Article

Who Relies on Social Media Influencers for Political Information? A Cross-Country Study Among Youth

The International Journal of Press/Politics
1–24

DOI: 10.1177/19401612241234898
journals.sagepub.com/home/hij


Darian Harff[1] and Desiree Schmuck[1,2]

Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) are defined as regular individuals who become well-known via self-branding on social media. Youth use content posted by SMIs not just for entertainment, but also for political information. However, we know little about which groups of young people are most likely to be exposed to their political messages or why some youth seem to favor SMIs' political information over news content from other sources. Inspired by the selective exposure paradigm, this cross-country study conducted between April 2022 and March 2023 explored which variables positively relate to selecting SMIs as primary political information sources among a quota-based sample of emerging adults (16–22 years old) in Germany ($N = 559$) and Belgium ($N = 495$). We focused on dispositional factors, namely young people's political predispositions (e.g., subjective political knowledge, institutional mistrust) and source perceptions (e.g., perceived expertise, perceived opinion leader functions), that may be associated with selecting SMIs for political information. Overall, 59 percent of youth in our study were able to name a favorite political SMI. In this analytical sample, youth who were male, politically active, or ascribed opinion leader functions to SMIs were likely to consider them central political information sources. Moreover, country-specific multi-group analysis showed that, in Germany, low subjective political knowledge and parasocial relationships developed with SMIs were linked with relying on them for political information.

[1]School for Mass Communication Research, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
[2]Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

Corresponding Author:
Desiree Schmuck, Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Währinger Straße 29, Vienna 1090, Austria.
Email: desiree.schmuck@univie.ac.at

Keywords
social media influencers, youth, political information, predispositions, selective exposure

Social media influencers (SMIs), defined as ordinary people who gain celebrity capital via platforms like YouTube or Instagram, are best known for fashion advice, "let's plays" and advertisements. Correspondingly, many young people engage with their content for entertainment purposes (Croes and Bartels 2021). However, SMIs have also emerged as an important news source on social media (Newman et al. 2021, 2023) by leveraging their popularity to highlight political topics ranging from human rights (Fischer et al. 2022) to elections (Allgaier 2020). Extant research suggests that it is especially youth who consume political SMI content (Dekoninck and Schmuck 2022; Martin and Sharma 2022; Wunderlich et al. 2022), possibly even preferring SMIs as news sources over legacy media or politicians (Newman et al. 2023). Thus, there is high potential for SMIs to become a central political player, with youth as their primary audience group (Harff 2022; Martin and Sharma 2022). Although studies have begun to explore the effects of SMIs' political content on young people's political participation (e.g., Harff and Schmuck 2023), we still lack insights into which groups of youth are most likely to consume SMIs' political messages and why they may do so—especially from a cross-country perspective.

Against this background, it is key to consider both (perceived) characteristics of SMIs that may render them more attractive information sources, such as their ability to simplify complex topics (Schmuck et al. 2022), but also young people's individual predispositions like political interest that may incline them to primarily consult SMIs for political news. Meanwhile, employing a comparative design helps ascertain whether variables that are associated with selecting SMIs as important information sources converge or vary between countries. So far, however, most research has opted for single-country studies when gauging SMIs' impact or analyzing their political content (e.g., Peter and Muth 2023; Suuronen et al. 2022).

To address these lacunas, we conducted a cross-country study to identify possible antecedents of young people's reliance on SMIs for political information. Inspired by work on selective exposure (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019; Skovsgaard et al. 2016), we focused on political predispositions (e.g., subjective political knowledge) and source perceptions (e.g., perceived expertise) that may indicate why youth turn to SMIs to be informed about political topics and help identify groups of young people who may constitute central audiences of political SMIs. We explored these predictors in Germany—a country well-known for an active political SMI culture (e.g., Allgaier 2020; Wunderlich et al. 2022)—and Belgium (which is comparable in terms of SMI use and popularity), allowing inferences to be made about the generalizability and robustness of our findings.

SMIs as Political Information Sources and Their Relevance Among Youth

The emergence of social media has broadened the field of actors who can achieve public visibility, allowing ordinary people to act as producers of media content. On social media, creators who amass large amounts of followers via self-branding are referred to as social media influencers (SMIs; Khamis et al. 2017). SMIs are primarily known as product endorsers in marketing (Lou and Kim 2019) and for their entertainment-based communication.

However, existing research (e.g., Suuronen et al. 2022; Zimmermann et al. 2022) suggests that SMIs also present political content in their communication (i.e., content related to topics of broader societal relevance; see Mansbridge 1999). This observation has led researchers to investigate characteristics (e.g., Sehl and Schützeneder 2023) and effects of SMIs' political content (e.g., Harff and Schmuck 2023), often studied through the lens of opinion leadership (e.g., Peter and Muth 2023; Suuronen et al. 2022). Much like personal contacts who give advice on topics of their interest (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), SMIs can act as opinion leaders in a media environment shaped by social curation (Thorson and Wells 2016), in which they function as intermediaries of messages by exploiting recipients' experiences of intimate bonds with them (Harff and Schmuck 2023). In this context, the notion of "parasocial opinion leadership" can be applied to SMIs, arguing that strong one-sided bonds that recipients build with media personalities (i.e., parasocial relationships; Horton and Wohl 1956; Liebers and Schramm 2019) can act as a replacement for interpersonal connections, which are typically considered a prerequisite for opinion leadership processes (Stehr et al. 2015).

Extant research on political SMIs suggests that their information may be particularly relevant for a specific age group, namely youth, who seem to pay more attention to SMIs' political content than adults (Dekoninck and Schmuck 2022; Martin and Sharma 2022; Newman et al. 2021). This notion is further supported in qualitative interviews among media users of different ages, which demonstrate that SMIs are used as a news source by adolescents and young adults, while adults seem more intent on consuming professionally produced journalistic content (Wunderlich et al. 2022). On social media, young people seem to be more attentive to political communication from SMIs than to news from other sources (Newman et al. 2023), raising questions of potential reasons behind this source liking.

Dispositional Factors Explaining Reliance on Political SMIs Among Youth

SMIs seem to predominantly discuss politics from a lifestyle perspective (Gonzalez et al. 2023; Suuronen et al. 2022), addressing political issues which connect to identity (e.g., gender rights) or are linked with personal lifestyle values (e.g., sustainability; Graham 2008). Young people in particular prefer such topics over conventional and

formal political issues (e.g., Soler-i-Martí 2015), which deal with abstract topics and are detached from their everyday lives. Related to this point is young people's shift toward more extra-institutional forms of political participation, which allow for the expression of political and ethical values through protesting or political consumerism (van Deth 2014; Weiss 2020). This perspective may thus provide one potential explanation for the growing relevance of SMIs as information sources among youth (Newman et al. 2021, 2023).

Especially in a high-choice media environment (Thorson and Wells 2016), people are encouraged to select content that suits their needs and preferences. In addition to topical interests (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019), SMIs may be able to match young people's informational wants and needs: For instance, extant research has noted that young people prefer political information that is easily understandable (Schwaiger et al. 2022), explaining why they potentially turn to SMIs for political information, who, as laypeople, can discuss political issues in simple terms (Harff and Schmuck 2023; Sawalha and Karnowski 2022). When investigating young people's reliance on SMIs for political information, it is also important to consider their political predispositions, since factors like political knowledge have been shown to motivate news consumption among adolescents (e.g., Moeller and de Vreese 2019).

The selective exposure paradigm and the uses and gratifications approach (U&G) represent prominent theories grounded in this assumption of selectivity in media choice (Knobloch-Westerwick 2014). While both theories postulate that media use and choice is driven by different audience motivations, U&G theory assumes specific needs that underlie media consumption (e.g., Ruggiero 2000). In contrast, selective exposure mainly focuses on recipients' individual characteristics as determinants of media choice (e.g., Dahlgren 2019), but has also considered the role of source bias in media selection (e.g., Van der Meer et al. 2020). According to selective exposure, people select content suiting their preferences, but can also be relatively unaware of the motives driving their media choices (Knobloch-Westerwick 2014).

Arguably, young people can also be incidentally exposed to SMIs' political content when they want to be entertained or desire company (Heiss et al. 2020), implying that they may not always actively search for it. In cases of incidental exposure, selectivity is also decisive in the further processing of messages. Factors like parasocial relationships established with SMIs or preexisting political interest may then determine whether or not youth appraise their political content as relevant and engage with it (Nanz and Matthes 2022).

Young People's Political Predispositions as Dispositional Factors

While, in political communication, selective exposure is often connected to the notion of confirmation bias (e.g., Westerwick et al. 2017), holding that media choices are driven by preferences for attitudinally congruent information, research in this area also highlights the importance of more general political predispositions such as political participation, interest or knowledge in explaining political media use (Kim 2016; Moeller and de Vreese 2019).

Researchers have examined reinforcing effects between political participation and political media use (Oser and Boulianne 2020), also among young adults (Boulianne and Theocharis 2020). Thus, political participation is not only identified as a consequence of political media use, but can motivate individuals to turn to specific media for information, thereby fostering selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick 2014). Young people with high levels of political participation, who likely have a preference for mobilizing content (Schwaiger et al. 2022), might specifically seek out SMIs as political information sources due to their engaging communication style (Huber et al. 2022; Zimmermann et al. 2022).

Similarly, social media is commonly used for news by people with high political interest (Wolfsfeld et al. 2016), which can act as a more important determinant of political news consumption than political leaning (Skovsgaard et al. 2016). We contend that politically interested young people may consume news through SMIs, as they explore niche and non-mainstream topics (Brooks et al. 2021), enabling them to respond to an already politically interested audience that wants to develop a deeper understanding of specific political issues.

Like political interest, political knowledge can also determine using SMIs as important political information sources. Although researchers have long argued that political learning occurs when people consume news (e.g., Eveland et al. 2005), more recent research among adolescents shows that "the influence of political knowledge on news use is estimated to be higher than the other way round" (Moeller and de Vreese 2019: 1078). Thus, political knowledge can predict the selection of SMIs for political information. Youth who are knowledgeable may prefer SMIs as sources for political information to complement their political media diet with information on lifestyle-oriented political topics that are often covered by SMIs (Suuronen et al. 2022).

Last, institutional mistrust may be a factor that relates to using SMIs for political information, in line with research assuming that mistrust can explain selective exposure to more alternative news content (e.g., Andersen et al. 2023). Those young people who consider official information (from legacy news media or the government) to be plain or complex may turn to SMIs for political news, because they tailor their content more closely to youth's preferences (Schwaiger et al. 2022; Zimmermann et al. 2022). Given that SMIs are themselves often critical of legacy media and the political establishment (e.g., Lewis 2020; Rothut et al. 2023), SMIs' communities may represent spaces in which negative attitudes toward these institutions are shared. During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth who were more frequently exposed to SMIs were also more likely to consider SMIs as important information sources when institutional mistrust was high (Schmuck and Harff 2023). Yet, other research has argued that SMIs are not an alternative to traditional news sources for 'disenchanted citizens,' but instead consulted for news by people who trust legacy media (Martin and Sharma 2022).

Based on previous research and following the assumptions of the selective exposure paradigm, the outlined variables may lead young people to use SMIs as sources of political information. However, nowadays, young people tend to pay even more attention to SMIs for news than to journalists (Newman et al. 2023), which suggests that SMIs may be used as a *primary* source for political information among some

young people. Yet, thus far, we have virtually no knowledge of the characteristics of young recipients who rely on SMIs for political information. It remains unclear whether the above-mentioned predictors, which have primarily been associated with conventional news use thus far, can also explain consulting SMIs as central political information sources. For instance, political interest has been found to predict use of only specific channels (i.e., television news; Boulianne 2011; Kruikemeier and Shehata 2017) and could thus also be unrelated to strong reliance on SMIs for political information. Hence, we ask the following research question:

RQ1: How are political predispositions—that is, political participation, political interest, political knowledge, and institutional mistrust—related to young people's use of political SMIs as primary sources of political information?

Young People's Source Perceptions as Dispositional Factors

According to Van der Meer et al. (2020: 938), "overload of information available might force audiences in habitual news selection patterns based on . . . heuristics like the source of information." In this context, we highlight three source perceptions—namely SMIs' perceived expertise, perceptions of SMIs' opinion leadership functions and young adults' experiences of parasocial relationships with SMIs—which may determine why young people primarily rely on SMIs for political information.

First, we consider the role of perceived expertise in explaining heavy reliance on SMIs for news. Perceived expertise is defined as "the extent to which an endorser is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (Erdogan 1999: 298). Because SMIs' topical expertise tends to be inferred from their "autodidactic knowledge acquisition" (Dekoninck et al. 2023: 713), rather than formal education, it is vital to explore whether perceptions of their expertise still factor into young people's selection of SMIs as important political information sources.

Both work on selective exposure and research on SMIs highlight the importance of perceived expertise in content selectivity. Correspondingly, Ozer (2023) as well as Winter and Krämer (2014) find that source expertise is a vital source cue in political media choice. Meanwhile, research on SMIs notes that young people's loyalty to SMIs and reliance on SMIs in consumption decisions are driven by perceptions of SMIs' expertise (Kim and Kim 2021; Tsourela 2023). We hypothesize:

H1: Perceived expertise of political SMIs is positively related to young people's use of political SMIs as primary sources of political information.

Second, SMIs may be consulted due to functions they fulfill as opinion leaders. In their model of parasocial opinion leadership, Stehr et al. (2015) note that personalities in media can fulfill functions for opinion followers such as providing orientation in relation to relevant issues, simplifying topics for their audiences and arousing interest in specific subjects. These functions can be understood as communicative capacities of opinion leaders that make their content disproportionally more attractive than news

from other sources. Correspondingly, we adapt these dimensions to SMIs: First, SMIs can act as behavioral models (Valente and Pumpuang 2007), showing how one can participate in politics, summarized as *perceived orientation for participation (POP)* provided by SMIs. Second, by catering to distinct segments of users (Brooks et al. 2021), they can raise attention to specific political issues (e.g., lifestyle-based political issues), which we describe as *perceived interest arousal (PIA)*. Third, as laypeople, they can explain politics in understandable terms (Sawalha and Karnowski 2022; Schmuck et al. 2022), defined as *perceived simplification of politics (PSP)*. The perceived ability of SMIs to present political issues in this fashion may match young people's preferences for political content—namely, news that is not only informative, but also entertaining, easy to understand, and motivating (Schwaiger et al. 2022), assets which traditional political communication may be lacking (Zimmermann et al. 2022). Accordingly, perceptions of SMIs' opinion leadership functions may lead youth to believe that SMIs can satisfy distinct informational needs (Van der Meer et al. 2020), that, for example, correspond with both information-seeking and entertainment gratifications (Ruggiero 2000).

H2: Perceived opinion leadership functions of political SMIs are positively related to young people's use of political SMIs as primary sources of political information.

Third, parasocial relationships may predict the perceived importance of SMIs as information sources, as shown in previous research (e.g., Rubin and Step 2000). Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships with media characters "are strongly related to motives of selective exposure" (Klimmt et al. 2006: 294). This perspective is also supported in qualitative interviews among young people asked about their use of political SMIs: One participant noted that "he considers influencers that he has followed for several years to be 'reliable sources of information' because he . . . feels 'a personal connection,'" while another stated that he better understands SMIs' opinions "because I have a much closer connection with them than I do with any journalist" (Wunderlich et al. 2022: 579). These examples strongly indicate that relational aspects may explain why SMIs become significant political information sources among youth, and that intimate connections established with them may render them being attractive sources of information. We hypothesize:

H3: Parasocial relationships with political SMIs are positively related to young people's use of political SMIs as primary sources of political information.

Method

Our research question and hypotheses are visualized in Figure 1. We conducted a cross-country cross-sectional survey in Germany and Belgium[1] to extend existing SMI research focused on country-specific contexts (e.g., Peter and Muth 2023; Suuronen et al. 2022). It is vital to investigate the phenomenon of (political) SMIs—which is

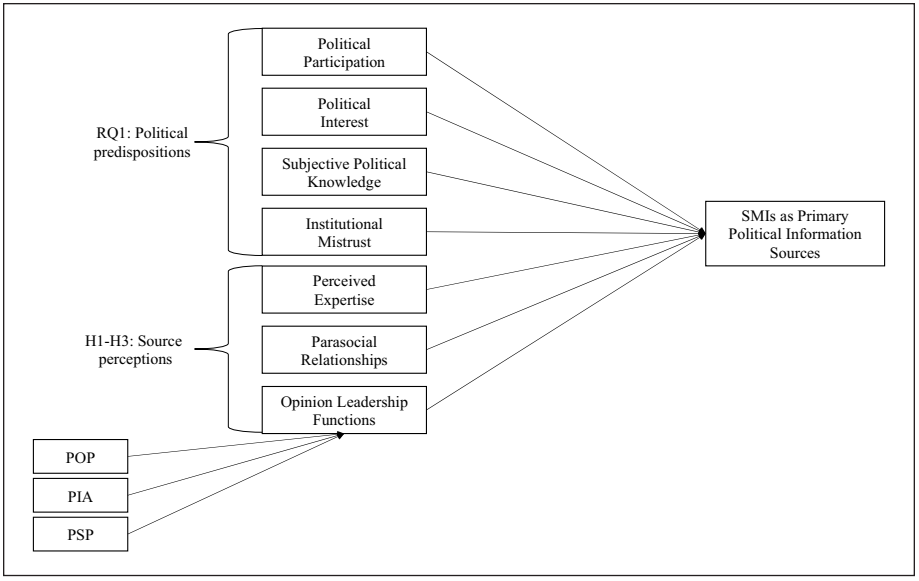

Figure 1. Theorized Model.

evidently not specific to a single country (Newman et al. 2023)—in a comparative manner to draw broader conclusions across contexts (Esser 2013). In this study, our aim was to identify characteristics and source perceptions of young people which could explain reliance on SMIs as an important information source across countries. We opted for a comparative design to be able to evaluate whether findings in relation to these factors would hold in more than a single given context, which would indicate higher generalizability of results (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017). We relied on a most similar case design (Esser 2013) and selected Germany as a case for a vibrant political influencer culture (Allgaier 2020; Wunderlich et al. 2022). Belgium offers a comparable context for two central reasons: First, social media news use among youth is analogous in both countries, with roughly one in three German and Belgian young adults noting social media as their most important channel of news.[2] Second, SMIs are popular in Germany and Belgium alike, with 81 percent of youth in Germany and 87 percent of youth in Belgium following at least one SMI.[3]

In both countries, inclusion criteria were providing informed consent, active use of at least one social medium, and age between 16 and 22, an age group described in previous research as young people/youth (Evers et al. 2013; Peter and Muth 2023). At this life stage, people "transition from late adolescence to early adulthood" (Kahne et al. 2012: 493), develop their political identity and are thus vulnerable to outside influence—which highlights the importance of focusing on this age group in this study. For both studies, we obtained approval from the ethical internal review board of KU Leuven (projects G-2022-4768-R2(MIN) and G-2022-6123-R4(AMD)).

Sample

Participants were recruited via independent and private survey companies (*TGM Research* in Germany, *Dynata* in Belgium). We collected $N = 559$ cases in Germany in April 2022, and $N = 495$ cases in Belgium in March 2023. Participants were aged between 16 and 22 ($M_{Germany} = 19.75$, $SD_{Germany} = 1.73$; $M_{Belgium} = 19.80$, $SD_{Belgium} = 1.89$). In both countries, 50 percent of participants identified as men, 49 percent of respondents identified as women and the remaining participants as non-binary/other. Overall, the samples matched the gender quota in these age groups in both countries.

Both samples were educationally diverse: In Germany, 36.6 percent were in lower or middle secondary, 21.2 percent in higher secondary, 22.5 percent in lower or medium tertiary (e.g., vocational school), 12 percent in higher tertiary (i.e., university) education and 7.5 percent in other forms of education. In Belgium, 8.3 percent of participants indicated primary school, 52.3 percent high school, 5.3 percent a diploma from a technical college, 23.6 percent a bachelor's degree and 9.5 percent a master's or PhD degree as their highest obtained level of education.

Procedure

After asking for informed consent and sociodemographic indicators, we provided participants with a definition of SMIs, described as "regular people who become famous via social media" and who "post about, for example, gaming, lifestyle, beauty, or fitness." They were then asked to think about an SMI whom they liked, who had at least once addressed politics[4] and was active on any social media platform (such as YouTube or Instagram). We then assessed source perceptions and the dependent variable (i.e., use of SMI as a primary source of political information) in relation to this SMI. Last, we assessed political predispositions (e.g., political interest). Only participants who were able to name an SMI (59%, $N_{Total} = 626$; $N_{Germany} = 383$, $N_{Belgium} = 243$) were included in the analytical sample (Supplemental Information File A1 summarizes descriptive statistics), since important variables could only be reliably measured if participants had a specific SMI in mind (Tsiotsou 2015).

Measures

In the following, we report all statistics for the analytical sample ($N = 626$). Full item wordings, factor loadings, the dataset, and R-script can be found on OSF: https://osf.io/uvp6e/. Correlations between constructs within the analytical sample are displayed in the Supplemental Information File (Table A1). Items were measured on 7-point Likert scales (e.g., ranging from 1 fully disagree to 7 fully agree).

Political Predispositions. Based on Vissers and Stolle (2014), *political participation* ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.55$, $\alpha = 0.93$) was measured using 10 items by asking participants about their political activities in the previous 3 months (e.g., "I have contacted a politician or party offline"). *Political interest* ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.79$) was gauged with one

item asking how interested participants are in political subjects and political affairs. *Subjective political knowledge* ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.39$, $\alpha = 0.86$) was assessed using five items (e.g., "I could explain to others what distinguishes a democracy from a dictatorship," Reinemann et al. 2019). Last, *institutional mistrust* ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.42$, $\alpha = 0.79$) was measured using three items (e.g., "I have no trust in my country's media reporting," Rieger and He-Ulbricht 2020).

Source Perceptions. All source perceptions were measured in relation to an SMI whom participants liked and who had at least once before addressed politics. We measured the *perceived expertise* of the SMI ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.54$, $\alpha = 0.88$) using four items (e.g., "I feel the source knows a lot about politics," Lou and Kim 2019). We assessed *parasocial relationships* with the SMI ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.45$, $\alpha = 0.88$) with six items (e.g., "The SMI makes me feel comfortable, like being with a friend," Rubin et al. 1985). Measures for the *perceived opinion leadership functions* were originally created by the authors and validated in another study. *Perceived orientation for participation* (*POP,* $M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.49$, $\alpha = 0.87$) was measured using five (e.g., "The SMI points out how one can participate politically"), *perceived interest arousal* (*PIA,* $M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.41$, $\alpha = 0.78$) using three (e.g., "The SMI draws attention to specific political topics")[5] and *perceived simplification of politics* (*PSP,* $M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.52$, $\alpha = 0.90$) using six items (e.g., "The SMI makes political topics more understandable").

Dependent Variable. The measure for the *use of SMIs as primary sources of political information* ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.69$, $\alpha = 0.88$) was based on three items (e.g., "I get most of my information about political issues from this SMI") and inspired by Schmuck and Harff (2023).

Data Analysis

We used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation in the R-package *lavaan* (Rosseel 2012). We entered political participation, subjective political knowledge, parasocial relationships, perceived expertise, institutional mistrust, and the dependent variable as latent variables into the model. We added the three opinion leadership functions—POP, PIA and PSP—as first-order dimensions, which loaded on the latent higher-order construct parasocial opinion leadership functions. A confirmatory factor analysis to validate the factor structure of this construct revealed a good model fit in both countries (see Supplemental Information File A3). Political interest was entered as a manifest variable based on a single indicator.

We included gender, age, country (with Germany as reference group), social media use, and use of online news media for political information as covariates to the SEM (all manifest variables). Gender was dummy-coded (women/other) with men-identifying participants as the reference group. We measured social media use using a summative index of five variables measured on 7-point scale (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok,

YouTube, Snapchat, $M = 22.71$, $SD = 6.04$) and use of online news media for political information on a 7-point scale ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.89$).

To detect possible differences in relationships between countries, we conducted a multi-group analysis in *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012). We chose an alpha level of .05 to determine the significance of the associations. We demonstrated configural, metric, and scalar measurement invariance across countries (see Supplemental Information File, A4).

Results

Our SEM revealed an acceptable model fit, $\chi^2/df = 2.12$, CFI = 0.920, TLI = 0.915, RMSEA = 0.042, 90% CI [0.040, 0.045].

RQ1 asked which political predispositions relate to the use of SMIs as a primary source for political information. Findings revealed significant positive associations of higher political participation ($b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$) and lower subjective political knowledge ($b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = -0.09$, $p = .035$) with the use of SMIs as primary sources for political information. Political interest ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.03$, $\beta = 0.03$, $p = .462$) and institutional mistrust ($b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.04$, $\beta = 0.05$, $p = .212$) were unrelated to the dependent variable.

H1 contended that expertise would be positively related to the importance of SMIs as a political information source, which was confirmed ($b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = 0.21$, $p = .011$). H2 posited that opinion leadership functions would be significantly positively related to the use of SMIs as primary sources for political information, which was supported ($b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = 0.27$, $p = .001$). Last, H3 argued that there would be a link between experiences of parasocial relationship with SMIs and heavy reliance on them for political information, which was also supported ($b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = 0.17$, $p < .001$).

Among the covariates, we found that participants identifying as men tended to be more likely to use SMIs as a primary political information source than those identifying as women ($b = -0.31$, $SE = 0.09$, $\beta = 0.11$, $p < .001$) or non-binary ($b = -0.75$, $SE = 0.36$, $\beta = -0.06$, $p = .039$).[6] Age ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $\beta = 0.04$, $p = .236$). Social media use ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $\beta = 0.03$, $p = .300$) and use of online news media for political information ($b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $\beta = -0.06$, $p = .061$) were unrelated to primary reliance on SMIs for political information.

Last, Germans were more likely to use SMIs as a primary political information source than Belgians ($b = -0.45$, $SE = 0.10$, $\beta = -0.15$, $p < .001$). In total, the model explained 65 percent of the variance of using SMIs as a primary political information source (see also Figure 2 and Table A2 in the Supplemental Information File).

Multi-group Analysis

Subsequently, we ran a multi-group analysis to determine country-specific differences, which showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.70$, CFI = 0.907, TLI = 0.901, RMSEA = 0.047, 90% CI [0.045, 0.050]). In Germany, the significance and direction of the relationships of the main model remained largely unchanged (results in Table 1). However, expertise

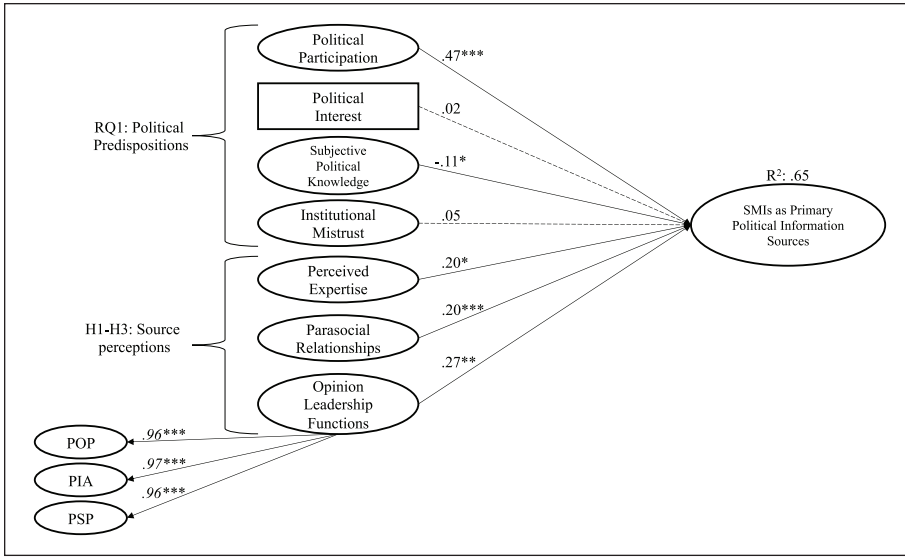

Figure 2. Structural equation model with results.
Note. Control variables not included here for clarity. Coefficients in italics represent factor loadings.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 1. Multi-group Analysis With Use of SMIs as Primary Political Information Sources as the Dependent Variable, $N = 626$.

	SMIs as primary political information sources					
	Germany ($N = 383$)			Belgium ($N = 243$)		
Predictor	*b*	*SE*	β	*b*	*SE*	β
Female gender (Male (0) vs. Female (1))	−0.28*	0.11	−0.11	−0.34*	0.15	−0.11
Non-binary (Male (0) vs. Other Gender (1))	−0.65	0.47	−0.06	−0.93	0.54	−0.07
Age	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.03
Political participation	0.38***	0.06	0.40	0.70***	0.11	0.48
Subjective political knowledge	−0.23**	0.07	−0.21	−0.02	0.07	−0.01
Political interest	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.02
Institutional mistrust	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.12	0.06	0.10
Perceived expertise	0.20	0.11	0.24	0.13	0.10	0.12
Opinion leadership functions	0.28*	0.13	0.31	0.27*	0.11	0.24
Parasocial relationships	0.27***	0.07	0.28	0.11	0.07	0.09
Online news media use	−0.02	0.03	−0.03	−0.06	0.04	−0.07
Social media use	−0.02	0.05	−0.02	0.11	0.06	0.08
R^2		0.60			0.69	

Note. Multi-group model fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.70$, CFI = 0.907, TLI = 0.901, RMSEA = 0.047, 90% CI [0.045, 0.050].
SMIs = Social media influencers.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

was not significantly associated with choosing SMIs as an important political information source ($b=0.20$, $SE=0.11$, $\beta=0.24$, $p=.073$). This was also the case in Belgium ($b=0.13$, $SE=0.10$, $\beta=0.12$, $p=.123$), where parasocial relationships ($b=0.11$, $SE=0.07$, $\beta=0.09$, $p=.128$) and subjective political knowledge ($b=-0.02$, $SE=0.07$, $\beta=-0.01$, $p=.821$) were also not significantly related to the dependent variable.

Discussion

The reasons for following SMIs may in many cases be unrelated to politics (Croes and Bartels 2021). However, SMIs' importance as political information sources for youth has increased, with these personalities nowadays ranking among the top sources for news on many social media (Newman et al. 2023). This cross-country study pioneers in providing insights into groups of young people who may be especially likely to turn to SMIs' political content—and also indicates factors potentially motivating this source liking—by exploring which *political predispositions* and *source perceptions* among youth relate to the selection of SMIs as primary political news sources.

First, we found in both countries that higher political participation was related to selecting SMIs as a primary political information source. This finding generally links with the notion that young people with higher participation levels are likely to expose themselves to political information (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020). Furthermore, SMIs' political content is mobilizing in nature (Huber et al. 2022) and may be particularly sought out by politically active young people (Schwaiger et al. 2022). A focus on this type of communication may be unique among political actors, because it requires a relative deviation from neutral coverage of politics—a tendency more prevalent in SMIs' content than in traditional news media (Zimmermann et al. 2022). However, it is also possible that reliance on SMIs for political information determines political participation, which would be in support of a mobilizing effect of SMI news use (Kim et al. 2017).

Meanwhile, political interest did not explain additional variance of turning to SMIs as a primary source of political information beyond political participation, which, due to its behavioral component, may be a stronger predictor than political interest. Politically interested youth may rather consume other political information—potentially on TV or in newspapers—thereby not necessarily using SMIs as their *primary* source of political information (Boulianne 2011; Strömbäck and Shehata 2019). The non-significant association between political interest and our dependent variable may also be a function of news-finds-me perceptions among young people with no particularly strong interest in politics, who trust to receive political information through curation by SMIs (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019; Sawalha and Karnowski 2022).

Additionally, youth with a distrustful attitude toward legacy media were generally not more intent to select SMIs as political information sources. However, online news use also did not correlate with using SMIs as primary political information sources. Together, these findings suggest that SMI-based news use in Germany and Belgium is neither particularly common among young people who mistrust more conventional sources of information (Schmuck and Harff 2023) nor especially popular among those

who also draw from online news media for political information (Martin and Sharma 2022). At the same time, online news media use was also not negatively related to reliance on SMIs for political information. We therefore presume that higher reliance on political SMIs likely does not drive young people away from (additional) use of legacy media for political information.

A key finding of this study is the negative association between subjective political knowledge and primarily seeking out SMIs for political information. In other words, those young people who select SMIs for political information perceive themselves *not* to be knowledgeable about politics. However, this finding may be country-specific, as the multi-group analysis shows a significant result only for Germany. A similar relationship has been observed in another study conducted in Germany, which found that knowledge about COVID-19 was negatively related to the importance of SMIs as information sources on this topic (Schmuck and Harff 2023). In contrast, in Belgium, young people with low perceived political knowledge may generally have low news usage or even intentionally choose to avoid news (Damstra et al. 2023). Possibly, SMIs relevant in this country may also not yet offer political content that appeals to this group of young people, while, in Germany, some SMIs have specialized in providing educational content (e.g., MrWissen2go). This potential content difference might also explain why SMIs are a more important information source for youth in Germany than for youth in Belgium. Given other research in the area of political communication (e.g., Moeller and de Vreese 2019), political media use is generally considered a result of more rather than less political knowledge. However, young people with low subjective political knowledge in Germany may consider conventional political information to be too complex (Toff and Nielsen 2022) and primarily consult SMIs for political information instead, whose content may better suit their level of understanding (Schmuck et al. 2022). This assumption is further supported by the link we find between perceptions of opinion leadership functions, that notably include perceived simplification of politics, and the use of SMIs as a primary political information source. Generally, this positive relationship suggests that when SMIs are regarded as able to respond to young people's need for easy-to-understand, mobilizing and engaging political content (Schwaiger et al. 2022), they are preferred as a political communication source. In contrast, youth who feel politically unknowledgeable may also be less likely to detect unfounded or false claims presented by SMIs, which entails possible formation of misbeliefs among their followers (Harff et al. 2022). Given that our cross-sectional data does not allow us to draw inferences about the direction of the associations found here, it is also possible that using SMIs as primary information sources contributes to young people's low perceived political knowledge, which, like the potential of reinforcing spirals (Slater 2007), should be addressed in future studies using longitudinal designs.

Besides opinion leadership functions, we also investigated the 'other half' of parasocial opinion leadership (Stehr et al. 2015)—that is, parasocial relationships—as a variable related to the use of SMIs as a primary source of political information. We discovered that German youth who maintain friendship-like ties with SMIs are likely to consider them important news sources.[7] This result accentuates the role that

relational aspects may also play in the selection of information sources (Rubin and Step 2000) and that bonds developed with SMIs may suffice as a motivation for youth to draw political information mainly from this source type (Wunderlich et al. 2022). This finding is particularly insightful against the background of the nonsignificant association between political interest and primary reliance on SMIs for political information. Irrespective of young people's political interest, parasocial relationships may lead youth to appraise SMIs' political messages as relevant (Harff 2022)—especially in cases of incidental exposure. At the same time, since youth do not value expertise too much as a base of judgment for their selection of SMIs for political information—expertise was not significantly related to reliance on SMIs for political information in the multi-group analysis—they may expose themselves to news from individuals who may not give them well-founded advice.

Regarding our covariates, we found that identifying as male was significantly positively related to selecting SMIs as primary political information sources, corroborating work on COVID-19-related informational SMI use (Schmuck and Harff 2023). This finding further links with research showing that young men consider advice from YouTubers more vital for political learning than young women (Zimmermann et al. 2022). This result may be explained by a generally higher tendency among men to use social media for information (Krasnova et al. 2017) or differences in topical foci between female and male SMIs who may attract same-gender audiences (Gonzalez et al. 2023).

Taken together, our study demonstrates for the first time that certain factors like male gender, being politically engaged and ascribing opinion leader functions to SMIs make youth more likely to use them as a main source of political information. These results are stable in two different countries, indicating the potential generalizability of the findings to other Western European countries in which social media news use and popularity of SMIs are similarly high. Other factors such as parasocial relationships or subjective political knowledge have varying influence depending on contextual factors, suggesting that the characteristics of young audiences who rely on SMIs for political information may also partially differ between countries.

Limitations and Future Research

This study also has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional data does not allow us to determine the directionality of the relationships. However, this may be less of a restraint in this case, since we aimed to inform about groups of youth who may pay particular attention to political SMIs. Nonetheless, follow-up longitudinal studies can shed light on the temporal order and potential transactional nature of the presented relationships. For example, relying on SMIs for political information may reinforce participation over time (Kim et al. 2017).

Additionally, although our samples represented the country quota in terms of gender and were educationally diverse, they were likely not entirely representative for this age group in Germany and Belgium. Future research should therefore consider other and more sociodemographic variables (e.g., ethnicity) that may explain if and why

SMIs are used as primary information source for political information. For instance, since minority groups are often underrepresented in traditional news (Eberl et al. 2018), SMIs may present a viable alternative information source for them.

The size of the analytical sample was considerably smaller than the overall sample. However, power analysis for SEM ($1–\beta = 0.90$, $\alpha = 0.05$) suggested that a sample size of $N = 566$, which we exceeded, would already be sufficient to find small to medium effects (Soper 2023). Meanwhile, sample sizes in the individual countries were large enough to find medium-sized effects (Soper 2023)—which may explain some of the null findings in Belgium. While we may not have been able to detect small effects in the multi-group analysis, we were able to identify the most important dispositional factors relating to the use of SMIs as a primary source of political information in both countries. Moreover, we are confident that calculations with our analytical sample are more reliable than analyses based on the overall sample, which includes respondents who were unable to think of a political SMI.

We also note that the dependent variable was measured in relation to participants' favorite SMI who (occasionally) addresses politics. Thus, this measure may not entirely account for how important SMIs are generally in each participants' news diet. However, only asking participants to choose a specific political SMI, which served as a mental anchor (Tsiotsou 2015), allowed us to reliably measure perceptions of the source and reduced overreporting. Yet, we acknowledge that SMIs named by participants may differ from each other in terms of their content focus or level of professionalization. Cluster analyses which group political SMIs based on their content characteristics may be useful to understand why young people use specific SMIs for political information (Henn 2023). Diversity among SMIs may also explain country differences which we examined. In this context, comparative content analyses might be useful to explain why, for example, subjective political knowledge is only negatively connected to reliance on SMIs for political information in Germany—although this difference may also be explained by the type of knowledge we assessed here (Amsalem and Zoizner 2023).

Last, although our study is the first to present comparative research on audiences of political SMIs, it is based on a most-similar case design. Future research should include non-Western and non-democratic countries, as predictors such as institutional mistrust may be highly dependent on the political system, and ideally compare relationships between variables between more than two countries (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017).

Implications

Despite these limitations, this study has important implications. Our comparative perspective demonstrates the need of cross-country research in the realm of political SMIs (Esser 2013). In both countries, male, politically active young people and those who perceive SMIs as opinion leaders are more likely to rely on SMIs as a primary information source. These individuals may also be more susceptible to influence from SMIs, since factors explaining media use can also moderate relationships between media use and different response states (Valkenburg and Peter 2013).

The bonds that young people develop with SMIs may both have positive and negative consequences, for which awareness should be raised in schools. While parasocial relationships can help connect those young people with politics who otherwise may not gain access to it, it also renders them more vulnerable to their influence: Consequently, youth may not be able to recognize ulterior motives from SMIs or low quality of their political information (Hwang and Zhang 2018). At the same time, relationships developed with personae can increase reliance on them as information sources—at least in some contexts. This finding is relevant for journalists, who can potentially increase their popularity among young audiences by adopting a more personal presentation style in their communication (Atad and Cohen 2023).

Finally, our findings in relation to the political predispositions suggest that young people who are not particularly interested in politics or think they know little about basic political principles can be reached via SMIs. This result has implications for governmental actors, who should collaborate with SMIs to contact potentially uninformed groups of young people and reduce knowledge gaps in society (Moeller and de Vreese 2019).

Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF). The link is provided in the document.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by two grants, an FWO research project (G0B7822N) awarded to Desiree Schmuck and a FWO aspirant fellowship (11F6423N) awarded to Darian Harff.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the ethical internal review board of KU Leuven (projects G-2022-4768-R2(MIN) and G-2022-6123-R4(AMD)).

ORCID iDs

Darian Harff https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4354-2198

Desiree Schmuck https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9492-6052

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In Belgium, only the Dutch-speaking population was included accounting for approximately 60 percent of the population.
2. See https://www.lfk.de/fileadmin/PDFs/Publikationen/Studien/Vielfaltsbericht-der-Medienanstalten/vielfaltsbericht-2022.pdf and https://www.mediawijs.be/nl/artikels/digital-news-report-2020-hoe-beleven-vlamingen-het-nieuws.
3. See https://www.bitkom.org/Presse/Presseinformation/Haelfte-folgt-Influencern and http://bitly.ws/LcpA.
4. Political topics were defined as issues "surrounding traditional political processes (e.g., elections) and actors (e.g., parties), but also topics generally relevant to public debate (e.g., women's rights or climate protection)."
5. In Belgium, we used slightly different items for this variable, because not exactly the same items as in Germany were included in the survey (see Supplemental Information File A2).
6. This result must be interpreted with care, due to the low number of participants who identified as non-binary in our sample.
7. Multi-group analysis showed a tendency that Belgian youth who hold close relationships with SMIs may also consider them more important information sources, but this relationship was not significant, potentially due to comparably low power (see limitations).

References

Allgaier, J. 2020. "Rezo and German Climate Change Policy: The Influence of Networked Expertise on YouTube and Beyond." *Media and Communication* 8(2):376–86. doi:10.17645/mac.v8i2.2862.

Amsalem, E., and A. Zoizner. 2023. "Do People Learn About Politics on Social Media? A Meta-Analysis of 76 Studies." *Journal of Communication* 73(1):3–13. doi:10.1093/joc/jqac034.

Andersen, K., A. Shehata, and D. Andersson. 2023. "Alternative News Orientation and Trust in Mainstream Media: A Longitudinal Audience Perspective." *Digital Journalism* 11(5):833–52. doi:10.1080/21670811.2021.1986412.

Atad, E., and J. Cohen. 2023. "Look Me in the Eyes: How Direct Address Affects Viewers' Experience of Parasocial Interaction and Credibility?" *Journalism*. Advance Online Publication. doi:10.1177/14648849231169886.

Boulianne, S. 2011. "Stimulating or Reinforcing Political Interest: Using Panel Data to Examine Reciprocal Effects Between News Media and Political Interest." *Political Communication* 28(2):147–62. doi:10.1080/10584609.2010.540305.

Boulianne, S., and Y. Theocharis. 2020. "Young People, Digital Media, and Engagement: A Meta-Analysis Of Research." *Social Science Computer Review* 38(2):111–27. doi:10.1177/0894439318814190.

Brooks, G., J. Drenten, and M. J. Piskorski. 2021. "Influencer Celebrification: How Social Media Influencers Acquire Celebrity Capital." *Journal of Advertising* 50(5):528–47. doi:10.1080/00913367.2021.1977737.

Croes, E., and J. Bartels. 2021. "Young Adults' Motivations for Following Social Influencers and Their Relationship to Identification and Buying Behavior." *Computers in Human Behavior* 124:Article 106910. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2021.106910.

Dahlgren, P. M. 2019. "Selective Exposure to Public Service News over Thirty Years: The Role of Ideological Leaning, Party Support, and Political Interest." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24(3):293–314. doi:10.1177/1940161219836223.

Damstra, A., R. Vliegenthart, H. Boomgaarden, K. Glüer, E. Lindgren, J. Strömbäck, and Y. Tsfati. 2023. "Knowledge and the News: An Investigation of the Relation Between News Use, News Avoidance, and the Presence of (Mis)beliefs." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 28(1):29–48. doi:10.1177/19401612211031457.

Dekoninck, H., and D. Schmuck. 2022. "The Mobilizing Power of Influencers for Pro-Environmental Behavior Intentions and Political Participation." *Environmental Communication* 16(4):458–72. doi:10.1080/17524032.2022.2027801.

Dekoninck, H., E. Van Houtven, and D. Schmuck. 2023. "Inspiring G(re)en Z: Unraveling (Para)Social Bonds With Influencers and Perceptions of Their Environmental Content." *Environmental Communication* 17(7):701–19. doi:10.1080/17524032.2023.2237693.

Eberl, J. M., C. E. Meltzer, T. Heidenreich, B. Herrero, N. Theorin, F. Lind, R. Berganza, H. G. Boomgaarden, C. Schemer, and J. Strömbäck. 2018. "The European Media Discourse on Immigration and its Effects: A Literature Review." *Annals of the International Communication Association* 42(3):207–23. doi:10.1080/23808985.2018.1497452.

Erdogan, B. Z. 1999. "Celebrity Endorsement: A Literature Review." *Journal of Marketing Management* 15(4):291–314. doi:10.1362/026725799784870379.

Esser, F. 2013. "The Emerging Paradigm of Comparative Communication Enquiry: Advancing Cross-National Research in Times of Globalization." *International Journal of Communication* 7:113–28. http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/issue/view/9

Esser, F., and R. Vliegenthart. 2017. "Comparative Research Methods." In *International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. J. Matthes, 1–22. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Eveland, W. P. Jr., A. F. Hayes, D. V. Shah, and N. Kwak. 2005. "Understanding the Relationship Between Communication and Political Knowledge: A Model Comparison Approach Using Panel Data." *Political Communication* 22(4): 423–46. doi:10.1080/10584600500311345.

Evers, C. W., K. Albury, P. Byron, and K. Crawford. 2013. "Young People, Social Media, Social Network Sites and Sexual Health Communication in Australia." *International Journal of Communication* 7:263–80. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2013-05/apo-nid34135.pdf

Fischer, T. S., C. Kolo, and C. Mothes. 2022. "Political Influencers on YouTube: Business Strategies and Content Characteristics." *Media and Communication* 10(1):259–71. doi:10.17645/mac.v10i1.4767.

Gil de Zúñiga, H., and T. Diehl. 2019. "News Finds Me Perception and Democracy: Effects on Political Knowledge, Political Interest, and Voting." *New Media & Society* 21(6):1253–71. doi:10.1177/1461444818817548.

Gonzalez, A., D. Schmuck, and L. Vandenbosch. 2023. "Posting and Framing Politics: A Content Analysis of Celebrities', Athletes', and Influencers' Instagram Political Content." *Information, Communication & Society*. Advance Online Publication. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2023.2285495.

Graham, T. 2008. "Needles in a Haystack: A New Approach for Identifying and Assessing Political Talk in Nonpolitical Discussion Forums." *Javnost-The Public* 15(2):17–36. doi:10.1080/13183222.2008.11008968.

Harff, D. 2022. "Political Content from Virtual 'Friends': How Influencers Arouse Young Women's Political Interest via Parasocial Relationships." *The Journal of Social Media in Society* 11(2):97–121. https://www.thejsms.org/index.php/JSMS/article/view/1053

Harff, D., C. Bollen, and D. Schmuck. 2022. "Responses to Social Media Influencers' Misinformation About COVID-19: A Pre-Registered Multiple-Exposure Experiment." *Media Psychology* 25(6):831–50. doi:10.1080/15213269.2022.2080711.

Harff, D., and D. Schmuck. 2023. "Influencers as Empowering Agents? Following Political Influencers, Internal Political Efficacy and Participation Among Youth." *Political Communication* 40(2):147–72. doi:10.1080/10584609.2023.2166631.

Heiss, R., J. Knoll, and J. Matthes. 2020. "Pathways to Political (Dis-)Engagement: Motivations Behind Social Media Use and the Role of Incidental and Intentional Exposure Modes in Adolescents' Political Engagement." *Communications* 45(s1):671–93. doi:10.1515/commun-2019-2054.

Henn, H. 2023. "Von Laien und Profis: Typen politischer Influencerkommunikation auf YouTube [About Amateurs and Professionals: Types of Political Influencer Communication on YouTube]." *Studies in Communication and Media* 12(2–3):242–75. doi:10.5771/2192-4007-2023-2-3-242.

Horton, D., and R. R. Wohl 1956. "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance." *Psychiatry* 19(3):215–29. doi:10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049.

Huber, B., Lepenies, R., Quesada Baena, L., and Allgaier, J. 2022. "Beyond Individualized Responsibility Attributions? How Eco Influencers Communicate Sustainability on TikTok." *Environmental Communication*. Advance Online Publication. doi:10.1080/17524032.2022.2131868.

Hwang, K., and Q. Zhang. 2018. "Influence of Parasocial Relationship Between Digital Celebrities and Their Followers on Followers' Purchase and Electronic Word-Of-Mouth Intentions, and Persuasion Knowledge." *Computers in Human Behavior* 87:155–73. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.029.

Kahne, J., E. Middaugh, N. J. Lee, and Feezell, J. T. 2012. "Youth Online Activity and Exposure to Diverse Perspectives." *New Media & Society* 14(3):492–512. doi:10.1177/1461444811420271.

Katz, E., J. G. Blumler, and M. Gurevitch. 1973. "Uses and Gratifications Research." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 37(4):509–23. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2747854.

Katz, E., and P. F. Lazarsfeld. 1955. *Personal Influence. The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Khamis, S., L. Ang, and R. Welling 2017. "Self-Branding, 'Micro-Celebrity' and the Rise of Social Media Influencers." *Celebrity Studies* 8(2):191–208. doi:10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292.

Kim, S. J. 2016. "A Repertoire Approach to Cross-Platform Media Use Behavior." *New Media & Society* 18(3):353–72. doi:10.1177/1461444814543162.

Kim, D. Y., and H. Y. Kim. 2021. "Trust Me, Trust Me Not: A Nuanced View of Influencer Marketing on Social Media." *Journal of Business Research* 134:223–32. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024.

Kim, Y., Russo, S., and Amnå, E. 2017. "The Longitudinal Relation Between Online and Offline Political Participation Among Youth at Two Different Developmental Stages." *New Media & Society* 19(6):899–917. doi:10.1177/1461444815624181.

Klimmt, C., T. Hartmann, and H. Schramm 2006. "Parasocial Interactions and Relationships." In *Psychology of Entertainment*, eds. Bryant J.,and Vorderer, P, 291–313. New York, NY: Routledge.

Knobloch-Westerwick, S. 2014. *Choice and Preference in Media Use: Advances in Selective Exposure Theory and Research*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Knobloch-Westerwick, S., A. Westerwick, and D. J. Sude 2019. "Media Choice and Selective Exposure." In *Media Effects*, eds. Oliver, M. B., Raney, A. A., and Bryant, J. C, 146–62. New York, NY: Routledge.

Krasnova, H., N. F. Veltri, N. Eling, and P. Buxmann. 2017. "Why Men and Women Continue to Use Social Networking Sites: The Role of Gender Differences." *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 26(4):261–84. doi:10.1016/j.jsis.2017.01.004.

Kruikemeier, S., and A. Shehata. 2017. "News Media Use and Political Engagement Among Adolescents: An Analysis of Virtuous Circles Using Panel Data." *Political Communication* 34(2):221–42. doi:10.1080/10584609.2016.1174760.

Lewis, R. 2020. "'This Is What The News Won't Show You': YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity." *Television & New Media* 21(2):201–17. doi:10.1177/1527476419879919.

Liebers, N., and H. Schramm. 2019. "Parasocial Interactions and Relationships with Media Characters–An Inventory of 60 Years of Research." *Communication Research Trends* 38(2):4–31. https://bitly.ws/39VHJ

Lou, C., and H. K. Kim. 2019. "Fancying the New Rich and Famous? Explicating the Roles of Influencer Content, Credibility, and Parental Mediation in Adolescents' Parasocial Relationship, Materialism, and Purchase Intentions." *Frontiers in Psychology* 10:Article 2567. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02567.

Mansbridge, J. 1999. "Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System." In *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, ed. Macedo, S., 211–39. New York, NY: Oxford UP.

Martin, J. D., and K. Sharma. 2022. "Getting News from Social Media Influencers and from Digital Legacy News Outlets and Print Legacy News Outlets in Seven Countries: The "More-And-More" Phenomenon and the New Opinion Leadership." *Newspaper Research Journal* 43(3):276–299. doi:10.1177/07395329221105507.

Moeller, J., and de Vreese, C. 2019. "Spiral of Political Learning: The Reciprocal Relationship of News Media Use and Political Knowledge Among Adolescents." *Communication Research* 46(8):1078–94. doi:10.1177/0093650215605148.

Nanz, A., and J. Matthes. 2022. "Seeing Political Information Online Incidentally. Effects of First-and Second-Level Incidental Exposure on Democratic Outcomes." *Computers in Human Behavior* 133:Article 107285. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2022.107285.

Newman, N., R. Fletcher, A. Schulz, S. Andı, C. T. Robertson, and R. K. Nielsen. 2021. "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021." In *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. https://bit.ly/3zvAuHI

Newman, N., R. Fletcher, K. Eddy, C. T. Robertson, and R. K. Nielsen. 2023. "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023." In *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. http://bitly.ws/Jfcf

Oser, J., and Boulianne, S. 2020. "Reinforcement Effects Between Digital Media Use and Political Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Repeated-Wave Panel Data." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84(1):355–65. doi:10.1093/poq/nfaa017.

Ozer, A. 2023. "Well, You're The Expert: How Signals of Source Expertise Help Mitigate Partisan Bias." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 33(1):1–21. doi:10.1080/17457289.2020.1744611.

Peter, C., and L. Muth. 2023. "Social Media Influencers' Role in Shaping Political Opinions and Actions of Young Audiences." *Media and Communication*. Advance Online Publication. doi:10.17645/mac.v11i3.6750.

Reinemann, C., A. Nienierza, N. Fawzi, C. Riesmeyer, and K. Neumann. 2019. *Jugend—Medien—Extremismus* [Youth – media – extremism]. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Rieger, M. O., and Y. He-Ulbricht. 2020. "German and Chinese Dataset on Attitudes Regarding COVID-19 Policies, Perception of the Crisis, and Belief In Conspiracy Theories." *Data in Brief*, 33:Article 106384. doi:10.1016/j.dib.2020.106384.

Rosseel, Y. 2012. "lavaan: An R Package for Structural Equation Modeling." *Journal of Statistical Software* 48(2):1–36. doi:10.18637/jss.v048.i02

Rothut, S., H. Schulze, J. Hohner, and D. Rieger. 2023. "Ambassadors of Ideology: A Conceptualization and Computational Investigation of Far-Right Influencers, Their Networking Structures, and Communication Practices." *New Media & Society*. Advance Online Publication. doi:10.1177/14614448231164409.

Rubin, A. M., E. M. Perse, and R. A. Powell. 1985. "Loneliness, Parasocial Interaction, and Local Television News Viewing." *Human Communication Research* 12(2):155–80. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1985.tb00071.x.

Rubin, A. M., and M. M. Step. 2000. "Impact of Motivation, Attraction, and Parasocial Interaction on Talk Radio Listening." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 44(4):635–54. doi:10.1207/s15506878jobem4404_7.

Ruggiero, T. E. 2000. "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century." *Mass Communication and Society* 3(1):3–37. doi:10.1207/S15327825MCS0301_02.

Sawalha, N., and V. Karnowski. 2022. "Between Reflective Evaluation and Opinion-Finds-Me–News-YouTubers' Role in Young Adults' Political Opinion-Forming Process." *Studies in Communication and Media* 11(2):186–209. doi:10.5771/2192-4007-2022-2-186.

Schmuck, D., and D. Harff. 2023. "Popular Among Distrustful Youth? Social Media Influencers' Communication About COVID-19 and Young People's Risk Perceptions and Vaccination Intentions." *Health Communication*. Advance Online Publication. doi:10.1080/10410236.2023.2286408.

Schmuck, D., M. Hirsch, A. Stevic, and J. Matthes. 2022. "Politics–Simply Explained? How Influencers Affect Youth's Perceived Simplification of Politics, Political Cynicism, and Political Interest." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27(3):738–62. doi:10.1177/19401612221088987.

Schwaiger, L., D. Vogler, and M. Eisenegger. 2022. "Change in News Access, Change in Expectations? How Young Social Media Users in Switzerland Evaluate the Functions and Quality of News." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27(3):609–28. doi:10.1177/19401612211072787.

Sehl, A., and J. Schützeneder. 2023. "Political Knowledge to Go: An Analysis of Selected Political Influencers and Their Formats in the Context of the 2021 German Federal Election." *Social Media+Society* 9(2). doi:10.1177/20563051231177916.

Skovsgaard, M., A. Shehata, and J. Strömbäck. 2016. "Opportunity Structures for Selective Exposure: Investigating Selective Exposure and Learning in Swedish Election Campaigns Using Panel Survey Data." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21(4):527–46. doi:10.1177/1940161216658157.

Slater, M. D. 2007. "Reinforcing Spirals: The Mutual Influence of Media Selectivity and Media Effects and Their Impact on Individual Behavior and Social Identity." *Communication Theory* 17(3):281–303. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00296.x.

Soler-i-Martí, R. 2015. "Youth Political Involvement Update: Measuring the Role of Cause-Oriented Political Interest in Young People's Activism." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18(3):396–416. doi:10.1080/13676261.2014.963538.

Soper, D. S. 2023. *A-Priori Sample Size Calculator for Structural Equation Models* [Software]. https://www.danielsoper.com/statcalc

Stehr, P., P. Rössler, L. Leissner, and F. Schönhardt. 2015. "Parasocial Opinion Leadership Media Personalities' Influence within Parasocial Relations: Theoretical Conceptualization and Preliminary Results." *Journal of Communication* 9:982–1001. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/2717

Strömbäck, J., and A. Shehata. 2019. "The Reciprocal Effects Between Political Interest and TV News Revisited: Evidence from Four Panel Surveys." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 96(2):473–96. doi:10.1177/1077699018793998.

Suuronen, A., H. Reinikainen, N. S. Borchers, and K. Strandberg. 2022. "When Social Media Influencers Go Political: An Exploratory Analysis on the Emergence of Political Topics Among Finnish Influencers." *Javnost-The Public* 29(2):301–17. doi:10.1080/13183222.2021.1983367.

Thorson, K., and C. Wells. 2016. "Curated Flows: A Framework for Mapping Media Exposure in the Digital Age." *Communication Theory* 26(3):309–28. doi:10.1111/comt.12087.

Toff, B., and R. K. Nielsen. 2022. "How News Feels: Anticipated Anxiety as a Factor in News Avoidance and a Barrier to Political Engagement." *Political Communication*. Advance Online Publication. doi:10.1080/10584609.2022.2123073.

Tsiotsou, R. H. 2015. "The Role of Social and Parasocial Relationships on Social Networking Sites Loyalty." *Computers in Human Behavior* 48:401–14. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.01.064.

Tsourela, M. 2023. "Successive Intertwining of Young Consumers' Reliance on Social Media Influencers." *Communications*. Advance Online Publication. doi:10.1515/commun-2022-0015.

Valente, T. W., and P. Pumpuang. 2007. "Identifying Opinion Leaders to Promote Behavior Change." *Health Education & Behavior* 34(6):881–96. doi:10.1177/1090198106297855.

Valkenburg, P. M., and J. Peter. 2013. "The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model." *Journal of Communication* 63(2):221–43. doi:10.1111/jcom.12024

Van der Meer, T. G., M. Hameleers, and A. C. Kroon. 2020. "Crafting our Own Biased Media Diets: The Effects of Confirmation, Source, and Negativity Bias on Selective Attendance to Online News." *Mass Communication and Society* 23(6):937–67. doi:10.1080/15205436.2020.1782432.

van Deth, J. W. 2014. "A Conceptual Map of Political Participation." *Acta Politica* 49:349–67. doi:10.1057/ap.2014.6.

Vissers, S., and D. Stolle. 2014. "The Internet and New Modes of Political Participation: Online Versus Offline Participation." *Information, Communication & Society* 17(8):937–55. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2013.867356.

Weiss, J. 2020. "What Is Youth Political Participation? Literature Review on Youth Political Participation and Political Attitudes." *Frontiers in Political Science* 2(1). doi:10.3389/fpos.2020.00001.

Westerwick, A., B. K. Johnson, and S. Knobloch-Westerwick. 2017. "Confirmation Biases in Selective Exposure to Political Online Information: Source Bias vs. Content Bias." *Communication Monographs* 84(3):343–364. doi:10.1080/03637751.2016.1272761.

Winter, S., and N. C. Krämer. 2014. "A Question of Credibility–Effects of Source Cues and Recommendations on Information Selection on News Sites and Blogs." *Communications* 39(4):435–56. doi:10.1515/commun-2014-0020.

Wolfsfeld, G., M. Yarchi, and T. Samuel-Azran. 2016. "Political Information Repertoires and Political Participation." *New Media & Society* 18(9):2096–115. doi:10.1177/1461444815580413.

Wunderlich, L., S. Hölig, and U. Hasebrink. 2022. "Does Journalism Still Matter? The Role of Journalistic and Non-Journalistic Sources in Young Peoples' News Related Practices." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27(3):569–88. doi:10.1177/19401612211072547.

Zimmermann, D., C. Noll, L. Gräßer, K.-U. Hugger, L. M. Braun, T. Nowak, and K. Kaspar. 2022. "Influencers on YouTube: A Quantitative Study on Young People's Use and Perception of Videos About Political and Societal Topics." *Current Psychology* 41: 6808–6824. doi:10.1007/s12144-020-01164-7.

Author Biographies

Darian Harff is a PhD student at KU Leuven. His main research interests are political communication and media psychology, with a special focus on social media influencers, their political content and their impact on young recipients' political engagement and involvement.

Desiree Schmuck (PhD, University of Vienna) is professor of communication science at the Department of Communication of the University of Vienna. She is also affiliated with the School for Mass Communication Research at KU Leuven. Her main research interests focus on the consequences of media change and media innovation for individuals, social relations and society at large.