historic and culture-specific development. However, the concept should be similar in other cultures. Regardless of nationality, most people feel at home in a specific place and with its customs, traditions, and vernacular. When a media offering awakens people’s associations with this home, a feeling of security and familiarity should arise that is most likely very similar to *Heimatgefühl* as it is described in this article.

As part of this article, we have attempted to make the trend toward *Heimat* more tangible to facilitate further research, and we have shown just how multifaceted, fruitful, and relevant future studies of *Heimat* in the media ought to be. Because it is safe to assume that the phenomena of *Heimat* and *Heimatgefühl* occur cross-culturally, we hope that the topic of *Heimat in the media* will also move onto the agenda of international communication research.

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