cogitatio

Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 3, Pages 164–174
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6750

Article

Social Media Influencers' Role in Shaping Political Opinions and Actions of Young Audiences

Christina Peter [1] and Luisa Muth [2,*]

[1] Department of Media and Communications, University of Klagenfurt, Austria
[2] Department of Political and Social Sciences, FU Berlin, Germany

* Corresponding author (luisa.muth@fu-berlin.de)

Submitted: 30 January 2023 | Accepted: 3 May 2023 | Published: 3 August 2023

Abstract
Social media influencers have become an indispensable part of social media, informing audiences, especially young ones, about various topics, such as beauty, lifestyle, or food. Recently more political influencers have emerged, and regular influencers have increasingly taken positions on political and societally relevant topics, including climate justice and gender equality. Yet, empirical evidence on how both types of influencers are perceived by their audiences and how they might impact young audiences regarding political action is scarce. Hence, the present study set out to investigate adolescents' and young adults' use and perception of social media influencers in the context of political information dissemination, opinion formation, and mobilization. With the help of qualitative interviews of young people in Germany (16–22 years), we show that while the mainstream media seems to still be the primary source of political information, influencers focused on politics are increasingly used to make sense of this information. The presumed impact ranges from amplifying the effects of existing opinions to opinion formation and changes in voting intentions based on the assessment provided by the influencer. Regular influencers who talk about political topics occasionally are not perceived as reliable sources of political information.

Keywords
digital opinion leadership; incidental news exposure; political influencers; political mobilization; social media influencers

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Social Media's Role in Political and Societal Mobilization" edited by Jörg Haßler (LMU Munich), Melanie Magin (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), and Uta Russmann (University of Innsbruck).

1. Introduction

So-called influencers have become an indispensable part of social media, especially in the lives of adolescents and young adults. These communicators use online platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, to inform their followers about various topics and to promote products through partnerships with companies. Previous research on influencers has mainly been concerned with marketing (e.g., Durau, 2022; Enke & Borchers, 2019) and has occasionally examined the spread of problematic beauty ideals (e.g., Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2021; Naderer et al., 2022). However, over the last couple of years, a new trend of political activism has emerged. On the one hand, an increasing number of political and/or social activist influencers have appeared, who focus on political and societally relevant topics and attempt to initiate social change (Duckwitz, 2019). On the other hand, more "regular" influencers are taking a stand on political issues, such as gender equality, climate justice, and sustainable lifestyles (Byrne et al., 2017; Chwialkowska, 2019), even though this is not their primary focus. The potential of social media influencers (SMIs) as opinion leaders is increasingly recognized by political actors, both in the context of elections as well as by single politicians seeking to increase their popularity among a younger audience. Influencers' popularity, reach, and impact combined with the youth's demand for

political information that is age-appropriate, entertaining, and comprehensible makes SMIs an important, yet understudied research topic in political communication.

Hence, the present study set out to investigate the role of influencers in shaping the political opinions of adolescents and young adults and to explore potential mobilizing effects, especially in the context of elections. In particular, we were interested in how often adolescents and young adults come across political information in the context of influencer communication and how they perceived influencers' impact on themselves and others in this context. Based on a theoretical framework that draws from digital opinion leadership and incidental news exposure, we conducted 12 qualitative interviews with adolescents and young adults (16 to 22 years) in Germany regarding their use and perception of influencers' content in the context of political information dissemination, opinion formation, and mobilization.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social media have become an integral part of people's everyday lives. In 2022, around 4.62 billion people were estimated to use social media, which is more than half of the world's population (We Are Social et al., 2023). Especially in younger age groups, the use of social media, in general, and social networks, in particular, is widespread. In Germany, where this study was conducted, more than 98% of adolescents use social media, with social networks such as YouTube and Instagram being among the most popular (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2022). When it comes to information about politics and news, adolescents predominantly turn to online and social media to find information. When asked how they inform themselves about daily news topics online, search engines (39%), Instagram (30%), and TikTok (25%) were the three top answers, with news apps (16%) and online newspapers (15%) only being of secondary importance as sources (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2022). In a similar study, Hasebrink et al. (2021) found that non-journalistic sources like influencers play a slightly more important role in adolescents' informational media use than journalistic sources, while the opposite is true for young adults. In addition, even though both age groups judge journalistic sources to be more important for opinion formation than non-journalistic ones, the latter also seems to play a substantial role, especially for younger audiences that are not politically interested. In this context, we set out to explore how adolescents and young adults come across news and political information provided by different types of SMIs and how this might relate to political action.

2.1. Social Media Influencers as Digital Opinion Leaders

Social networks enable all kinds of users to create and share all kinds of information with others, although a majority of users can be described as passive (e.g., browsing other profiles without engaging in social interactions; Verduyn et al., 2017). In this social network context, a new group of communicators has emerged, the so-called SMIs (Hudders et al., 2020). The range is somewhere between ordinary users and celebrities, which earned them the nickname "micro-celebrities" (Senft, 2008). Influencers use their outreach to inform their followers about specific topics and allow them to peek into their everyday life (Freberg et al., 2011). The combination of broad outreach along with a supposed closeness to their followers as "one of them" makes influencers especially successful, which has attracted companies seeking to use them as a marketing tool (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Definitions of influencers differ with regard to the research focus. In marketing, influencers are defined by their commercial orientation and their number of followers (e.g., Enke & Borchers, 2019; Hudders et al., 2020). Freberg et al. (2011, p. 90) define influencers as "a new type of third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media." Schach (2018, p. 31) describes them as individuals who, due to their digital network, personality strength, topic expertise, and communicative activity, have perceived credibility regarding certain topics and can make them accessible to a broad group of people through digital channels. In media effects research, influencers are defined by their core element, which involves exerting influence over others in specific areas (Grenny et al., 2013).

In this regard, SMIs can be conceptualized as what Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) called "opinion leaders," especially because they possess two central characteristics that are deemed to make opinion leaders successful—charisma and communicative competence, described by Katz (1957) as the "who one is" dimension—as well as their content-related expertise ("what one knows"; Katz, 1957). Regarding the latter, opinion leaders can be distinguished by whether they possess expertise in single areas (monomorphic opinion leaders) or on multiple topics (polymorphic opinion leaders; Merton, 1949; Richmond, 1980). Thus, SMIs as opinion leaders can be conceptualized as semi-professional communicators, who range somewhere between friends and role models, which is why followers are more likely to trust their recommendations (Freberg et al., 2011; Stehr et al., 2015). So far, studies have shown that influencers are capable of affecting brand attitudes and purchase intentions, especially in the context of typical influencer topics, such as fashion and lifestyle (Casalo et al., 2018; Hudders et al., 2020). However, it remains unclear whether these effects translate to political information and thus to opinion formation and political activism in this context.

2.2. From Beauty Influence to Political Mobilization: Social Media Influencers as Change Agents?

Previous research on SMIs has mostly focused on the context of advertising and marketing (e.g., Enke & Borchers,

2019; Hudders et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2019), involving topics such as fashion, lifestyle, or food (e.g., Qutteina et al., 2019; Wiedmann et al., 2010). Marketers have recognized the potential of influencers as a marketing tool due to their persuasiveness and trustworthiness as well as their strong connection to their audiences. In the context of brand endorsement, Durau (2022, p. 2012) refers to SMIs as change agents "who have the ability to shape and change their follower's behaviors with their content." In this study, we are interested in whether the impact of influencers also translates to political news, and thus, whether influencers are capable of impacting the political opinions of adolescents and young adults and, based on that, their political actions. In recent surveys of German adolescents and young adults, more than half reported using social media as a weekly news source, with about 25% indicating it is their main news source (Hölig & Behre, 2021; Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2022). However, it remains unclear where social media stems from, what role influencers play in the dissemination of information, and how they can contribute to the political mobilization of members of this age group. Thus, in this study, we explore whether SMIs can also function as change agents in the political sphere, with the potential to mobilize young audiences.

In particular, we are interested in two sorts of influencers and their respective impacts: (a) political influencers, who we define as influencers that primarily focus on the dissemination of political and/or societally relevant information while having no or only a secondary commercial interest, and (b) "regular" influencers, who primarily focus on non-political topics (e.g., fashion, lifestyle, or travel) while also having a strong commercial interest. Regarding their content-related expertise on political topics, political influencers as monomorphic opinion leaders can be distinguished from regular influencers, who may nevertheless include political or societally relevant topics in their everyday communications about other topics with a more commercial focus (e.g., beauty or lifestyle). While it can be assumed that followers turn to the first group primarily for political information, followers of the second group might be exposed to political information incidentally, that is, "while they are not consciously looking for it" (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018, p. 2; see also Kümpel, 2022). The question arises as to how followers evaluate this information and whether they perceive such polymorphic SMIs as credible sources of political information. We claim that incidental exposure to political and societally relevant topics through regular influencers could be important for adolescents and young adults, especially when they have no or little political interest. Several studies have shown that a majority of internet users come across news incidentally via social media, especially younger people (e.g., Hermida et al., 2012; Purcell et al., 2010; Swart et al., 2017).

The present study set out to investigate the role of SMIs in informing and mobilizing adolescents and young adults in the political context. Specifically, we were interested in how (often) adolescents and young adults come across political information in the context of SMI communication and how they perceive influencers' impact on themselves and others, especially in comparison to traditional sources, such as politicians or news. Three research questions guide our empirical approach:

> RQ1: How do adolescents and young adults encounter political information through SMIs?
>
> RQ2: What influence do they attribute to SMIs on themselves and others in the political sphere?
>
> RQ3: What potential do SMIs have when it comes to the political mobilization of adolescents and young adults?

3. Methodological Approach

To answer our research questions, 12 qualitative, semi-standardized guided interviews were conducted with young people between the ages of 16 and 22 (see Table 1). To ensure the intersubjective comprehensibility of the study, a category-guided approach was adopted. The category system was deductively developed and operationalized in an interview guide, which was divided into the following different blocks: media usage in general and for political information, influencer usage and definition, the credibility of media and influencers, the perceived impact of influencers regarding politics on self and others, and general information.

For the recruitment of participants, a conscious selection was carried out based on theoretical criteria of age and gender while also aiming for some heterogeneity in terms of formal education. We chose an age range of 16 to 22 years because interviewees should be of voting age to examine the relevance of influencers for their political actions, such as voting decisions (it is possible to vote from the age of 16 in 11 of 16 German federal states; Kramliczek, 2020). Moreover, at this age, increased usage of influencers (e.g., Berg, 2017; Emde-Lachmund & Klimmt, 2018) as well as an incipient political interest can be expected (Müller, 2017). According to Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), many first-time voters do not yet have a consolidated political opinion, so a higher influencer impact on their political opinions and aligned political actions could be expected.

The initial search for potential participants was carried out by contacting young people on Instagram who had commented under an influencer's post and whose profiles showed their age. This recruitment method turned out to be very cumbersome, however, so we switched to recruiting via third party-contacts (Meyen et al., 2011, p. 75). We asked acquaintances to make suggestions for other participants based on the age range and the prerequisite of influencer usage. However, due to limited resources and time restraints, it was

Table 1. Interviewee outline.

Number	Alias	Sex	Age	Profession
1	Johanna	Female	16	Pupil
2	Sina	Female	17	Pupil
3	Anna	Female	18	Pupil
4	Lea	Female	19	Student
5	Hannah	Female	19	Student
6	Milena	Female	20	Student
7	Hilla	Female	22	Student
8	Tobi	Female	16	Pupil
9	Marco	Male	18	Apprentice
10	Emil	Male	19	Student
11	Benjamin	Male	21	Student
12	Michael	Male	21	Student

particularly difficult to recruit male respondents aged 16 to 17 as well as people with a lower level of formal education. Since this study aimed to obtain initial insights on youth's perceptions of political information disseminated by influencers, and due to the limited resources of the study, the goal was to conduct eight to 12 interviews. In practice, interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. We subsequently recruited more interviewees from the 18–19-year-old age group because their answers varied the most. Among other age groups, theoretical saturation was achieved faster.

Before we started the interview phase from the 23rd of October 2020 to the 6th of November 2020, we tested the interview guide (see Supplementary File) for comprehensibility and length. Before the interviews, the participants were briefed on how their data would be used and informed about the study's methodology. The interviews lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. The first two interviews could be held in person. The remaining ones were conducted via the online applications Zoom and Teams due to the contact restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, pseudonymized, and then analyzed with the help of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015), using a deductively formed and inductively adapted category system guided by the research questions and the theoretical framework (Mayring, 2015, p. 86; Meyen et al., 2011, p. 171). The analysis was conducted using a coding frame that was developed based on the category system to ensure a systematic approach (see Supplementary File; Mayring, 2015). This coding frame contained coding rules for each category with an example and was inductively adjusted during the coding process. The transcripts were analyzed using the software program MAXQDA. The semantic validity of the coding frame in terms of coding rules, category definitions, and anchor examples was checked by senior scientists. Construct validity was ensured due to the partly deductive creation of the coding rules (Mayring, 2015). Reliability was increased by altering ambiguous categories in the research process (Mayring, 2015), with the final coding round using all of the added categories. Since the content analysis was only conducted by one person, intercoder reliability did not have to be tested (Mayring, 2015). Based on the evaluation, a user typology was carried out according to Meyen et al. (2011). The criteria were developed based on the material and theoretical framework to structure the results and predict political mobilization potential. With this typology, every person could be matched with a user type according to the answers in the interview. In the first step, a table was made for every person, including their answers in the most important categories: political interest, political participation, influencer image, frequency of influencer usage, and information usage. In the second step, these categories were extended by our evaluation of each respondent regarding the perceived trustworthiness of influencers and the tendency to see influencers as digital opinion leaders and to form parasocial relationships with them (factors that are known to strengthen the potential impact of influencers on followers). In the third step, we looked for similarities between the interviewees regarding these criteria, which led to a distinction of four user types, which were named after the usage motives (see Table 2). This process was carried out several times to account for the heterogeneity of the material and to finally develop separable user types. After consolidating the types, the criteria of each type were used to determine their potential to be politically mobilized by influencers.

4. Results

4.1. Influencer Usage

The patterns of use give first indications of the potential opinion leadership and mobilization power SMIs have on adolescents and young adults. The reasons for following influencers vary greatly. The respondents follow influencers based on interest in the respective topic, for sympathy reasons, entertainment, or political information. Three interviewees expressed an intentional use of

influencers who voice political views and address topics that are socially and politically relevant. Further, as expected, some interviewees reported incidental exposure to political views by influencers who have no political focus but express political views or share political information nevertheless. This happened mostly during major societal events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, when many influencers commented on the lockdown measures taken by the government. This unintended contact with political views and information shows a potential influence on followers that are not primarily interested in politics. In addition, it indicates polymorphic opinion leadership (Merton, 1949) on the part of the influencers that affects the interviewees with regard to multiple topics.

4.2. Political Opinion Formation and Opinion Leadership

When it comes to political information and opinion formation, the interviewees use influencers as complementary sources, while their primary sources of political information are mostly traditional mainstream media. Influencers become important for information about topics that are not covered by traditional news broadcasts but are deemed relevant for political opinion formation. In addition, the respondents consult influencers when they want to comprehend or evaluate information distributed by traditional media. For example, one interviewee uses influencers to make sense of political news from traditional outlets:

> To think about it for yourself, is this good or is this not so good, when you don't have so much information about it right now, I find it difficult. That's why I find it nice to hear from people with whom I know I always agree, why is this good now, why is this bad now? (I5)

All interviewees reported forming political opinions based on classic media sources because the information is verified and controlled. In the second step, they seem to follow influencers who align with their political views and help them make sense of political news and how to think and act upon it. Taken together, these cases show the great potential of SMIs' opinion leadership, such that influencers add to what adolescents and young adults learn from traditional news outlets and provide them with complexity reduction as well as orientation (Stehr et al., 2015). In this regard, some answers also point to the fact that influencers might have a substantial impact on how their followers think about a given political topic:

> When the news tells you about the new EU agricultural reform, you might think to yourself: "Okay, that sounds pretty good." And then I would have to start researching myself: Is it that good? What does it really say? And that takes an incredible amount of time. Then I look at Luisa Neubauer, and I know what she's doing is good and then she tells me: "This and this is stupid, that's why we don't want it." "Ah okay, then we don't want that." (I5)

Regarding the perceived impact of SMIs on the political beliefs of their audiences, the views of the respondents diverge. Political influencers are perceived as more competent and reliable when it comes to political information than regular influencers. In particular, the political information they provide is viewed as more trustworthy and neutral if the respondents believe their primary focus is on the dissemination and discussion of political and societally relevant information and not on promoting products. Nearly all the interviewees agreed that influencers are more credible if they present reliable information that is backed up by sources. Further attributes identified in prior research that play a role in the perceived credibility of influencers are likability, identification, similar interests, the relevance of information, as well as similar political opinions (Casalo et al., 2018; Cohen, 2001; Duckwitz, 2019; Hovland et al., 1953). Additionally, seriousness and expertise, authenticity, charisma, and consistency in the influencer's way of communicating are important to the respondents. An example to which some interviewees referred is a video on YouTube by German political influencer Rezo in which he criticizes the German party CDU, the ruling party at that time (Rezo, 2019). The video was published right before the 2019 European elections and was the most-viewed YouTube video in Germany that year. The respondents expressed the importance of consistent communication by influencers regarding political information, suggesting that monomorphic opinion leaders are deemed more reliable when it comes to political information. The interviewees believed that influencers' effect on political opinions is stronger when the audience anticipates serious content and substantial knowledge about it, which is the case for political influencers rather than regular influencers.

4.3. Mobilization Potential

Next, we consider the political mobilization potential of influencers on the interviewed adolescents and young adults. In particular, we were interested in how they estimated the impact of influencers on their and others' voting intentions. Regarding perceived influence on others, most of the respondents indicated that younger users are especially influenced in their political opinion formation and voting decisions since they represent the largest user group of influencers. The interviewees claimed that sympathy and identification with influencers as well as the perception of influencers as role models account for this high level of impact at such a young age. Further, people who mainly inform themselves with the help of SMIs judge themselves to be particularly susceptible to being politically mobilized since they form a one-sided and less objective political opinion. All the participants estimated that the strongest

effect of influencers was on an age group that did not include their age (either younger or older). This suggests a third-person effect (Davison, 1983), and this finding should be examined further in follow-up studies.

Looking at mobilization potential, the interviewees indicated that the influencers' political mobilization power is indirect because the respondents frequently have consolidated political opinions of their own. Depending on the area of interest of the recipients, political opinions conveyed by influencers are perceived positively or negatively. People who are interested in politics and enjoy political information also enjoy being informed by influencers, but mostly on issues that agree with their own opinions. In this regard, one respondent stressed that the mobilization potential of influencers is higher for users who are particularly engaged in politics. In line with research on classical opinion leadership (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), influencers are thus perceived to strengthen rather than modify their young followers' political opinions and voting intentions. One respondent noted this influence in discussions about subjects related to their interests and political views:

> As I said, if the political orientation is similar. When the topics are close to one's heart. If you have already read similar information that is taken up again. Then, of course, that confirms your own orientation in the first place. But also the feeling that you can trust this person. Yes, so often these influencers are feminists themselves. That's why I always take everything seriously that is addressed there. Which is also related to the fact that I find them credible. (I7)

This influence is perceived as stronger if there is continuous exposure to the influencer and his or her political opinion. Thus, it seems that acceptance of the influencer's opinion and trust is built over a longer period. One respondent pointed out that algorithms also play a role in the mobilization force of influencers since they can intensify the amount of content a follower is exposed to by an influencer: The more one consumes an influencer's content, the more the algorithm displays this influencer's content in the follower's feed. In addition, influencers covering topics like environmental protection are judged to have a higher influence on voting decisions, as this topic is of high relevance for young people.

Even though the interviewees mainly use traditional media as a primary source of political information, there is some evidence that some of them also explicitly use influencers to make voting decisions. For example, I1 stated that she strongly relies on information provided by the German YouTube vlogger MrWissen2Go in making her voting decisions. In addition, she pointed out that she sometimes finds it difficult to distinguish between professional media and influencers, as professional media outlets, especially those targeting a young audience (the YouTube vlogger MrWissen2Go belongs to the public broadcasting service ZDF), often collaborate with influencers who discuss social and political issues. As an example, she mentioned the Instagram channel Funk, which belongs to the public broadcasting service in Germany. This could point to a larger issue for young people when it comes to judging the credibility of a source.

As discussed in the previous subsection, the political influencer Rezo (2019) can be identified as an example of an influencer with mobilization power. His video was published right before the European elections and influenced respondents with its well-founded statements based on reliable sources. It went viral and gained considerable media attention, causing other influencers to release supporting statements (Peters, 2019). One interviewee, who was not yet eligible to vote in the 2019 European elections, stated that, after seeing this video, "the CDU would have been out of the question for me." Another interviewee said that the video had influenced her, although it only strengthened her political opinion. Some interviewees stated the video was only one factor in their decision to vote in the 2019 European elections, along with information about the parties, reports in the traditional media, conversations with their families, and their political preconceptions.

In summary, the interviews suggested that the impact of influencers varies greatly among individuals. While there is some evidence that their messages can be decisive for some, in general, we found their impact to have an amplifying nature. Their perceived impact also depends on classical opinion leader characteristics, such as expertise and knowledge, likability, credibility, and matching political views.

4.4. User Types

Based on the findings described above, we identified four different user types whose political ideas and voting choices are affected by influencers to varying degrees: the Politics Enthusiast, the Versatile Interested, the Entertainment Seeker, and the Commercial User (see Table 2).

A political influencer has the largest impact on the opinions of young users who are engaged in politics and use political influencers intentionally. These would be the Politics Enthusiast and the Versatile Interested types. However, the latter is only somewhat influenced by the subjects the influencer discusses in terms of political views and opinions. In the few instances when regular influencers discuss politics, Entertainment Seekers may be persuaded to change their political views as well. The Commercial User is more influenced by product recommendations because these are the kinds of topics discussed by the regular SMIs the Commercial User follows.

The Politics Enthusiasts and the Versatile Interested type have the highest mobilization potential since they are influenced regarding their political views and voting choices. For the former, this impact seems to amplify

Table 2. User types and their characteristics.

	User types			
Characteristics	The Politics Enthusiast	The Versatile Interested	The Entertainment Seeker	The Commercial User
Interviewee	I5 and I7	I2, I3, and I10	I1, I8, I9, and I12	I4, I6, and I11
Political interest	Very high	High	Medium	Medium
Intended usage of influencers	Political Information	Information and inspiration	Diversion and entertainment	Tips and recommendations
Image of influencers	Influence and information of their audience, political and non-political	Information and influence on certain topic areas	Certain purposes, like the entertainment of an audience	Brand ambassador and product marketing
Information usage	Traditional media and SMIs complementary	Traditional media and online media; usage of SMIs possible	Traditional media and online media	Traditional media
Digital opinion leadership	Existent	Existent in the used subject area; potential for political SMIs	Possible in the rare usage of political SMIs	Not possible, only for product recommendations
Trustworthiness	High	High for perceived expertise	High for perceived expertise	Low; higher for sympathy and identification
Political mobilization potential	High; SMI with similar political opinions are used	Medium; high for the reception of well-founded information	Low; existent for rare usage of political SMIs with expertise	Very low; rare confrontation with political SMI

rather than change their political views, whereas, for the latter, influencers can help to make sense of political information and thus influence them in a certain direction. For both types, political influencers function as political opinion leaders who are attributed with expert knowledge and credibility.

In the few instances when regular influencers discuss politics, Entertainment Seekers may be persuaded to change their political views as well. However, these users mainly follow influencers for entertainment reasons, so political mobilization is rather unlikely. The same is true for Commercial Users, who seem to be more focused and thus more persuaded by product recommendations than political content.

5. Discussion

The current study set out to explore the potential of SMIs in relation to the political socialization and mobilization of young audiences. Through 12 qualitative interviews, we investigated the perceived impact of both political and regular influencers on political opinion formation and political actions, such as voting intention. Our aim thus was to look not only at the intentional use of SMIs but also at incidental exposure to news and political information through regular influencers who take a stand on political issues. In this regard, our findings point to the fact that the role of political influencers should not be underestimated. It is important to note that our data were collected in 2020, and since then, several studies on the relevance of SMIs for political action have been published. While it would have been awkward to use these studies for theoretical reasoning, we will refer to them to discuss our findings in light of the current state of research.

Regarding the use of political influencers, Knupfer et al. (2023) showed that active engagement with "greenfluencers" (SMIs with a special focus on sustainability and environmental awareness) is positively related to different forms of environmental activism for German adolescents. However, due to the use of cross-sectional data, it remained unclear whether engagement with these influencers can increase such activities or whether adolescents already engaging in such activities are more likely to also follow greenfluencers. Our results point to the latter, as political influencers are predominantly used by those who are already politically interested. In line with quantitative surveys, our results further confirm that traditional media sources, such as quality (online) news outlets, are still judged as more trustworthy for political information

by young audiences, and political influencers are used as a supplementary source that helps them make sense of this complex information (Hasebrink et al., 2021; Hölig & Behre, 2021). Thus, their impact seems to be limited when it comes to opinion change. Further, most of the interviewees reported following influencers who disseminate political or societally relevant information only when their general political view aligns with their own. In such cases, the impact of these influencers on oneself and others is evaluated as positive, while influencers holding other political opinions are viewed negatively. This confirms experimental findings by Naderer (2023), who found that perceived similarity with the influencer on political topics predicted the intention to take political action. In this context, and in line with prior research on public opinion leaders, influencers seem to be capable of reinforcing rather than changing the audience's attitudes and behaviors. However, some answers also indicated a rather strong impact of influencers on their followers, especially on younger or undecided ones. The fact that influencers take a stand on topics provided by legacy media in a more neutral way can lead followers to form opinions and take action based on the influencers' evaluation of a given topic. It is important to note that while the stimulation of political action might initially seem positive, it can also have detrimental consequences (for example, the spread of conspiracy theories and extremist views; Riedl et al., 2021).

In addition, our results indicate that most political influencers as monomorphic opinion leaders who focus primarily on political information are judged as credible sources for political guidance. Meanwhile, regular influencers who take a stance on political or societally relevant topics only occasionally were viewed as less credible and judged to lack the knowledge to present such topics reliably. Here, our findings are consistent with those of Naderer (2023), who reported that such "unlikely" sources of political information might still stimulate political action when there is a fit between one's views and those of the influencer. Similarly, Knupfer et al. (2023) showed that a parasocial relationship with influencers seems to be important for fostering political action for individuals with little or no political interest (see also Schmuck et al., 2022).

Certainly, this study has some limitations. First, our results are based on 12 interviews with adolescents and young adults in Germany, which limits the generalizability of our findings, as we can only make assumptions within the national context of Germany. Most recent studies on this topic have also focused on young Germans (e.g., Knupfer et al., 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022), so cross-national comparisons regarding influencers' impact in different countries with divergent political systems would be helpful to broaden the results. Second, due to limited resources, we were not able to conduct substantially more interviews, and thus we could not employ more quotation criteria (e.g., regional variety or political orientation). Regarding our user typology, we are confident that the four identified types are generalizable since all are based on several cases, but we cannot exclude the possibility that a larger sample would yield additional and more refined user types. Since we recruited via third-party contacts in our environment, we predominantly reached people over the age of 18 with a higher level of education. However, the interviews revealed a broad range of answers regarding political interest and the use of influencers, so we are confident that our results and user types provide a coherent picture. Our results also match those of other studies (e.g., Hasebrink et al., 2021), which found that adolescents and young adults judge legacy media as more important sources of political information and opinion formation. However, interviewing younger people and people with a lower level of education could offer even more detailed and nuanced insights into the mobilization potential of influencers. Another important aspect to note is that our interviews took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, which represents a special case, particularly with regard to how and how often regular influencers included political topics within their stories. Thus, this could have led to a higher level of incidental exposure to political content through regular influencers compared to other times. It might be assumed that the role of regular influencers in sharing political information becomes more important in the context of specific events (e.g., the Russian aggression on Ukraine), which could be further investigated, for example, through content analyses.

The empirical approach based on qualitative interviews allowed us to dig deep into young audiences' perceptions and evaluations of the political impact and mobilization potential of SMIs, but it did not allow us to capture the actual effect influencers have on adolescents and young adults, even though our results are largely in line with newer quantitative and experimental studies (e.g., Knupfer et al., 2023; Naderer, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Especially regarding the dissemination of political messages by regular influencers, it would be fruitful for follow-up studies to investigate whether their credibility and impact in this area are as limited as suggested by our interviews or if these results can also be partly attributed to social desirability. Further, we did not define the different types of influencers for the interviewees but instead asked them for their assessments of what constitutes an influencer in general and a political influencer in particular. Hence, the influencer definitions differed between the interviewees, which could have led to differences in their evaluations of the perceived impact of the influencer types. This is an ongoing issue that should be kept in mind when researching influencers since the platforms and platform actors change rapidly. Accordingly, future studies should pay special attention to who can be defined as a political influencer, what kind of political information is disseminated, and how it is perceived by audiences. For instance, Suuronen et al. (2022) showed that while only a small minority of Finnish influencers reported talking about formal politics, a majority

engages in lifestyle-related, societally relevant political topics, such as health and nutrition. In addition, as Riedl et al. (2021) pointed out, most political influencers also engage in the promotion of commercial products, which might reduce their credibility as political agents.

Taken together, considering the current state of research, our findings have several implications both for influencer communication as well as for political communication in general. First, political influencers may affect young people's political ideas as digital opinion leaders because young people perceive them as capable of disseminating information in addition to traditional media. Even respondents who do not follow political influencers can be persuaded by their content if they see something that strikes them as important and credible, such as the video by the influencer Rezo before the European election in 2019. Second, traditional media are still the primary trusted source of political information, but social media in general, and (political) influencers in particular, seem to play a role in orientation and opinion formation when it comes to the evaluation of the information provided by news outlets. In this regard, one's political views and interests play a role in the usage of influencers to form political opinions and actions. Thus, the political mobilization of young audiences through SMIs is possible but varies among individuals. Mobilization factors include the usage of social media as the main information source, the algorithm of the social media platform, and the political interests of the respondent. Further, the mobilization power of influencers depends on their credibility and the usage motives of their followers. Third, influencers, in general, may be especially powerful in disseminating what Suuronen et al. (2022) called lifestyle-related politics: personally experienced topics of general interest for society, such as nutrition, health behavior, or sustainable lifestyles. Riedl et al. (2021) argued that influencers' power as social agents lies in the way they present political topics: "Despite meaningful content, political influencers still focus on a casual, down-to-earth appearance to maintain high credibility among their followers. In that sense, political influencers make politics look easy." While this might initially seem like a good thing, a current study by Schmuck et al. (2022) suggests that the "simplification of politics" can be a double-edged sword, as it can not only spark political interest but also foster political cynicism. Thus, future research needs to focus on boundary conditions that could explain when adolescents and young adults might benefit from political communication through SMIs and how literacy programs can address this new form of political communication.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive feedback as well as Raquel Silva from Cogitatio Press for her great support.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author.

References

Ahmadi, M., & Wohn, D. Y. (2018). The antecedents of incidental news exposure on social media. *Social Media & Society*, *4*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118772827

Berg, A. (2017). *Kinder und Jugend in der digitalen Welt* [Children and adolescents in the digital world]. Bitkom. https://www.bitkom.org/Presse/Anhaenge-an-PIs/2017/05-Mai/170512-Bitkom-PK-Kinder-und-Jugend-2017.pdf

Byrne, E., Kearney, J., & MacEvilly, C. (2017). The role of influencer marketing and social influencers in public health. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, *76*(3), 21–23. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0029665117001768

Casalo, L. V., Flavian, C., & Ibanez-Sanchez, S. (2018). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. *Journal of Business Research*, *117*, 510–519. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.005

Chwialkowska, A. (2019). How sustainability influencers drive green lifestyle adoption on social media: The process of green lifestyle adoption explained through the lenses of the minority influence model and social learning theory. *Management of Sustainable Development*, *11*(1), 33–42.

Cohen, J. (2001). Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Communication & Society*, *4*(3), 245–264. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0403_01

Davison, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *47*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1086/268763

Duckwitz, A. (2019). *Influencer als digitale Meinungsführer: Wie Influencer in sozialen Medien den politischen Diskurs beeinflussen—und welche Folgen das für die demokratische Öffentlichkeit hat* [Influencers as digital opinion leaders: How influencers in social media influence political discourse—And what consequences this has for the democratic public sphere]. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Durau, J. (2022). The relevance of social media and corporate influencers as potential change agents in corporate communications. In M. Karmasin, S. Diehl, & I. Koinig (Eds.), *Media and change management* (pp. 211–229). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86680-8_12

Emde-Lachmund, K., & Klimmt, C. (2018). News consumption around age 14: A typology of adolescents' preferred media, topics, and outcome expectations. In R. Kühne, S. Baumgartner, T. Koch, & L. Hofer (Eds.), *Youth and media: Current perspectives on media use and effects* (pp. 97–113). Nomos. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845280455

Enke, N., & Borchers, N. S. (2019). Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *13*(4), 261–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1620234

Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review*, *37*, 90–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001

Grenny, J., Patterson, K., Maxfield, D., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2013). *Influencer: The new science of leading change*. McGraw-Hill.

Hasebrink, U., Hölig, S., & Wunderlich, L. (2021). *#UseTheNews: Studie zur Nachrichtenkompetenz Jugendlicher und junger Erwachsener in der digitalen Medienwelt* [#UseTheNews: Study on the news literacy of adolescents and young adults in the digital media world] (Working Paper No. 55). Hans-Bredow-Institut. https://doi.org/10.21241/ssoar.72822

Hermida, A., Fletcher, F., Korell, D., & Logan, D. (2012). Share, like, recommend: Decoding the social media news consumer. *Journalism Studies*, *13*(5/6), 815–824. https://doi.org/1080/1461670X.2012.664430

Hölig, S., & Behre, J. (2021). Aktuelle Entwicklungen bei der Nachrichtennutzung in Deutschland: Befunde aus dem Reuters Institute Digital News Survey 2021 [Current developments in news usage in Germany: Findings from the Reuters Institute Digital News Survey 2021]. *Media Perspektiven*, *11*, 575–587.

Hovland, C. I., Irving, L. J., & Kelley, H. (1953). *Communication and persuasion: Psychological studies of opinion change*. Yale University Press.

Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2020). The commercialization of social media stars: A literature review and conceptual framework on the strategic use of social media influencers. *International Journal of Advertising*, *40*(3), 327–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1836925

Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *21*(1), 61–78. https://doi.org/10.1086/266687

Knupfer, H., Neureiter, A., & Matthes, J. (2023). From social media diet to public riot? Engagement with "greenfluencers" and young social media users' environmental activism. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *139*, Article 107527. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107527

Kramliczek, P. (2020, February 14). Wählen mit 16? Nicht in Bayern! [Voting with 16? Not in Bavaria!]. *BR*. https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/waehlen-mit-16-nicht-in-bayern,RqUIdOY

Kümpel, A. S. (2022). Social media information environments and their implications for the uses and effects of news: The PINGS framework. *Communication Theory*, *32*(2), 223–242. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtab012

Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. Duell, Sloan and Pearce.

Lowe-Calverley, E., & Grieve, R. (2021). Do the metrics matter? An experimental investigation of Instagram influencer effects on mood and body dissatisfaction. *Body Image*, *36*, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.10.003

Mayring, P. (2015). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken* [Qualitative content analysis: Basics and techniques] (12th ed.). Beltz Verlagsgruppe.

Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest. (2022). *JIM-Studie 2022—Jugend, Information, Medien: Basisuntersuchung zum Medienumgang 12–19-Jähriger* [JIM study 2022—Youth, information, media: Basic study on media use by 12–19 year olds]. https://www.mpfs.de/fileadmin/files/Studien/JIM/2022/JIM_2022_Web_final.pdf

Merton, R. (1949). Patterns of influence: A study of interpersonal influence and of communication behaviour in a local community. In P. F. Lazarsfeld & N. Stanton (Eds.), *Communication research* (pp. 180–219). Duell, Sloan and Pearce.

Meyen, M., Löblich, M., Pfaff-Rüdiger, S., & Riesmeyer, C. (2011). *Qualitative Forschung in der Kommunikationswissenschaft: Eine praxisorientierte Einführung* [Qualitative research in communication studies: A practice-oriented introduction]. Springer.

Müller, P. (2017). *Social media und Wissensklüfte: Nachrichtennutzung und politische Informiertheit junger Menschen* [Social media and knowledge gaps: News usage and political informedness of young people]. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-23158-3

Naderer, B. (2023). Influencers as political agents? The potential of an unlikely source to motivate political action. *Communications*, *48*(1), 93–111. https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0006

Naderer, B., Peter, C., & Karsay, K. (2022). This picture does not portray reality: Developing and testing a disclaimer for digitally enhanced pictures on social media appropriate for Austrian tweens and teens. *Journal of Children and Media*, *16*(2), 149–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2021.1938619

Peters, B. (2019, May 24). Nein zur CDU, nein zur SPD—70 Youtuber stellen sich hinter Rezo [No to CDU, no to SPD—70 Youtubers get behind Rezo]. *Süd-*

deutsche Zeitung. https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/rezo-video-youtuber-1.4462172

Purcell, K., Rainie, L., Mitchell, A., Rosenstiel, T., & Olmstead, K. (2010). *Understanding the participatory news consumer*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2010/03/01/understanding-the-participatory-news-consumer

Qutteina, Y., Hallez, L., Mennes, N., De Backer, C., & Smits, T. (2019). What do adolescents see on social media? A diary study of food marketing images on social media. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, Article 2637. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02637

Rezo. (2019, May 18). *Die Zerstörung der CDU* [The destruction of the CDU] [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Y1lZQsyuSQ&pbjreload=101

Richmond, V. P. (1980). Monomorphic and polymorphic opinion leadership within a relatively closed communication system. *Human Communication Research*, *6*, 111–116. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1980.tb00131.x

Riedl, M., Schwemmer, C., Ziewiecki, S., & Ross, L. M. (2021). The rise of political influencers—Perspectives on a trend towards meaningful content. *Frontiers in Communication*, *6*, Article 752656. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2021.752656

Schach, A. (2018). Botschafter, blogger, influencer: Eine definitorische Einordnung aus der Perspektive der Public Relations [Ambassadors, bloggers, influencers: A definitional classification from a public relations perspective]. In A. Schach & T. Lommatsch (Eds.), *Influencer relations* (pp. 24–47). Springer.

Schmuck, D., Hirsch, M., Stevic, A., & Matthes, J. (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), 738–762. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221088987

Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2019). Celebrity vs. influencer endorsements in advertising: The role of identification, credibility, and product–endorser fit. *International Journal of Advertising*, *39*(2), 258–281. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898

Senft, T. M. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity and community in the age of social networks*. Peter Lang.

Stehr, P., Rössler, P., Leißner, L., & Schönhardt, F. (2015). Parasocial opinion leadership media personalities' influence within parasocial relations: Theoretical conceptualization and preliminary results. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 982–1001. https://doi.org/1932–8036/20150005

Suuronen, A., Reinikainen, H., Borchers, N. S., & Strandberg, K. (2022). When social media influencers go political: An exploratory analysis on the emergence of political topics among Finnish influencers. *Javnost—The Public*, *29*(3), 301–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1983367

Swart, J., Peters, C., & Broersma, M. (2017). Navigating cross-media news use: Media repertoires and the value of news in everyday life. *Journalism Studies*, *18*(11), 1343–1362. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1129285

Verduyn, P., Ybarra, O., Résibois, M., Jonides, J., & Kross, E. (2017). Do social network sites enhance or undermine subjective well-being? A critical review. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, *11*(1), 274–302. https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12033

We Are Social, Hootsuite, & DataReportal. (2023). *Anzahl der Social-Media-Nutzer weltweit in den Jahren 2012 bis 2023 (in Milliarden)* [Number of social media users worldwide from 2012 to 2023 (in billions)]. Statista. https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/739881/umfrage/monatlich-aktive-social-media-nutzer-weltweit

Wiedmann, K.-P., Hennigs, N., & Langner, S. (2010). Spreading the word of fashion: Identifying social Influencers in fashion marketing. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, *1*(3), 142–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2010.10593066

About the Authors

Christina Peter (PhD, 2014, LMU Munich) is a full professor of media and communication at the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Klagenfurt. She studied communication science, political science, and psychology at the LMU Munich. Her research focuses on media usage and effects, digital and political communication, and persuasion.

Luisa Muth is currently finishing her master's degree at FU Berlin, Germany, in the field of media and political communication. She studied communication and politics at LMU Munich, Germany. Her research interest lies within political communication on social media and its impact on voters. In her latest project, she focuses on the role of disinformation in the Russian-Ukrainian war.