

Lighting the participatory spark?

The role of social media influencers in initiating political participation

HANNA REINIKAINEN,^I NILS S. BORCHERS,^{II} ALEKSI SUURONEN,^{III}
& KIM STRANDBERG^{III}

^I CENTRE FOR CONSUMER SOCIETY RESEARCH, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND

^{II} INSTITUTE OF MEDIA STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF TÜBINGEN, GERMANY

^{III} FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS, AND LAW,
ÅBO AKADEMI, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

The role of social media influencers is often limited to the realm of consumer behaviour. However, recently, their role in the sphere of political communication has become a new topic of interest. In this article, we focus on how political influencer content is perceived by Finnish social media users and probe the interrelations between these perceptions and political participation. A moderated mediation model was developed and tested using data gathered from Finnish respondents ($n = 680$) through an online survey and self-reported measures. The results imply that perceived exposure to political influencer content is associated with latent political participation (i.e., increased attention and awareness), which is further related to manifest political participation (e.g., boycotting and voting). The moderating effects of general political interest and engagement with influencers were also tested, but not found. The findings suggest that influencers' political content has the potential to spark political participation, as it may ignite awareness towards political topics – possibly even among those who have not previously shown interest in politics. Such awareness, in turn, may eventually manifest itself as political behaviour, such as voting or boycotting. The results provide an enhanced understanding of the potential impact of new social media arenas on increasing political participation while simultaneously contributing to the studies on political influencers, a research area that is growing in popularity.

KEYWORDS: social media influencers, political participation, political interest, engagement, moderated mediation

Reinikainen, H., Borchers, N. S., Suuronen, A., & Strandberg, K. (2025). Lighting the participatory spark? The role of social media influencers in initiating political participation. *Nordicom Review*, 46(1), 25–54. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2025-0002>

Introduction

Declining political participation (e.g., Kostelka & Blais, 2021; Renström et al., 2021; van Biezen et al., 2012) has raised concerns regarding the states of democracy and civil society and the legitimacy of political institutions. Considerable hope has been placed in social media for increasing political participation (Widholm & Ekman, 2024), as several studies have found a positive connection between political activity and the consumption of political content on social media (e.g., Holt et al., 2013; Yamamoto et al., 2017). Simultaneously, new actors have been observed entering the political arena: Social media influencers (from now on referred to as influencers), typically known for their self-branding efforts and engagements with commercial brands, also raise political topics in their content (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024b; Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022) – often with the explicit goal of influencing the opinions and behaviours of their followers.

For instance, in April 2024, a selected group of Finnish influencers took part in a public relations trip to the European Parliament in Brussels and published several Instagram posts about the experience. The excursion was organised by a Finnish influencer agency and paid for by the European Parliament Liaison Office in Finland. The participating influencers, who mostly create content about everyday lifestyle topics, were given a tour of the European Parliament, introduced to the ways in which the Parliament works, and provided a chance to meet and question the Finnish members of the Parliament. The objective of the trip was to raise awareness about the upcoming European elections through the influencers and, ultimately, to increase voter turnout. This example suggests that it is important to understand the political significance of influencers, especially because even established political institutions are turning to influencers as possible saviours of democracy.

The ability of influencers to affect the attitudes and behaviours of their followers is well established in the current communication and marketing literature (e.g., Lee & Watkins, 2016; Leite & Babtista, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Munnukka et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). There is also substantial evidence of the political role played by influencers. Studies demonstrate, for example, that political influencer content can impact people's opinion formation, predict political action, and raise political interest through constructs such as perceived similarity (Naderer, 2023), parasocial relationships (Cheng et al., 2024), and the perceived simplification of politics (Schmuck et al., 2022). However, questions remain regarding the dynamics that potentially contribute to political participation when it comes to influencers and their content. For instance, what is the function of follower engagement or followers' general interest towards politics? Do these constructs perhaps have a moderating effect when it comes to political participation? In addition, while the politicisation of influencers appears to be a popular topic in both academia and practice, the prevalence of influencers' political content still requires further investigation. Previous studies examining the prevalence of political influencer content have mainly relied on evidence from either social media (e.g., Gonzalez

et al., 2023) or influencers themselves (e.g., Suuronen et al., 2022), suggesting that there is room for research that explores the perceptions of the audiences and their impressions of the politicalness of influencers.

In this study, we pursue two objectives, using the Finnish information ecology as a case study. First, we explore how frequently Finnish social media users report exposure to political topics raised by influencers, which are the most common topics they report having encountered, and how Finnish audiences perceive and describe engaging with such content. Second, we analyse the connections between users' self-reported exposure to political influencer content and the perceived influence on their latent and manifest political participation. Therefore, this study helps develop an understanding about the role of new social media arenas in contributing to political participation while also adding to the discussion about political influencers.

Literature review

Social media influencers and engagement with followers

The term social media influencer is now well established in popular culture, although there are various ways to define it (Hudders et al., 2020). An early definition by Abidin (2015: para. 1) describes influencers as,

everyday ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces and monetise their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts.

This definition emphasises the ordinariness of influencers, their engagement with their followers, and their ambitions for monetisation. A couple of years later, Dhanesh and Duthler (2019: 3) further defined influencers as people who utilise personal branding for building and maintaining relationships with their followers and thus have the “ability to inform, entertain and potentially influence followers’ thoughts, attitudes and behaviours”. This definition captures the self-branding efforts of influencers – the construction of a distinctive image for commercial gain (Khamis et al., 2017) – and their influence, that is, how influencers can affect the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours of their followers, and how both are connected to relationship-building online.

A central feature of the relationships between influencers and their followers is that they are interactive. Social media platforms allow users to engage with influencers in various ways: liking influencer content, commenting on it publicly in the comments sections, or sending private messages to influencers. Influencers often encourage such engagement because their success depends on such support; they typically share the idea that the recommendation algorithms on social media

platforms favour content that audiences engage with and reward the same with enhanced visibility (Cotter, 2019). Thus, influencers may promote follower engagement by directly addressing users, acknowledging their contributions, highlighting their importance, and responding to their comments and private messages (Ashton & Patel, 2018; Duffy, 2018; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Research on the domain of influencer marketing has suggested that follower engagement also contributes to persuasion outcomes, specifically due to the concept of parasocial relationships (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Munnukka et al., 2019). This indicates that engagement is associated with influencer–follower relationships and that those social media users who are more likely to engage with influencers are also more likely to be receptive to the influencer’s messages and recommendations.

Political influencers

While influencers are more commonly known to generate content on lifestyle themes and topics such as entertainment, travel, and games, an increasing amount of evidence indicates that they frequently also bring up political issues (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022). Before delving into the discussion of political influencers, it is necessary to contemplate what the term politics means in this context. A rigid definition of a political topic would involve formal political processes and institutions. For example, Graham and colleagues (2015: 653; see also Munson & Resnick, 2011: 235) used this approach and defined raising political topics as “a public-spirited way of talking whereby participants make connections from their individual and personal experiences to formal political processes and institutions”. Nevertheless, politics is often associated with personal, subjective experiences (van Zoonen, 2005), such as health or nutrition. Politically relevant topics are, therefore, not to be understood as dealing only with formal political actors or institutions; instead, they need to be considered through the lens of individual lifestyle values and personal narratives (Graham, 2008). Influencers are an intriguing embodiment of this development, as they often effortlessly combine aspirational lifestyles with ideologies (Arnesson, 2023). A typical example of such a combination could be a post in which the influencer talks about a subject such as their latest fashion purchase while also raising the issue of sustainable consumption habits. The public relations trip to Brussels can be considered another example of combining lifestyle content with politics, as the visuals from the trip depict trendy, inspiring influencers navigating the halls of the European Parliament while discussing the importance of voting in the European elections.

Considering the emergence of politics in the influencer sphere, there is a need to define the concept of political influencers. Bause (2021) offered one of the first definitions of this type of influencer, describing them as “users who became well known in social media and, as self-created personal brands, regularly distribute self-produced political content with which they reach and potentially influence a dispersed audience”. Suuronen and colleagues (2022) further argued that influencers can be considered a particular type of opinion leader who should

be distinguished from, for instance, political bloggers and social-media-savvy activists like Greta Thunberg. This is because, as opposed to political activists, influencers typically engage in self-branding and influencer marketing activities while aiming to commodify their online personas (e.g., Abidin, 2015). Riedl and colleagues (2023) further defined political influencers as “content creators that endorse a political position, social cause or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform”. They also stated that the purpose of endorsing specific positions, causes, or individual candidates may be to influence the political attitudes or behaviours of audiences or merely show support for a political cause. In addition, influencers may engage in such endorsements either with or without financial incentives (Riedl et al., 2023).

The number of studies on political influencers has started to increase in the last few years. Researchers have examined aspects such as the connection between political influencer content and cynicism (Schmuck et al., 2022), the role of influencers in political campaigns (Goodwin et al., 2023), and the types of young people most likely to be exposed to political influencer content (Harff & Schmuck, 2024c). The role of influencers in initiating political participation has also been of central interest. Naderer (2023) examined whether political influencer content affects political action and found that perceived similarity with an influencer increased followers’ willingness to respond to an influencer’s call to action, even among those who reported low prior political interest. A similar association was described by Wasike (2023), who concluded that following political influencers appears to improve political interest and, ultimately, political participation. Thus, political interest appears to be a key variable when it comes to political influencer content and political participation.

While the connection between follower engagement and political participation has not been studied in the context of influencers as such, there are some findings from previous studies regarding the role of interactivity and engagement with political influencer content. For example, Pöyry and Reinikainen (2024) found that an influencer’s call to vote, which includes an invitation to engage, appeared to predict voting behaviour more than a call made by a journalist or politician. This indicates that the potential for interaction with an influencer is associated with higher participatory intentions. Political content by influencers also seems to be surprisingly engaging: Harff and Schmuck (2024b) found that political videos by influencers received more views and likes than their non-political content, implying that the influencers’ discussions about meaningful themes garner audiences’ attention and invite them to engage. These dynamics suggest that follower engagement may be a critical factor when examining the political impact of influencers.

Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022, 2023) have analysed the connection between following political influencers and political participation through two different studies. In their study involving the Austrian elections, Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022) found that following environmental influencers was associated with on-line political participation, such as signing petitions, which was further found to predict offline political participation, such as participating in demonstrations.

Thus, the relationship between political influencer content and political participation appears to develop in stages. In their subsequent study on “greenfluencers”, Dekoninck and Schmuck (2023) reported that following environmental influencers was associated with political activities, such as participating in protests, which they referred to as political-sphere-oriented participation, and product boycotts, termed as cause-oriented participation. This, in turn, seems to suggest that political influencer content can trigger different kinds of political activity.

In addition to the possible effects of political influencer content, previous studies have examined the frequency and types of political content created by influencers. Through content analysis, Gonzalez and colleagues (2023) determined how frequently influencers published political content on Instagram and found that celebrities with established “star power”, such as Leonardo Di Caprio, are more likely to publish posts on political topics than influencers. They also observed that influencers prefer lifestyle politics over conventional politics and that political content more often appears in ephemeral forms (e.g., Instagram stories) than permanent ones (e.g., Instagram posts). Sehl and Schützeneder (2023) also employed content analysis to examine how political influencers communicated on Instagram, podcasts, TikTok, and YouTube in the run-up to the German elections and found a strong focus on environment and climate issues. In a similar manner, Suuronen and colleagues (2022), while investigating the frequency of political influencer content in Finland, found that influencers report discussing climate change as a major topic in their content.

From exposure to political topics to participation

Previous studies on political influencers suggest that there is a likelihood that political influencer content and political participation are indeed interrelated. Researchers have proposed connections between variables such as perceived similarity and participation (Naderer, 2023), influencer authenticity and participation (Harff & Schmuck, 2024a), following environmental influencers and online political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022, 2023), following influencers and political interest (Wasike, 2023), and interactive political endorsement and intention to vote (Pöyry & Reinikainen, 2024). To complement previous research, we propose a stepwise model that considers exposure to political influencer content, engagement with influencers, general political interest, increased awareness about politics, and finally, political activity. We formulated the steps based on Ekman and Amnå’s (2012) typology of latent and manifest political participation. These authors proposed a nuanced model to illustrate how participation is a continuum, from non-participation (disengagement), to latent political participation (attention and awareness), to manifest political participation (e.g., voting). They further divided latent participation into social involvement (e.g., talking about politics) and civic engagement (e.g., writing to an editor, recycling) and manifest participation into formal political participation (e.g., voting, running for office) and activism (e.g., boycotting). The primary point that Ekman and Amnå (2012) made is that we

should not only consider the manifest forms of participation, such as voting, but also its latent forms within a common framework, where citizens move between different stages of participation. Thus, the steps towards participation can be considered sequential, starting from not participating at all (disengagement/non-participation) to paying more attention to politics, and finally, to actively participating (civic engagement and/or participation) (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; see also Boulianne, 2015; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010).

In this study, we build on this typology but adapt it based on our own inferences. First, we focus on latent and manifest participation, leaving out forms of disengagement and non-participation. Second, we suggest somewhat different definitions for latent and manifest participation: a narrower definition for latent participation and a broader one for manifest participation. We consider that, on the individual level (see Ekman & Amnå, 2012), latent participation – that is, attention and awareness – consists of actions such as paying more attention to political issues in the media, perceiving politics as important, and taking a greater interest in politics. We see such actions more as being directed “inwards” and, thus, not as manifest actions that other people can directly observe. Here, we somewhat deviate from the typology proposed by Ekman and Amnå (2012), who considered actions such as donating money to charities or recycling as latent forms of political participation. In contrast, we consider these acts as manifest participation, as they are directed “outwards” and materialise in a way that allows them to be, for example, communicated on social media. Hence, while Ekman and Amnå (2012) considered manifest political participation as acts such as voting, contacting a politician, and boycotting, we add the actions that these authors have classified as “civic engagement” to this category as well.

Research questions and hypotheses

Based on previous literature, we set out to explore the perceived frequency at which influencers raised political topics and the attitudes of social media users towards such content. We complement previous discussions about the prevalence of political influencer content (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022) by turning to Finnish social media users. As discussed earlier, we use a broad definition of politics and consider political influencer content to include topics related to not only so-called formal politics, such as elections or individual politicians, but also lifestyle politics, such as climate change, gender, health, or nutrition. We pose the following research questions:

- RQ1. How frequently do Finnish social media users report encountering political influencer content?
- RQ2. How do Finnish social media users perceive such content?
- RQ3. What are the most common political topics raised by influencers that Finnish social media users report encountering?
- RQ4. How do Finnish social media users report engaging with such content?

In addition, we test a stepwise model – from exposure to participation – based on the typology proposed by Ekman and Amnå (2012). We suggest that exposure to political influencer content can trigger latent political participation (i.e., attention and awareness) towards politics, which, in turn, may lead to manifest political participation (e.g., voting, donating, and boycotting) and propose the following two hypotheses:

- H1. Exposure to political influencer content is positively associated with manifest political participation.
- H2. The relationship between exposure to political influencer content and manifest political participation is mediated by latent political participation.

Further, as interactivity appears to be critical in political influencer messaging (Pöyry & Reinikainen, 2024), and engagement (liking, commenting, and sharing) with influencer content is an important element for both building relationships with influencers and the endorsement effectiveness of influencer marketing (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Munnukka et al., 2019), we propose that engagement with influencers has a moderating effect when considering exposure to and becoming aware of political topics. Therefore, our third hypothesis is as follows:

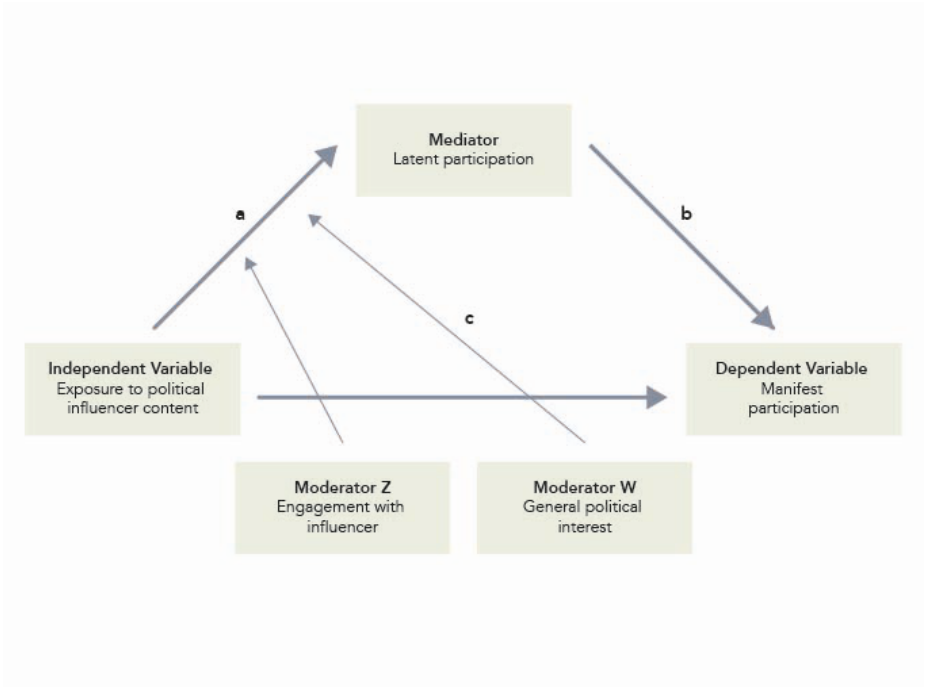
- H3. The relationship between exposure to political influencer content and latent political participation is moderated by engagement with the influencer such that the higher the engagement, the higher the latent political participation.

Further, in the context of political influencer content, interest in politics constitutes a key factor in political participation (Naderer, 2023). Therefore, we suggest that general political interest has a moderating effect when it comes to the relationship between exposure to political influencer content and latent political participation. We base this on the findings of the earliest studies on the Internet's participatory potential, which contemplated whether only those individuals who were already interested in digital participation would be the ones to do so (Norris, 1999). While this perspective precedes the emergence of social media (e.g., Boulianne, 2015; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010), we still acknowledge that the general political interest of a social media user might affect the impact that political influencer content has on them. Accordingly, we suggest a fourth and final hypothesis:

- H4. The relationship between exposure to political influencer content and latent political participation is moderated by general political interest such that the higher the interest, the higher the latent political participation.

Following this line of reasoning, it could be stated that influencers light the participatory spark, so to speak, by highlighting political topics for their followers, which potentially raises the followers’ attention and awareness with regard to those issues. For example, in practice, this could mean that through exposure to an influencer-initiated debate about how travelling increases harmful carbon emissions, a social media user moves from not caring at all about the political issue of climate change to becoming aware of the issue. Subsequently, having become aware, the user starts actively paying attention to the issue (e.g., by consuming news about climate change). Potentially, this could eventually lead to the user acting on the issue, for instance, by choosing to reduce their own travel or donating money to an environmental organisation. Finally, in addition to altering their lifestyle choices, the user may opt to act on the issue within the formal framework of politics (e.g., voting for a Green candidate) or through an informal form of participation, such as engaging in activism (e.g., participating in climate protests). Analytically, this sequence forms a moderated mediation model (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Moderated mediation model



Comments: The diagram shows a conceptual model of the relationship between exposure to political influencer content and manifest participation, mediated by latent participation and moderated by general political interest and engagement with influencer.

Based on this reasoning, we set out to investigate the self-reported exposure to and the attitudes towards political topics raised by influencers among Finnish social media users, while simultaneously investigating the connections between the reported exposure to and the perception of political influencer content on latent and manifest political participation.

Methods and data

The data for this study were gathered through an online survey employing a Finnish research company and its online panel (for survey questions used in this study, see Appendix 1). It is important to note that the use of survey data naturally entails that all our key variables are measured using self-reported assessments by our respondents and do not necessarily represent actual observed behaviour. The data gathering coincided with the first wave of Covid-19 in early 2020. The data are representative of the Finnish population aged 15–65 in terms of age, gender, and region. From all the data ($N = 1,025$), we present certain descriptive results and then use a smaller sample ($n = 680$) to run the moderated mediation model.

All respondents were first asked how often they typically engage with content created by influencers. It was elaborated for the respondents that influencers are people who have devoted audiences on social media and include individuals such as bloggers, YouTubers, or Instagrammers. They were then asked whether they had encountered political influencer content. We explained that such topics included discussions and statements about issues such as climate change, immigration, equality, sexuality or gender, health and nutrition, individual politicians, political parties, elections, or other current political issues. Those who said that they had encountered such content at least once during the previous year ($n = 680$) were then asked to answer further questions related to their exposure to such themes. More information about the respondents is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Respondents and their background information

Variable		Number of respondents in full sample (<i>N</i> = 1,025)	% of <i>N</i>	Number of respondents in subsample (<i>n</i> = 680)	% of <i>n</i>	% in the population (15–65)
Gender	Male	519	51	337	50	51
	Female	506	49	343	50	49
Age	15–24	183	18	148	22	17
	25–34	205	20	152	22	20
	35–44	199	19	135	20	20
	45–54	204	20	112	17	19
	55–65	234	23	133	20	23
Region	Western Finland	243	24	167	25	24
	Helsinki – Uusimaa	340	33	228	34	33
	Southern Finland	220	21	144	21	21
	Northern and Eastern Finland	222	22	140	21	22

Operationalisations and measures

After the initial filter question of whether the respondents had encountered political influencer content, those who had (*n* = 680) were asked to assess how often they had encountered such content during the past year. All the variables for the moderated mediation analyses used standardised scales (which are presented in detail below). The reason for standardising the scales used for analysis was to make it easier to compare the strengths of the coefficients.

Regarding the first scale, exposure to political topics, the respondents were first asked how often they had encountered influencer content on formal politics, such as elections, the parliament, parties, or individual politicians, and they responded using a four-point scale (1 = not at all; 2 = once or twice; 3 = three

to five times; 4 = more than five times). These items were then standardised to range between 0 and 1 (0 = not at all; 0.25 = once or twice; 0.50 = three to five times; 1 = more than five times; $\alpha = 0.92$). In addition, the respondents were asked how often they had encountered influencer content related to various societal topics (i.e., lifestyle politics), such as climate change, health, nutrition, or sexuality, during the past year. The assessment scale was the same as that for the previous question. Again, these items were standardised to range between 0 and 1 ($\alpha = 0.86$). All the items on exposure to formal politics and societal topics (lifestyle politics) were then summarised into a standardised scale (value 0–1) for the independent variable (IV) *Exposure to political influencer content* ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Latent and manifest participation were both measured using items that were built on the typology proposed by Ekman and Amnå (2012). The standardised scale (0–1; $\alpha = 0.90$) for the mediator *Latent political participation* included a statement with three items:

Political or societal influencer content has made me... 1) more interested in political and societal topics; 2) consider political and societal topics to be important; 3) pay more attention to political and societal topics in media.

Each of these had original answer scales (0 = I don't know; 1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree). During the standardisation process, the "I don't know" answers were omitted, and the new scale ranged from 0 (fully disagree) to 1 (fully agree). The standardised scale (0–1; $\alpha = 0.81$) for the dependent variable (DV) *Manifest participation* included a statement with four items:

Political or societal influencer content has made me... 1) talk more about political and societal topics with my friends and family; 2) participate in actions that are beneficial for society, such as donating money or recycling; 3) participate in non-formal political action, such as demonstrations or boycotts; 4) participate in formal political action, such as voting or taking part in party activities.

All assessments were carried out using a five-point scale (0 = can't say; 1 = fully disagree; 5 = fully agree). During the standardisation process, the "can't say" responses were omitted, and the obtained scale ranged from 0 (fully disagree) to 1 (fully agree).

Moderator Z: *Engagement with influencer* was measured using a standardised scale (0–1; $\alpha = 0.81$) that consisted of a question with three items:

How often do you... 1) react to influencer content? 2) comment on influencer content? 3) share influencer content?

The items were assessed utilising a seven-point scale, which ranged from “several times a day” to “never”. During standardisation, this scale was reversed (0 = never; 1 = several times a day).

Moderator W: *General political interest* was measured with a standardised scale (0–1; $\alpha = 0.86$) consisting of three items:

1. “How interested are you in politics?”
2. “To what extent do you follow politics in your everyday life?”
3. “To what extent do you follow societal issues in your everyday life?”

The response to the first item used a four-point scale (0 = can’t say; 1 = very interested; 4 = not at all interested). During standardisation, the “can’t say” answers were omitted, and the new scale ranged from 0 (not at all interested) to 1 (very interested). The second and third items had original answer scales (1 = a lot; 2 = a decent amount; 3 = only a little; 4 = not at all; 5 = I don’t know). During the standardisation process, the “I don’t know” responses were omitted, and the scales were reversed (0 = not at all; 0.33 = only a little; 0.66 = a decent amount; 1 = a lot).

Analyses

The moderated mediation model (see Figure 1) was analysed using the PROCESS version 4.2 macro for SPSS, Process Model 9 (Hayes, 2018: 589). Although Process Model 9 does not test the entire model (i.e., the total effects of the model are not determinable), it enabled the testing of the paths depicted in Figure 1. Accordingly, a conditional process model (with bootstrapping = 5,000 to make the findings robust even if normality assumptions were violated) that used both moderators (both with mean-centred values) was employed (see Appendix 2 for the regression tables).

Results

Descriptive results

Our first step was to determine how frequently Finnish social media users reported encountering political influencer content (RQ1), how they perceived such content (RQ2), what were the most common political topics raised by influencers that Finnish social media users reported encountering (RQ3), and how the users engaged with such content (RQ4). Hence, some descriptive results are reported first. Our respondents reported having encountered political influencer content relatively often. From the entire sample ($N = 1,025$), 66 per cent of the respondents reported that they had seen influencers either comment on or raise political topics. This was more common among younger respondents (15–24-year-olds), with 81 per cent reporting having encountered such content (see Table 2).

Table 2 Respondents who reported encountering or not encountering political influencer content, by age group (per cent)

Answer	Age group				
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–65
Yes	81	74	68	55	57
No	19	26	32	45	43

Comments: *N* = 1,025

Young people also expressed perceiving such content more positively than other respondents, with 46 per cent of the 15–24-year-olds having either very or somewhat positive attitudes towards such content (see Table 3). In contrast, in the oldest age group (55–65-year-olds), only 18 per cent reported having positive attitudes.

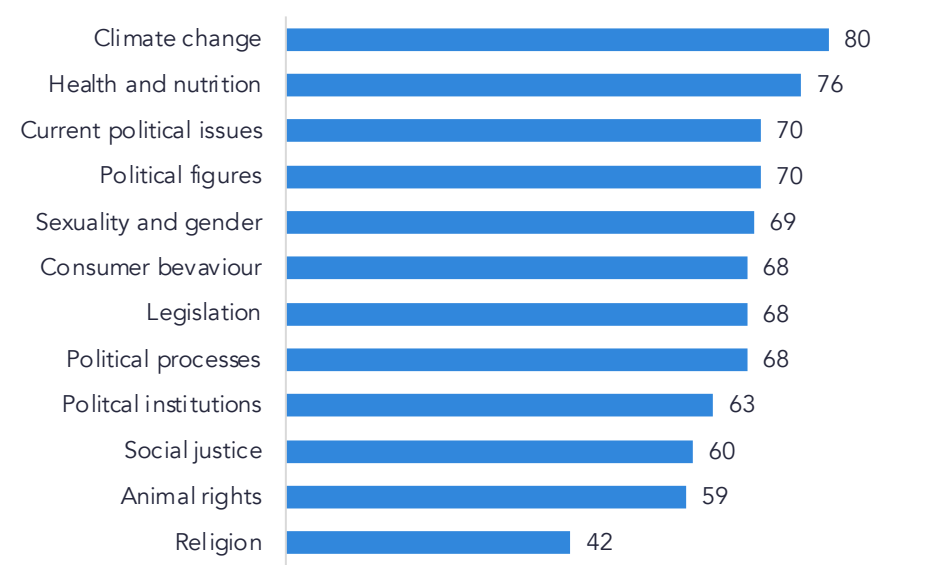
Table 3 Respondents who reported their attitudes towards political influencer content, by age group (per cent)

Attitude	Age group				
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–65
Very positive	14	9	6	4	6
Somewhat positive	32	27	21	16	12
Neither negative nor positive	37	36	41	34	39
Somewhat negative	8	15	21	24	22
Very negative	2	4	3	12	12
Can't say	7	9	9	11	9

Comments: *N* = 1,025

The respondents who had reported being exposed to political topics raised by influencers (*n* = 680) were then asked what kinds of topics they had encountered during the previous year (see Figure 2). Most often, the respondents reported having encountered content related to climate change (80%), health and nutrition (76%), current political issues (70%), along with political figures (70%).

Figure 2 Respondents who reported encountering political content created by influencers during the past year at least once, by topic (per cent)



Comments: *n* = 680

When asked about engagement with political influencer content, the respondents who had encountered political content in the previous year (*n* = 680) mostly reported no engagement, with 73 per cent reporting no engagement at all when it came to influencer content related to issues such as the parliament, elections, individual politicians, or parties. However, 17 per cent did report having liked such content, while 11 per cent stated that they had engaged with the content (e.g., by commenting or sharing). When asked about engagement with influencer content that was related to societal issues, such as climate change, sexuality, gender, or consumption, 66 per cent of the respondents reported no engagement, 23 per cent reported liking such content, and 11 per cent reported other types of engagement. Thus, content related to lifestyle politics appeared to be more engaging than that related to formal politics.

Table 4 Respondents’ engagement with political topics, by age group (per cent)

		Age group				
Variable		15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–65
Engagement with influencer content related to lifestyle politics	Liking	42	20	21	16	14
	Commenting	5	4	6	3	8
	Sharing	5	2	2	5	1
	Disliking	3	3	1	4	4
	No engagement	45	71	71	73	74
Engagement with influencer content related to formal politics	Liking	29	14	13	13	11
	Commenting	5	4	3	3	8
	Sharing	5	5	4	5	3
	Disliking	1	2	2	2	4
	No engagement	60	76	78	78	74

Comments: *n* = 680

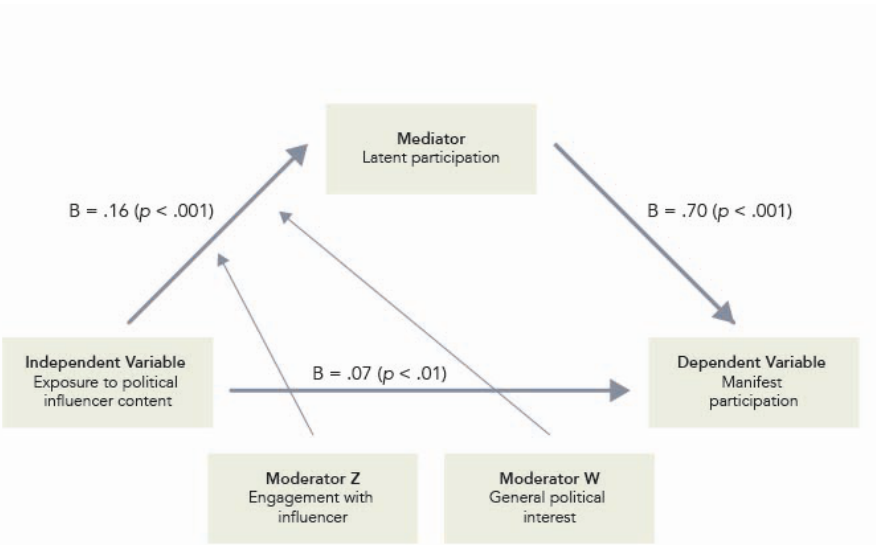
In line with the previous results, young people (15–24-year-olds) reported engaging with political influencer content more than other age groups (see Table 4). However, the amount of 15–24-year-olds is slightly overrepresented in this sample (*n* = 680), while the amount of 55–65-year-olds is slightly underrepresented when comparing to the entire population of 15–65-year-olds (see Table 1 for information about respondents).

Results of the moderated mediation model

The second step of the study was to examine how exposure to political topics raised by influencers related to latent and manifest political participation. Thus, the results of the moderated mediation model are reported next.

The findings from the conditional process analysis indicate a statistical significance of *p* < 0.10, as the hypotheses have a directional expectation (the regression table for the analyses is provided in Appendix 2). The model is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Findings for the moderated mediation model with exposure to political influencer content (IV) and manifest participation (DV)



Comments: The moderators are mean-centred. Multicollinearity diagnostics are all good (tolerances range between .84 and .93 and VIF scores from 1.074 to 1.185).

The model produced a significant direct effect as well as significant indirect effects, but no significant moderation effects. Thus, the IV *Exposure to political influencer content* has a direct effect on the DV *Manifest participation* ($B = 0.07$; $SE = 0.02$; $p = 0.007$; $LLCI = 0.02$; $ULCI = 0.13$). Further, the IV *Exposure to political influencer content* has a significant effect on the mediator *Latent political participation* ($B = 0.16$; $SE = 0.04$; $p = 0.0002$; $LLCI = 0.07$; $ULCI = 0.24$). There is also a quite strong mediation effect, where the mediator significantly influences the DV *Manifest political participation* ($B = 0.70$; $SE = 0.03$; $p = 0.0000$; $LLCI = 0.64$; $ULCI = 0.74$). These findings support H1 – Exposure to political content raised by a social media influencer is positively associated with manifest political participation – as well as H2 – The relationship between exposure and manifest participation is mediated by latent participation. The other two hypotheses (H3 and H4) were not confirmed, as there were no significant moderation effects for either *Engagement with influencer* (Moderator Z; $B = -0.16$; $SE = 0.18$; $p = 0.3574$; $LLCI = -0.51$; $ULCI = 0.18$) or *General political interest* (Moderator W; $B = -0.08$; $SE = 0.17$; $p = 0.6398$; $LLCI = -0.42$; $ULCI = 0.26$).

Discussion

This study had two objectives: The first was to explore the perceptions and engagement that Finnish social media users report with regard to political influencer content, while the second was to empirically test an analytical model that covered the range from exposure to political topics raised by influencers to manifest political participation (e.g., voting or boycotting) through latent political participation (awareness and attention). Hence, this article contributes to the discussions on the role of new social media arenas in political communication in general (e.g., Holt et al., 2013; Widholm & Ekman, 2024; Yamamoto et al., 2017) and, specifically, on the role of political influencers in political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Harff & Schmuck, 2024c; Naderer, 2023; Riedl et al., 2023).

The descriptive results indicated that a significant number of Finnish social media users reported encountering political influencer content. This implies that political content published by Finnish influencers is not exceptional to Finnish online audiences, nor should influencers be considered as actors who only operate in the commercial sphere (e.g., Lee & Watkins, 2016; Leite & Babbista, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Instead, Finnish audiences state that they commonly encounter influencer content about topics such as climate change, social equality, legislation, and elections – to which young people in particular seem to respond positively. This finding aligns with research from Belgium and Germany (Harff & Schmuck, 2024b), where 82 per cent and 87 per cent of social media users, respectively, between 16 and 22 years of age indicated that they had encountered political content by influencers in the last year (compared with 81% of respondents 15–24 years of age in this study). Thereby, the idea of collaborating with influencers for strategic political communication, as the European Parliament did, for example, does not seem to be out of the ordinary.

However, as political influencer content more often appears in ephemeral forms than permanent ones (Gonzalez et al., 2023), a considerable proportion of the political content that influencers publish might go unnoticed by social media users. Therefore, asking social media users how often they have encountered such content will likely produce interesting results. Although, such results are perceptions that are based not only on actual encounters with political influencer content but also on prevalent ideas about the politicisation of influencers, which could be, for example, based on what has been written about the influencers by the mainstream media. In fact, the politicisation of influencers may often be driven from the outside by mainstream media, other influencers, or online audiences (Arnesson, 2024).

Our results showed that when asked about engagement with political topics, the respondents leaned more towards engagement with topics related to lifestyle, such as health, nutrition, and gender, than those related to formal politics, such as elections, individual politicians, and political institutions. Further, when asked about individual political topics that the respondents had noticed among influencer content during the previous year, topics such as climate change, health,

and nutrition were the most common. Individual political figures also ranked quite high in this list (see Figure 2), which might indicate the personalisation of politics and increased interest in individual politicians at the expense of political parties and institutions (Karvonen, 2014).

These findings appear to align with the results from studies conducted from the perspective of influencers. For instance, Gonzalez and colleagues (2023) reported that influencers are more likely to post about lifestyle politics than traditional, formal politics. A similar observation was reported by Suuronen and colleagues (2022), who noted that climate change – along with health and nutrition – was among the political topics that Finnish influencers themselves reported bringing up very frequently. Thus, influencers appear to be prominent actors when it comes to discussions about environmental issues in Finland – an observation that has also been made in other Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Norway (Vikøren Andersen & Eriksson Krutrök, 2024).

The results from the second part of this study suggest that the perceptions regarding exposure to political influencer content is indeed associated with self-reported political participation. This is partly a direct effect but mostly one that is heavily mediated by latent participation (awareness and attention). Interestingly, general political interest was not found to be a moderator in this relationship. However, as we did not test the function that political interest serves in other relationships (e.g., between latent and manifest participation), we cannot conclude that political interest plays no role in the relationship between exposure and behaviour. Nonetheless, when considering the findings by Naderer (2023) and Wasike (2023), it is possible that political influencer content may inspire even those with little or no prior political interest – something that can be considered positive in terms of potentially engaging those who have previously been inactive or uninterested in politics. Furthermore, the extent to which social media users tend to engage with influencers did not have any impact on the mediating effect of political exposure; however, previous studies from the field of influencer marketing seem to suggest that audience engagement promotes the impact of influencers' marketing content (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Munnukka et al., 2019). Nevertheless, similar to political interest, engagement may play another kind of a role when it comes to exposure to political influencer content and possible participation, and, thus, we cannot state that engagement would be irrelevant in this relationship.

Taken together, our findings provide important insights. They indicate that political influencer content can potentially induce latent political participation by social media users and light the participatory spark by inspiring people to talk about politics with their friends and family and leading them to consider political issues to be important. These actions, in time, are likely to manifest as political activity, such as boycotting, voting, or donating money. Hence, our findings align with the results of, for example, Dekoninck and Schmuck (2023), Harff and Schmuck (2024c), and Pöyry and Reinikainen (2024), who all suggest that exposure to political influencer content may predict political participation. At the same time, it should be noted that political influencer content is hetero-

geneous in nature and that different topics, formats (e.g., reaction videos and vlogs), and deliveries (e.g., humour and scandalisation) can have different effects with respect to political participation (Harff & Schmuck, 2024b).

Finally, we would like to stress that influencers are typically subjected to obvious economic constraints. The business models of most influencers rely significantly on income from product endorsements; thus, influencers need to carefully consider how addressing political issues can affect what Delisle and Parmentier (2016) call their “person-brand capital”. For instance, Suuronen and colleagues (2022) observed that influencers often avoid raising political issues for fear of losing collaborations. Therefore, economic considerations may possibly affect whether and how social media influencers take up political issues. Moreover, addressing political issues might simply constitute a tactic for influencer marketing and product endorsements. In a “purpose economy” (Hurst, 2016), it is becoming increasingly vital to charge products with purpose, and connecting products to political engagement is a possible way to do so. Rather than advancing interest in a social or political cause, the activities of influencers could treat political causes as a means to an end. In the long run, such an instrumental approach to political issues might even harm political participation.

Limitations and future outlook

We acknowledge that this study has several limitations. First, it is based on survey data and self-reported measures. Therefore, the possibilities of actually observing and discussing the effects of the societal and political content raised by influencers are limited, especially as people often have difficulties accurately recalling and reporting their past behaviours. Further, when measuring both latent and manifest participation, we used a measure for which the respondents needed to assess the effects that influencer content had on their own behaviour. This is different from other studies on political influencers, which usually measure political behaviour by asking the respondents to report their own online or offline behaviour without making them evaluate whether the content has affected said behaviour (e.g., Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). However, measures that involve asking respondents to evaluate the likelihood of them following the behaviour suggested by an influencer have also been used in previous research (e.g., Naderer, 2023). While we acknowledge that the method we used to measure our mediating variable and dependent variable may attract criticism, we would like to note that individuals usually tend to “grossly underestimate” the influence that other people have on them (Cialdini, 2005: 158). Thus, the fact that we observed a strong mediating effect using this type of a measurement makes the finding interesting, as our way of designing the measure could likely have led to extremely critical behavioural assessments.

To address the constraints associated with self-reporting, future studies should explore the impacts of political influencer content through experimental settings and the randomisation of participants. Such research settings could, for

example, include manipulating the content shown to respondents (lifestyle/formal politics) or varying the motivations behind addressing the topics (sponsored/not sponsored). Parasocial relationships and perceived authenticity – both of which are important variables in terms of influencer appeal (e.g., Kapitan et al., 2021; Lee & Johnson, 2021; Munnukka et al., 2019) – could be studied as moderators. Further, in terms of our model, it is crucial to note that we adopted an integrative approach that did not distinguish between formal and lifestyle politics but, instead, combined these into one variable: *Exposure to political influencer content*. Making this distinction could help further differentiate the possible consequences of political influencer content.

Another limitation of this is the cultural context in which it was conducted. On average, Finnish people are not as active in engaging with online content as people in the European Union (News Media Online, 2020), which might have affected our model, as it included engagement as a moderator. Hence, future research should examine the connections between engagement and the possible effects of societal and political content in other countries and influencer cultures. Thus far, most relevant evidence comes from Western countries (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2024b, 2024c; Wasike, 2023), while regions such as the Asia-Pacific are becoming increasingly prominent with regard to influencer cultures (see Abidin et al., 2023).

Finally, a further limitation is related to the moderated mediation analysis and the cross-sectional nature of our data. Studies can use panel data – as is the case, for example, in the work of Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022, 2023) – longitudinal studies, or mobile tracking to compensate for the cross-sectional quality of the data. Such studies are needed to verify that the causal sequence of exposure, latent participation, and manifest participation is not only theoretically and analytically sound but also empirically valid.

Acknowledgements

This study has been funded by The Media Industry Research Foundation of Finland and The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation.

References

- Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative intimacies: Influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology*, 8, 1–18. <https://hdl.handle.net/1794/26365>
- Abidin, C., Xu, J., & Hutchinson, J. (2023). Influencer regulations, governance and sociocultural issues in Asia. *Policy and Internet*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.340>
- Arnesson, J. (2023). Influencers as ideological intermediaries: Promotional politics and authenticity labour in influencer collaborations. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(3), 528–544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221117505>
- Arnesson, J. (2024). ‘Endorsing a dictatorship and getting paid for it’: Discursive struggles over intimacy and authenticity in the politicisation of influencer collaborations. *New Media & Society*, 26(3), 1467–1483. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211064302>

- Ashton, D., & Patel, K. (2018). Vlogging careers: Everyday expertise, collaboration and authenticity. In S. Taylor, & S. Luckman (Eds.), *The new normal of working lives: Critical studies in contemporary work and employment* (pp. 147–169). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66038-7_8
- Bause, H. (2021). Politische Social-Media-Influencer als Meinungsführer? *Publizistik* [Political social media influencers as opinion leaders?], 66(2), 295–316.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-021-00666-z>
- Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication and Society*, 18, 524–538.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542>
- Chen, K.-J., Lin, J.-S., & Shan, Y. (2021). Influencer marketing in China: The roles of parasocial identification, consumer engagement, and inferences of manipulative intent. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 20(6), 1436–1448. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1945>
- Cheng, Z., Chen, J., Peng, R. X., & Shoenberger, H. (2024). Social media influencers talk about politics: Investigating the role of source factors and PSR in Gen-Z followers' perceived information quality, receptivity and sharing intention. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 21(2), 117–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2023.2173700>
- Cialdini, R. B. (2005). Basic social influence is underestimated. *Psychological Inquiry*, 16(4), 158–161. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20447283>
- Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, 21(4), 895–913.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684>
- Dekoninck, H., & Schmuck, D. (2022). The mobilizing power of influencers for pro-environmental behavior intentions and political participation. *Environmental Communication*, 16(4), 458–472.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2027801>
- Dekoninck, H., & Schmuck, D. (2023). The “greenfluence”: Following environmental influencers, parasocial relationships, and youth's participation behavior. *New Media & Society*, 26(11), 6615–6635. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231156131>
- Delisle, M.-P., & Parmentier, M.-A. (2016). Navigating person-branding in the fashion blogosphere. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 7(3), 211–224.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2016.1167619>
- Dhanesh, G. S., & Duthler, G. (2019). Relationship management through social media influencers: Effects of followers' awareness of paid endorsement. *Public Relations Review*, 45(3), 101765.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.03.002>
- Duffy, B. E. (2018). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.
- Ekman, J., & Amnå, E. (2012). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs*, 22, 283–300. <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1>
- Gibson, R., & Cantijoch, M. (2013). Conceptualizing and measuring participation in the age of the internet: Is online political engagement really different to offline? *The Journal of Politics*, 75(3), 701–716. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381613000431>
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Veenstra, A., Vraga, E., & Shah, D. (2010). Digital democracy: Reimagining pathways to political participation. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 7(1), 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331680903316742>
- Gonzalez, A., Schmuck, D., & Vandenbosch, L. (2023). Posting and framing politics: A content analysis of celebrities', athletes', and influencers' Instagram political content. *Information, Communication & Society*, 27(8), 1605–1627. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2285495>
- Goodwin, A. M., Joseff, K., Riedl, M., Lukito, J., & Woolley, S. C. (2023). Political relational influencers: The mobilization of social media influencers in the political arena. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 1613–1633. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18987>
- 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.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2008.11008968>
- Graham, T., Jackson, D., & Wright, S. (2015). From everyday conversation to political action: Talking austerity in online ‘third spaces’. *European Journal of Communication*, 30(6), 648–665.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323115595529>
- Harff, D., & Schmuck, D. (2024a). Is authenticity key? Mobilization by social media influencers versus celebrities and young people's political participation. *Psychology & Marketing*, 41(11), 2757–2771. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22082>

- Harff, D., & Schmuck, D. (2024b). Prevalence, presentation, and popularity of political topics in social media influencers' content across two countries. *Political Communication*, 1–31. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2406809>
- Harff, D., & Schmuck, D. (2024c). Who relies on social media influencers for political information? A cross-country study among youth. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. OnlineFirst. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612241234898>
- Hayes, A. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis – A regression-based approach* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Holt, K., Shehata, A., Strömbäck, J., & Ljungberg, E. (2013). Age and the effects of news media attention and social media use on political interest and participation: Do social media function as leveller? *European Journal of Communication*, 28(1), 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323112465369>
- Hudders, L., 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>
- Hurst, A. (2016). *The purpose economy: How your desire for impact, personal growth and community is changing the world*. Elevate.
- Kapitan, S., van Esch, P., Soma, V., & Kietzmann, J. (2021). Influencer marketing and authenticity in content creation. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 30(4), 342–351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18393349211011171>
- Karvonen, L. (2014). *The personalisation of politics: A study of parliamentary democracies*. ECPR press.
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>
- Kostelka, F., & Blais, A. (2021). The generational and institutional sources of the global decline in voter turnout. *World Politics*, 73(4), 629–667. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887121000149>
- Lee, J. E., & Watkins, B. (2016). YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(12), 5753–5760. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.04.171>
- Lee, S. S., & Johnson, B. K. (2021). Are they being authentic? The effects of self-disclosure and message sidedness on sponsored post effectiveness. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(1), 30–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1986257>
- Leite, F. P., & Baptista, P. D. P. (2021). The effects of social media influencers' self-disclosure on behavioral intentions: The role of source credibility, parasocial relationships, and brand trust. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 30(3), 295–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2021.1935275>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: how message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
- Munnukka, J., Maity, D., Reinikainen, H., & Luoma-aho, V. (2019). "Thanks for watching": The effectiveness of YouTube vlog endorsements. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 93, 226–234. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.12.014>
- Munson, S., & Resnick, P. (2011). The prevalence of political discourse in non-political blogs. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 5(1), 233–240. <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/14133>
- Naderer, B. (2023). Influencers as political agents? The potential of an unlikely source to motivate political action. *Communications*, 48(1), 93–11. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0006>
- News media online [Uutismedia verkossa]. (2020). *Reuters institute digital news report, country report Finland [Reuters-instituutin Digital News Report, Suomen maaraportti]*. Tampere Research Center for Journalism, Media, and Communication. https://www.mediaalantutkimussaatio.fi/wp-content/uploads/Reuters-Uutismedia-verkossa_raportti-Suomi_2020.pdf
- Norris, P. (1999). Who surfs? New technology, old voters and virtual democracy. In E. C. Kamarck, & J. Nye (Eds.), *Democracy.com? Governance in a networked world* (pp. 71–94). Hollis Press.
- Pöyry, E., & Reinikainen, H. (2024). "Remember to vote!" How do people respond to social media influencers promoting political participation? In J. Arnesson, & H. Reinikainen (Eds.), *Influencer politics – At the intersection of personal, political, and promotional* (pp. 35–50). De Gruyter.

- Reinikainen, H., Munnukka, J., Maity, D., & Luoma-aho, V. (2020). 'You really are a great big sister' – Parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(3-4), 279–298.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2019.1708781>
- Renström, E. A., Aspernäs, J., & Bäck, H. (2021). The young protester: The impact of belongingness needs on political engagement. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(6), 781–798.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1768229>
- 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>
- Riedl, M. J., Lukito, J., & Woolley, S. C. (2023). Political influencers on social media: An introduction. *Social Media + Society*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177938>
- 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>
- Sehl, A., & Schützeneder, J. (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). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177916>
- Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53, 101742. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.01.011>
- 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>
- van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going, . . . gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1) 24–56.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2011.01995.x>
- van Driel, L., & Dumitrica, D. (2021). Selling brands while staying “authentic”: The professionalization of Instagram influencers. *Convergence*, 27(1), 66–84.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520902136>
- van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Vikøren Andersen, I., & Eriksson Krutrök, M. (2024). Greenfluencers and environmental advocacy: Sustainability representations and appeals to action in content by Scandinavian influencers. In J. Arnesson, & H. Reinikainen (Eds.), *Influencer politics: At the intersection of personal, political, and promotional* (pp. 105–120). De Gruyter.
- Wasike, B. (2023). I am an influencer and I approve this message! Examining how political social media influencers affect political interest, political trust, political efficacy, and political participation. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 3110–3132.
<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/20293>
- Widholm, A., & Ekman, M. (2024). Democracy and digital disintegration: Platforms, actors, citizens. *Nordicom Review*, 45(S1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2024-0005>
- Yamamoto, M., Kushin, M. J., & Dalisay, F. (2017). Social media and political disengagement among young adults: A moderated mediation model of cynicism, efficacy, and social media use on apathy. *Mass Communication & Society*, 20(2), 149–168.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1224352>

Appendix 1

The political role of social media influencers / Questionnaire

(translated from Finnish)

From the panel: Age (15–65)

Gender

Postcode

How often do you use the following social media channels?

Several times a day

Once a day

A few times a week

About once a week

Monthly

Less frequent

Never

1. Facebook

2. Instagram

3. YouTube

4. Snapchat

5. Twitter

6. LinkedIn

7. Twitch

8. TikTok

9. Jodel

10. Pinterest

11. Blogs

12. Other, what?

Note! If the answer is “Never” to all options, the respondent will be directed out of the survey.

How often do you do the following?

Several times a day

Once a day

A few times a week

About once a week

Monthly

Less frequently

Never

1. I react to a social media influencer’s blog post, YouTube video, or other social media content, for example, by liking.

2. I comment on a social media influencer's blog post, YouTube video, or other social media content on the influencer's own social media channel.
3. I share a blog post, YouTube video, or other social media content of a social media influencer on my own social media channel.

In general, what do you think about social media influencers taking a stand on political or social issues? These may include, for example, topics related to political parties, actors, and institutions, but also topics related to climate change, migration, sexuality and gender, and social equality.

0 = I don't know; 1 = I am very negative; 5 = I am very positive

Have you ever noticed a social media influencer bring up or comment on topics that you think are political or societal, or related to political or social topics? This means, for example, times when a social media influencer has brought up topics related to politicians, parties, elections, social grievances, or other topical public debates, such as climate change, immigration, sexuality and gender, or equality.

Yes, I have noticed

No, I haven't noticed

Note! If the answer is "No, I haven't noticed", the respondent will not be directed to the following questions.

How often during the past year have you noticed a social media influencer (blogger, YouTuber, Instagrammer, or other social media influencer) bringing up the following topics on their own social media channels?

Not at all

One or two times

Three to five times

More than five times

I don't remember

1. Current public issues (e.g., immigration)
2. Political figures (e.g., party chairs or presidential candidates)
3. Political processes (e.g., elections)
4. Legislation (e.g., healthcare)
5. Political institutions (e.g., parliament)
6. Some other political topic, what?

If you have noticed a social media influencer or influencers highlighting or commenting on topics related to political issues, such as the parliament, elections, individual politicians, or parties, which of the following have you primarily reacted to such content?

1. Liking
2. Commenting
3. Sharing
4. Disliking (thumbs down)
5. I haven't

How often during the past year have you noticed social media influencers (bloggers, YouTubers, Instagrammers, or other social media influencers) bringing up the following social topics in their own social media channels?

Not at all
One or two times
Three to five times
More than five times
I don't remember

1. Sexuality and gender
2. Animal rights
3. Health and nutrition
4. Climate change
5. Religion
6. Consumer behaviour
7. Social justice, e.g., equal pay between men and women

If you have noticed a social media influencer or influencers highlighting or commenting on topics related to social issues, such as climate change, sexuality and gender, health, nutrition, or consumer behaviour, which of the following have you primarily reacted to such content?

1. Liking
2. Commenting
3. Sharing
4. Disliking (thumbs down)
5. I haven't

If you have noticed a social media influencer bringing up either political or social topics, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

0 = don't know; 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree

Political or social content shared by social media influencers has made me...

1. Take a greater interest in political or social issues
2. Consider political or social issues more important in my own life
3. Discuss political or social issues more with friends, family, or other people close to me

4. Pay more attention to political or social issues on TV or in newspapers
5. Do more things that I see as beneficial to wider society, such as donating to charity or recycling
6. Engage more in formal political activities, such as voting in elections or participating in political parties
7. Engage more in informal political activities, such as participating in demonstrations or buying boycotts

How interested are you in politics?

- Very interested
- Somewhat interested
- A little interested
- Not interested at all
- I don't know

To what extent do you follow politics in your everyday life?

This means, for example, reading news or articles related to the government, members of the parliament, or other political actors in Finland or some other country.

- A lot
- A decent amount
- Only a little
- Not at all
- I don't know

To what extent do you follow societal issues in your everyday life?

This means, for example, reading news or articles related to climate change, religion, or gender and equality.

- A lot
- A decent amount
- Only a little
- Not at all
- I don't know

Appendix 2

Table A1 Regression analyses for Figure 3

	Mediator (0–1)		DV (0–1)	
	B	SE	B	SE
Exposure to politics (0–1)	***.16	.01		
EXP*Engagement (0–1)	–.14	.18		
EXP*Interest (0–1)	–.12	.17		
Constant	***.38	.01		
N	602			
R ²	.17			
Exposure to politics (0–1)			*.06	.02
Mediator (0–1)			***.70	.03
Constant			***.04	.01
N			602	
R ²			.59	

Comments: ****p* < .001

Table A2 Regression analyses for Figure 3 with covariates

	Mediator (0–1)		DV (0–1)	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Exposure to politics (0–1)	***.16	.04		
EXP*Engagement (0–1)	–.16	.18		
EXP*Interest (0–1)	–.08	.17		
Gender	***.08	.02		
Age group	***–.03	.00		
Education level	–.00	.01		
Constant	***.35			
<i>N</i>	602			
<i>R</i> ²	.20			
Exposure to politics (0–1)			** .07	.03
Mediator (0–1)			***.70	.03
Gender			.01	.01
Age group			–.01	.01
Education level			–.00	.00
Constant			** .09	.03
<i>N</i>			602	
<i>R</i> ²			.60	

Comments: **p* < .05 ** *p* < .01 ****p* < .001