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Navigating Politics Through Influencers: Understanding the
Parasocial Path to Political Engagement

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Social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as significant players in today's media landscape, shaping consumer trends while increasingly serving as sources of news and political content for young adults (Rield et al., 2021). Unlike traditional political actors, SMIs build trust with their audiences through perceived authenticity, relatability, and consistent engagement (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). Various research shows that younger demographics often prefer influencers over traditional news outlets due to their relatability and engaging communication style, particularly when addressing political or social issues (Newman et al., 2021).

For young adults, SMIs are more than entertainers or lifestyle gurus to whom they can look up (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Hudders et al., 2021). They are often viewed as trusted sources of information (Peter & Muth, 2023). By reducing the complexity of political topics and presenting them in relatable ways, influencers lower the barriers to political participation and foster political engagement (Schmuck et al., 2022), such as voting or activism. While this phenomenon has attracted considerable interest internationally (Rothut, 2025), in the Czech Republic, where young adults are active social media consumers (Štětka et al., 2021), the potential of influencers to drive political interest and engagement remains underexplored.

Whilst existing research primarily focuses on the broader challenges posed by digital platforms, such as disinformation and their impact on public trust and polarization (Mazák & Štětka, 2015; Štětka et al., 2021), there is an evident gap in understanding how influencers and their parasocial relationships with audiences contribute to political behaviors. Štětka et al. (2021) emphasize the need for further research into the influence of online social media on political behavior and the transformation of the Czech public sphere, highlighting the region's unique post-transition media environment. This call for research aligns with scholarly findings (Harff & Schmuck, 2024b; Schmuck et al., 2022), which suggest that SMIs can foster political interest by making complex issues accessible and engaging.

Building on this context, this study explores the unique position of SMIs as opinion leaders who bridge the gap between entertainment and political communication (Harff &

Schmuck, 2024b). By fulfilling functions such as simplifying complex issues, providing orientation, and arousing interest, influencers have the potential to shape political attitudes and behaviors among their followers (Stehr et al., 2015). These dynamics are particularly significant within the context of young adults, whose political engagement and civic participation are often influenced by the accessibility and framing of political information in social media environments (Hameleers et al., 2018).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the impact of SMIs on the political engagement of young adults in the Czech Republic, with a specific focus on the role of parasocial relationships and their associated opinion leadership functions. When users establish a parasocial bond with a SMI, a powerful channel of influence emerges (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Stehr et al., 2015).

In essence, this paper seeks to answer the question: *"How do the parasocial opinion leadership functions of social media influencers influence young adults' political engagement through the mediating role of political interest?"*

This research applies a political psychology approach, focusing on understanding youth political engagement concerning SMI content. Grounded in the parasocial interaction theoretical framework (Horton & Wohl, 1956), the study examines how social media influencers use emotional bonds with their audiences to affect political behaviors.

In addition, this research also theorizes that exposure to political influencers will be an important predictor of political interest and engagement. Although this pathway was not formally hypothesized as a separate effect, it is conceptualized as a relevant predispositional condition that can facilitate the development of parasocial opinion leadership functions.

Based on this framework, it is expected that stronger perceptions of parasocial opinion leadership functions, as well as higher exposure to political influencers, will be associated with greater political interest and a higher likelihood of political engagement among young adults.

Prior work indicates that SMIs frequently highlight political topics, thereby functioning as opinion leaders who selectively reinforce audiences' prior predispositions and normalize political discourse within their communities (Harff and Schmuck 2023; Newman et al. 2023). Over time, this agenda-setting role can foster perceptions that political participation is desirable and attainable (Valente and Pumpuang 2007; Zimmermann et al. 2022).

While some studies have examined influencer topics in regions such as Asia and the Middle East, most of the empirical research to date has primarily focused on Western Europe and North America, with comparatively less attention given to Central and Eastern European contexts (Hudders et al., 2021). By concentrating on Czech citizens, this study makes a relevant and necessary contribution to understanding how these dynamics manifest in post-transition democracies.

Literature review

This research applies the parasocial interaction framework (Horton & Wohl, 1956) for understanding how SMIs develop strong, trust-based relationships with their followers, fostering a sense of closeness and relatability despite the one-sided nature of their interaction (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

This conceptual framework has been previously applied to explore the dynamics between media figures and their audiences, particularly in marketing and lifestyle contexts (Abidin, 2015; Närvänen et al., 2020), where influencers' own perceived authenticity affects their audiences' loyalty and behavior (Martin & Sharma, 2022). This framework underpins the analysis of how SMIs perform parasocial opinion leadership (Stehr et al., 2015), shaping young adults' political interest and engagement.

Defining social media influencers

To understand why SMIs are such a prevailing part of young people's news consumption, it is important to define the term. Goanta and Ranchordás (2020, p. 4) define SMIs as:

“individuals with a significant social media audience, with the purpose of increasing online engagement for the endorsed product or service”.

SMIs have both the platform and the influence to promote material goods and endorse brands, but their impact extends beyond commercial activities (Hudders et al., 2021). According to Schmuck et al. (2022), influencers can also address important social and political issues, shape opinions, and provide impactful sources of information, particularly for younger audiences.

SMIs derive their success from their ability to foster trust and relatability, often presenting themselves as authentic, approachable, and emotionally available (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020; Martin & Sharma, 2022; Stehr et al., 2015). By projecting an image of accessibility, SMIs establish intimate connections with their followers, positioning themselves as trusted voices in the digital landscape (Raun, 2018). These traits are particularly valuable in fostering loyalty, as audiences often perceive SMIs as relatable figures who share their values and interests (Jin, 2018). Pasek et al. (2009) support this by indicating that social media fosters civic engagement, especially when users trust the source.

In addition to cultivating emotional bonds, successful SMIs rely on measurable metrics such as reach and interaction to assess and amplify their influence (Gräve & Greff, 2018). These metrics not only validate their effectiveness as communicators but also enhance their ability to drive meaningful engagement (Abidin, 2015).

Political SMIs. With the concept of social media influencers outlined, attention now turns to their role in political communication. Bause (2021, p. 296) defined political SMIs 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”.

Political SMIs are a relatively new phenomenon and engage with political topics in simplified, relatable ways, making “politics look easy” (Riedl et al., 2021, p. 3). This strategy,

highlighted by Gonzalez et al. (2023), often adopts a lifestyle perspective, balancing accessibility with personal branding concerns to avoid controversy (Suuronen et al., 2021).

Suuronen et al. (2021) further highlight a research gap in studying the political aspects of SMIs, noting that they have predominantly been examined through marketing and advertising perspectives. The potential for political SMIs to influence audiences became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Peter & Muth, 2023). For example, Finnish influencers shared government messages using simplified, relatable narratives, adopting a practical communication style to engage their followers (Pöyry et al., 2022). Similarly, during the European elections, influencers like Rezo, whose viral video "The Destruction of the CDU" criticized the party's climate inaction and started a public debate, demonstrated their ability to mobilize audiences, transforming digital platforms into hubs for civic engagement and political action (Allgaier, 2020).

Sehl and Schützeneder (2023) further examine political SMIs in the context of Germany's 2021 federal elections. Their findings suggest that political SMIs educate and engage audiences with minimal political knowledge by presenting accessible, non-partisan content.

Youth preferences and news consumption

The next section will focus on youth media preferences regarding the proposed study. According to Shearer (2021), social media has become the main source of information for 42% of Americans aged 18-29. Newman et al. (2021) support this by stating that young people increasingly favor internet personas over traditional news media outlets. Newman et al. (2021) define online personalities as a wide spectrum, including celebrities such as actors and musicians, alongside SMIs and reality stars. It is crucial to highlight that the communication style and tone used by these personas often differ from traditional approaches (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2018). However, this does not prevent the discussion of serious topics

(Gonzalez et al., 2023). The urgency to focus on the young generation stems from their use of social media as an informational source.

Additionally, according to Newman et al. (2021), many young people creatively use online platforms to raise awareness about pressing issues such as climate change and social justice. Celebrities and influencers, even those primarily focused on entertainment, can play a substantial role in strengthening these discussions (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2024).

Nevertheless, Newman et al. (2021) also caution that the influence of SMIs is not always favorable. The content shared by social media influencers can include false information or propaganda, which risks misleading their audiences and contributing to misinformation (Mulcahy et al., 2024).

Parasocial relationships

The concept of parasocial relationships (PSR) was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), who described how audiences develop emotional and cognitive bonds with media personalities, perceiving them as friends or trusted advisors. In digital communication, these interactions have evolved into dynamic relationships that influencers cultivate through personalized, relatable, and interactive content (Chen, 2016; Giles, 2002).

Horton and Wohl (1956) define PSR as one-sided connections that foster a sense of intimacy and trust. Such bonds position influencers as credible, trusted figures (Abidin, 2015), who are also capable of shaping audience attitudes and behaviors (Jin et al., 2019). Over time, repeated exposure to these media personas creates an illusion of reciprocity, further reinforcing their role as trusted opinion leaders (Stehr et al., 2015; Tsiotsou, 2015).

Influencers who share personal aspects of their own lives or present relatable narratives strengthen these emotional bonds, despite the absence of real physical interaction (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tsiotsou, 2015). This emotional integration explains why PSRs are particularly effective in shaping attitudes and behaviors, making them influential in domains

such as marketing, health communication (Pöyry et al., 2022), and political engagement (Harff & Schmuck, 2024a).

Horton and Strauss (1957, as cited in Liebers & Schramm, 2019) distinguish between parasocial interactions (PSIs) and parasocial relationships (PSR). PSIs refer to the immediate sense of connection experienced during a broadcast or performance. In contrast, PSRs are deeper, ongoing emotional bonds that develop over time, typically through passive consumption. As passive consumption, literature identifies acts such as repeatedly observing, reading, and engaging with content (Munzel & Kunz, 2014; Tsiotsou, 2015). Schramm & Hartmann (2008) later developed new measurements for PSI, while criticizing the lack of focus on PSI in contrast to PRS and their overlapping examination in academia. The distinction between the two terms is particularly relevant as consistent online presence fosters long-term relationships with their audiences, enhancing their ability to influence opinions and behaviors.

Opinion leadership

It has been established that SMIS as opinion leaders possess distinct characteristics that enhance their ability to influence others effectively (Bause, 2021; Riedl et al., 2021; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). Katz (1957, as cited in Stehr et al., 2015, p. 73) identifies three key attributes of opinion leadership: “personification of values, competence, and strategic social location”. These traits involve aligning content with audience preferences, demonstrating expertise or knowledge in specific domains, and occupying influential positions within social networks to facilitate the dissemination of information.

Building on this, Weimann (1994) expands the profile of opinion leaders to include characteristics such as intelligence, credibility, sociability, self-confidence, and competence. These attributes collectively highlight the qualities that enable opinion leaders to gain trust and guide the attitudes and behaviors of their peers effectively.

The concept of opinion leadership originates from Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet’s (1944) foundational study, *The People’s Choice*. This study introduced the idea that personal

influence plays a more significant role in shaping decision-making than direct exposure to mass media (Weimann, 1994). This finding was formalized in the two-step flow of communication model by the authors of *The People's Choice* study, which emphasizes the role of opinion leaders as intermediaries who interpret and spread mass media messages to the public, simplifying complex information and making it more relatable for their audiences (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). These insights provide the historical foundation for understanding how opinion leadership functions in the digital era.

Parasocial opinion leadership

Stehr et al. (2015) extend the concept of parasocial relationships by introducing the theory of parasocial opinion leadership, which examines how media personalities influence audience opinions and behaviors through one-sided relationships facilitated by mass media or social media. Unlike traditional opinion leadership (Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), which focuses on interpersonal communication, parasocial opinion leadership operates through emotional bonds (Stehr et al., 2015).

Recent research (Harff, 2022; Harff & Schmuck, 2024a; Pöyry et al., 2022) has focused on examining how parasocial relationships with influencers specifically affect political interest among young audiences. For example, Harff (2022) surveyed young female followers of sustainability influencers and found that both perceived source similarity and trustworthiness significantly predict the strength of parasocial relationships. Importantly, these parasocial relationships were, in turn, positively associated with the arousal of political interest. This study highlights that even when political content is incidental (Heiss & Matthes, 2019), the presence of parasocial ties can nurture curiosity and motivate audiences to explore political topics further (Harff, 2022).

Parasocial opinion leadership functions. Stehr et al. (2015) identify three key functions of parasocial opinion leaders that enable them to effectively guide audiences: simplification of content, providing orientation, and arousal of interest. By fulfilling at least

one of these functions, influencers can activate audience engagement, provided that a parasocial relationship is already established (Stehr et al., 2015).

Simplification involves breaking down complex topics into easily digestible narratives, allowing audiences to engage with information that might otherwise seem overwhelming. Research (Reinikainen et al., 2025; Schmuck et al., 2022; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023) emphasizes the role of simplifying politics, where SMIs present political content in a comprehensive and easily understandable manner. Schmuck et al.'s (2022) study shows that frequent exposure to SMIs increases perceived simplification of politics (PSP), which can boost political interest by reducing cognitive barriers to understanding. They also warn that PSP might lead to political cynicism if political processes are oversimplified or misrepresented, highlighting the dual nature of these parasocial functions (Schmuck et al., 2022).

The second function, providing orientation, involves guiding audiences by offering actionable insights and framing issues in ways that resonate with their values or interests (Stehr et al., 2015). SMIs can serve as “change agents” and provide direction on aligning with causes or adopting new perspectives, fostering audience engagement, and leading to behavioral changes (Valente and Pumpuang 2007, p. 890).

Lastly, arousal of interest refers to creating emotionally engaging and motivational content that inspires curiosity and deeper exploration of topics (Stehr et al., 2015). Both Stehr et al. (2015) and Schmuck et al. (2022) highlight how influencers' ability to emotionally connect with their followers amplifies their influence.

These interconnected functions position political SMIs as important actors in digital communication, acting as intermediaries who translate traditional media narratives, shape public discourse, and mobilize participation (Goodwin et al., 2023). Together, these studies demonstrate how SMIs shape political attitudes and behaviors by leveraging emotional bonds, clear communication, and relatable content. Accordingly, to the literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1_a: *Perceived simplification of political content by social media influencers affects the political engagement of young adults.*

H1_b: *Perceived provided orientation by social media influencers affects the political engagement of young adults.*

H1_c: *Arousal of interest by social media influencers affects the political engagement of young adults.*

Political engagement

The next section provides an overview of political engagement. Political engagement encompasses a broad and changing array of voluntary and non-professional actions undertaken by individuals aiming to influence political decision-making, governmental bodies, or social matters (Theocharis & van Deth, 2017). This includes behaviors such as voting, protesting, and engaging in political discussions, which reflect efforts to shape societal decisions and hold institutions accountable (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Stekelenburg, 2016). As a pillar of democracy, political engagement fosters informed and active citizens, contributing to the legitimacy of political systems (Prats & Meunier, 2021).

Drawing on Andersen's (2021) framework, political engagement can be understood through three critical components: political interest, political knowledge, and political efficacy. These elements highlight the motivations, informational capacity, and psychological empowerment that drive political participation (Andersen, 2021).

The first component is political interest, which is a vital predictor of political behavior, driving individuals to seek out political information and participate in civic activities (Reichert, 2018). Andersen (2021) emphasizes that political interest is different from external pressures, stating that it reflects a personal curiosity about political issues and events. This dimension serves as the foundation of political engagement, as politically interested individuals are more likely to engage in knowledge acquisition and participatory behaviors (Prior, 2010; Shehata & Amnå, 2017).

Norris's (2000) "virtuous circle" thesis provides further theoretical support for this pathway, suggesting that effective political communication fosters trust, knowledge, and participation in a reinforcing cycle. This model emphasizes how repeated exposure to engaging political content can stimulate curiosity (political interest) and, subsequently, translate into actions such as voting or participating in protests. Zimmermann et al. (2020) argue that the style of communication can influence political interest by making topics more engaging, contemporary, and motivating for audiences, in the case of YouTube.

In the context of this study, political interest acts as a mediator, linking the parasocial opinion leadership functions of SMIs to political engagement. By presenting political issues in accessible ways, SMIs reduce cognitive barriers, helping audiences connect with complex topics and sparking curiosity about political discourse (Harff & Schmuck, 2024b). This process highlights how political interest not only fosters individual motivation but also functions as a crucial pathway through which SMIs drive political engagement. Therefore, the following hypotheses are posed:

H2: Higher political interest is positively associated with political engagement among young adults.

H3: The relationship between parasocial functions (perceived simplification of political content, perceived provided orientation, arousal of interest) and political engagement is mediated by young adults' political interest.

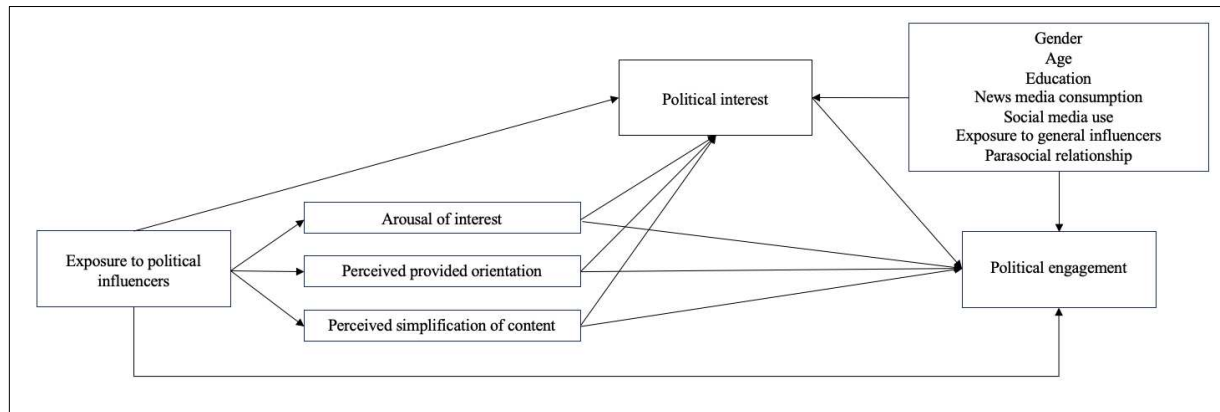
The second dimension of political engagement, as described by Andresen (2021), is political knowledge, which refers to an individual's understanding of political systems, policies, and current events. Andersen (2021, p. 15) distinguishes between long-term, system-level knowledge, often derived from education, and current-affairs knowledge, which is linked to ongoing political developments. SMIs contribute to political knowledge by simplifying complex political topics and presenting them in a digestible manner (Schmuck et al., 2022).

Lastly, political efficacy captures individuals' beliefs in their ability to influence political outcomes (Levy, 2018). Efficacy serves as a motivational factor in political engagement because individuals with high internal efficacy are more likely to participate in activities such as voting, protesting, or campaigning, as they feel confident in their ability to make a difference (Miller et al., 1979, as cited in Anderson, 2014). Conversely, a lack of efficacy often leads to disengagement and apathy (Moeller et al., 2014).

While political knowledge and efficacy are often considered critical dimensions of engagement (Caprara et al., 2009; Levy, 2018), their exclusion from this model is intentional. Andersen (2021) highlights that political interest serves as a motivational driver, encouraging individuals to engage with political content and further develop cognitive and psychological components of engagement. Studies (Balch, 1974; Marks, 2012) have demonstrated that political interest precedes the development of knowledge and efficacy, serving as the foundation that drives individuals to seek out information and build confidence in their political capabilities. Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) emphasize that political interest is a key predictor of knowledge acquisition, as it prompts individuals to consume political content and stay informed about current affairs. Similarly, Prior (2010) underscores that interest motivates individuals to engage with political topics, making it a critical prerequisite to informed and confident participation. Therefore, focusing on political interest allows this research to examine the influential factor in the relationship between SMIs and political engagement.

Figure 1

Theorized model



Note. The figure illustrates hypothesized relationships among parasocial opinion leadership functions, political interest, and political engagement. Exposure to political influencers was modeled as an exploratory predictor. Covariates and control variables included for clarity.

Context of the Czech Republic

In the Central European context, young adults in the Czech Republic are increasingly turning to digital platforms and social media for news and information, reflecting global trends in youth media consumption but shaped by distinctive regional dynamics (Koc-Michalska et al., 2024; Štětka et al., 2021). Research indicates that Czech youth prefer content that is accessible, interactive, and informal, aligning with the global shift away from traditional media outlets, which are often perceived as less relatable or engaging (Mazák & Štětka, 2015). This generational shift is further influenced by declining trust in traditional media institutions among younger demographics across Central and Eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic (Heřmanová, 2022).

Social media provides Czech youth with opportunities to engage with political information both intentionally and incidentally while consuming entertainment or lifestyle content (Heřmanová, 2022; Matthes, 2022). Harff and Schmuck (2024b) contribute that young people often rely on SMIs for political information because of the accessibility and relatability of their content. Their study highlights how political topics are frequently seen by adolescents

and young adults while scrolling through lifestyle or entertainment posts, lowering the cognitive and emotional barriers to engaging with such information. This incidental exposure (Heiss & Matthes, 2019) helps youth feel more comfortable interacting with elaborate political topics, which might otherwise seem intimidating (Harff & Schmuck, 2024b).

Bode (2015) states that there is a potential for users to get political information from social media, but also that they do not often realize it. By adapting political content to suit the engagement styles of younger generations, SMIs serve as intermediaries who make political information more approachable and relevant (Peter & Muth, 2023).

However, the reliance on social media for political information also carries risks (Matthes, 2022). Research highlights challenges such as navigating misinformation and avoiding the formation of echo chambers, which can distort young audiences' understanding of political and social issues (Heřmanová, 2022; Štětka et al., 2021). These dynamics underscore the need for further exploration of how Central and Eastern Europe, including Czech youths, consume and interact with political content online, as well as how their evolving media habits shape their broader engagement with democratic processes (Koc-Michalska et al., 2024).

While parasocial opinion leadership has gained attention in social media research, its role in shaping political engagement remains underexplored in Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, few studies have examined how specific engagement constructs, such as political interest, mediate their effects. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how SMIs in the Czech context employ parasocial opinion leadership functions to foster political interest and engagement among young adults.

Method

Sample

This study was designed as a quantitative, cross-sectional online survey ($N = 207$) targeting young adults from the Czech Republic. Participants were aged between 18 and 30 years old ($M = 23.73$, $SD = 2.51$) with a gender distribution of 34.78% of participants

identifying as male, 65.22% identifying as female, and none identifying as non-binary or ‘didn’t want to specify’ category. To assess potential baseline differences between gender groups on covariates (i.e., age, news consumption, social media use, and influencer exposure), balance checks were conducted using descriptive statistics and Welch’s t-tests (see Table 3). These comparisons ensured that any gender-based variation was accounted for in subsequent analyses.

The sample reflected a range of educational backgrounds, with most participants reporting either a high school diploma (44.0%) or a bachelor's degree (40.6%). Smaller proportions reported lower (3.9%) or higher tertiary education (master’s degree: 10.1%, doctorate: 1.5%), indicating moderate educational diversity across the sample.

Procedure

Before the data collection, a pretest was conducted with a convenience sample ($N = 14$) to evaluate the clarity and flow of the questionnaire. Based on the feedback, minor changes were made to the wording and formatting. Data from the pretest were excluded from the final analysis. Participants were recruited using a convenience-based snowball sampling method, primarily via social media platforms and student networks. Efforts like contacting participants from different regions were made to promote diversity of the sample.

The survey was administered online through the platform SoSci Survey. Prior to participation, respondents were presented with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, data handling practices, and their right to withdraw. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between 18 and 30 years old and hold Czech citizenship. Participants who did not meet these criteria or failed to provide consent were not able to proceed with the survey. One attention-check item was included mid-survey to ensure data quality. Those who failed ($N = 37$) could not continue with the survey, and their responses were excluded from the final sample.

As an incentive, participants had the opportunity to enter a raffle for a 500 CZK Luxor bookstore voucher. Email addresses for the draw were collected voluntarily and stored

separately from survey responses to maintain anonymity. Participants also had a chance to enter their email address to receive the final study, again stored independently from their answers.

Power and sensitivity analysis

Power analysis was conducted in R using the *pwr* package (Champely et al., 2017) to determine the required sample size for the study. Based on Dienlin et al. (2021), who report that communication effects are typically small to medium, a small-to-medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.08$) was assumed, with a significance level of .05 and desired power of 0.80. Focusing on the hypothesized predictors, this analysis indicated a minimum required sample size of 196 participants.

After data collection, a post hoc sensitivity analysis was conducted based on the full SEM specification, including all predictors and control variables, to estimate the smallest detectable effect size given the achieved sample ($N = 207$) at $\alpha = .05$ and 80% power. Based on the largest regression equation in the SEM ($k = 12$), the analysis indicated a minimum detectable effect of $f^2 = 0.088$ (approximately $R^2 = 0.081$), which falls between conventions for small ($f^2 = .02$) and medium ($f^2 = .15$) effect sizes (Cohen, 2013). This suggests the study was adequately powered to detect small-to-medium effects, though very small effects may not have been detectable.

Survey instrument

All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), or from 1 (never or rarely) to 5 (very frequently), depending on the item type. The questionnaire began with demographic questions and control variables (see chapter Covariates).

Exposure to political influencers ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.29$) was measured using a single item adapted from Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022), following a broad definition of political influencers, which was shown to participants. *Parasocial relationship* ($\alpha = 0.837$, 95% CI [0.790, 0.876], $M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.85$) was measured using six items adapted from Harff and

Schmuck (2024a), which assessed emotional closeness and perceived connection with a self-identified favorite influencer (e.g., “The SMI makes me feel comfortable, like being with a friend”). Participants were asked to name a preferred influencer to anchor their responses.

To assess *parasocial opinion leadership functions*, three dimensions were measured based on Harff and Schmuck (2024a): *arousal of interest* with 3 items (e.g., “The SMI draws attention to specific political topics”; $\alpha = 0.858$, 95% CI [0.790, 0.908], $M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.97$), *perceived provided orientation* with 4 items (e.g., “The SMI shows ways to get politically involved”; $\alpha = 0.844$, 95% CI [0.796, 0.881], $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.05$), and *perceived simplification of political content* with 5 items (e.g., “The SMI makes political topics more understandable”; $\alpha = 0.900$, 95% CI [0.851, 0.935], $M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.89$).

Additionally, *political interest*, serving as the mediator, was assessed using one item scale from Schmuck et al. (2022): “I am interested in politics” ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.06$). Lastly, *political engagement* ($\alpha = 0.826$, 95% CI [0.788, 0.856], $M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.81$) was measured with nine items; four adapted from Harff and Schmuck (2024a; based on Vissers & Stolle, 2014; e.g., “I have signed a petition or collected votes for a petition”) and five from Waeterloos et al. (2021) capturing online/offline discussion and political content interaction (e.g., “I liked or reacted to a post concerning social or political topics”).

Covariates. The study included six control variables: age, gender, education level, social media use, news consumption, and general exposure to influencers. *Frequency of social media use* ($\alpha = 0.742$, 95% CI [0.680, 0.791], $M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.70$) was measured with seven items adapted from Rosen et al. (2013), capturing behaviors such as posting, liking, and commenting. *News consumption* ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.15$) was assessed using a single item 5-point Likert scale (“How often do you watch/read/listen to the news?”). Lastly, *exposure to influencers* ($\alpha = 0.806$, 95% CI [0.763, 0.844], $M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.95$) was measured using three items adapted from Schmuck et al. (2022) (e.g., “I view content from influencers”).

Before the measurements, participants were presented with a definition of social media influencers tailored to the Czech context, also adapted from Schmuck et al. (2022), to ensure a consistent understanding of the term. A complete list of all survey items, item wordings, and response scales is provided in the Appendix.

Statistical analysis plan

Prior to modeling, the dataset was cleaned and analyzed using RStudio. Item-level missing data were addressed using Full Information Maximum Likelihood estimation (FIML) in all SEM models to retain partial responses and minimize bias. Items were recoded as needed, and composite variables were computed for social media use and influencer exposure. Control variables were included in the model as observed. To assess potential baseline differences by gender, a series of independent-samples Welch's *t*-tests was performed on key covariates, including age, news consumption, social media use, and influencer exposure (general and political). Gender was dummy-coded (0 = male, 1 = female).

Education, a categorical variable with five levels, was dummy-coded using level 2 as the reference group. Multi-item scales were tested for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha, all of which demonstrated acceptable reliability (α ranging from .742 to .900).

To validate the measurement model, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012), modeling latent constructs for the three parasocial opinion leadership functions: arousal of interest (PF1), perceived provided orientation (PF2), and perceived simplification of political content (PF3), as well as for parasocial relationship (PSR) and political engagement (PE). The CFA demonstrated acceptable model fit, $\chi^2(78) = 1562.412$, CFI = 0.958, TLI = 0.942, RMSEA = 0.073.

Before model estimation, multivariate normality was assessed using Mardia's tests of skewness and kurtosis. Following this, a SEM was specified to test for the hypotheses, modeling the parasocial opinion leadership functions as independent latent predictors of political interest and political engagement, while including all covariates.

Results

Mardia's test indicated no substantial multivariate skewness (skewness = 1010.73, $p = .997$), but significant multivariate kurtosis (kurtosis = -29.95 , $p < .001$). Accordingly, all SEM parameters were estimated with 1,000 bootstrap replicates to obtain robust standard errors. A post hoc sensitivity analysis confirmed that the final sample ($N = 207$) provided 80% power to detect large model misfit ($w = 0.55$) in the chi-square test of model fit. The SEM, which included both direct and indirect paths as well as covariates, showed insufficient model fit according to the conventional cutoffs (Hu & Bentler, 1999), $\chi^2(257) = 542.002$, CFI = 0.876, TLI = 0.853, RMSEA = 0.073, 90% CI [0.065, 0.082]. The lower CFI and TLI values may be partly attributable to the relatively small sample size with the model's complexity (see Limitations and future research).

None of the parasocial opinion leadership functions significantly predicted political engagement, either directly or indirectly (e.g., the indirect effect of arousal of interest on political engagement via political interest: $b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .20$, 95% CI $[-0.07, 0.34]$, $\beta = 0.16$). Similarly, perceived provided orientation and perceived simplification of political content yielded no significant direct or mediated effects. Thus, hypotheses H1_a, H1_b, and H1_c were not supported.

H2, which stated that political interest positively predicts political engagement, was supported ($b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[0.15, 0.47]$, $\beta = 0.53$).

However, H3, which proposed that political interest mediates the effects of parasocial opinion leadership functions on political engagement, was not supported. None of the mediated paths reached statistical significance.

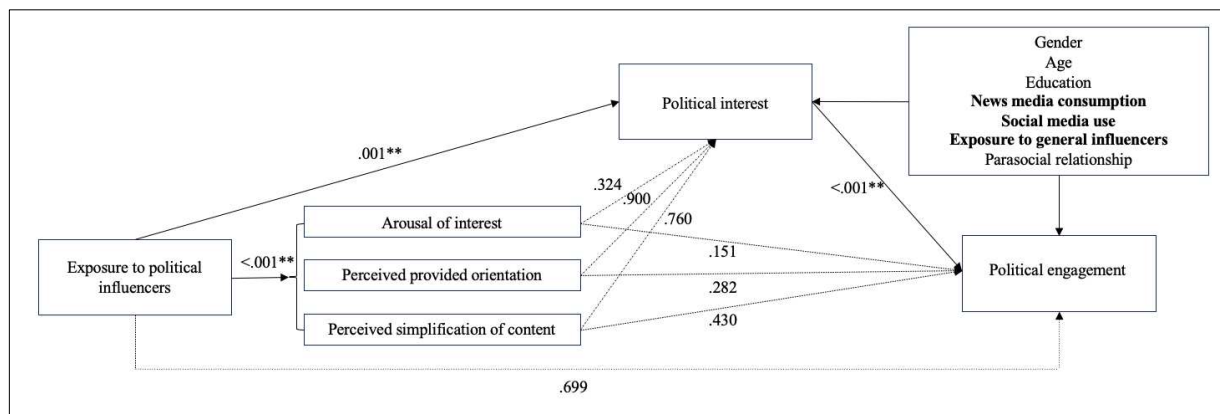
Finally, while not hypothesized, exposure to political influencers significantly predicted political interest ($b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .001$, 95% CI $[0.09, 0.36]$, $\beta = 0.27$) as part of the theorized model. Together with the significant path from political interest to political engagement, this resulted in a significant indirect effect ($b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .021$, 95% CI

[0.03, 0.14], $\beta = 0.14$), consistent with a theoretically expected partial mediation pathway from exposure to political influencers to political engagement via political interest (see Figure 2).

Several covariates showed notable associations. News consumption was a strong positive predictor of political interest ($b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.50$), and social media use positively predicted political engagement ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.37$). General influencer exposure negatively predicted political interest ($b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -0.25$). These results underscore the importance of controlling for media exposure variables in political behavior models (see Table 2).

Figure 2

Structural equation model with results



Note. Numbers on paths show p -values. Solid arrows = significant; dashed arrows = nonsignificant. $p < .05$ marked with *, $p < .01$ with **. Covariates were included in the model; however, their p -values were omitted from the figure for clarity. Significant covariate effects are shown in bold. Model fit: $\chi^2(257) = 542.002$, CFI = .876, TLI = .853, RMSEA = .073.

Table 1

Structural paths relevant to hypotheses (N = 207)

Hypothesis	Path	b	SE	β	p	95% CI
H1 _a	PF1 → PE	0.17	0.18	0.24	.324	[-0.12, 0.58]
H1 _b	PF2 → PE	-0.03	0.24	-0.05	.900	[-0.51, 0.42]
H1 _c	PF3 → PE	-0.06	0.19	-0.09	.760	[-0.44, 0.32]

Hypothesis	Path	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	95% CI
H2	PI → PE	0.30	0.08	0.53	<.001**	[0.15, 0.47]
H3	PF1 → PI → PE	0.11	0.09	0.16	.204	[0.00, 0.34]
H3	PF2 → PI → PE	−0.12	0.13	−0.20	.370	[−0.47, 0.04]
H3	PF3 → PI → PE	0.07	0.10	0.10	.513	[−0.07, 0.31]

Note. PE = political engagement; PI = political interest. PF1 = arousal of interest; PF2 = perceived provided orientation; PF3 = perceived simplification of political content. Covariates were controlled. *p* < .05 marked with *, *p* < .01 with **.

Table 2

Exploratory effects of covariates on parasocial opinion leadership functions, political interest, and political engagement (N = 207)

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	Outcome
	0.31	0.07	0.48	<. 001**	PF1
Exposure to political influencers	0.26	0.07	0.35	<. 001**	PF2
	0.27	0.07	0.37	<. 001**	PF3
Age	−0.03	0.03	−0.06	.326	PI
Gender (1=female)	0.02	0.13	0.01	.881	PI
Education	0.04	0.06	0.04	.512	PI
News consumption	0.47	0.06	0.50	<. 001**	PI
Exposure to general influencers	−0.28	0.09	−0.25	.001**	PI
Parasocial relationship	−0.03	0.14	−0.02	.851	PI
Social media use	−0.02	0.11	−0.01	.850	PI
Exposure to political influencers	0.22	0.07	0.27	.001**	PI
Age	−0.03	0.02	−0.13	.120	PE
Gender (1=female)	0.15	0.10	0.12	.144	PE
Education	−0.01	0.05	−0.02	.787	PE
News consumption	−0.04	0.05	−0.08	.428	PE
Exposure to general influencers	−0.08	0.07	−0.12	.273	PE
Parasocial relationship	0.14	0.11	0.15	.233	PE

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	Outcome
Social media use	0.31	0.09	0.37	< .001**	PE
Exposure to political influencers	0.02	0.05	0.04	.699	PE

Note. PF1 = arousal of interest; PF2 = perceived provided orientation; PF3 = perceived simplification of political content; PI = political interest; PE = political engagement. $p < .05$ marked with *, $p < .01$ with **.

Covariates

To assess baseline differences by gender on key covariates, a series of independent-samples Welch's *t*-tests were conducted. Results revealed no significant differences between male and female participants in age ($t(135.29) = 1.22, p = .224$), news consumption ($t(142.50) = 1.48, p = .140$), or exposure to political influencers ($t(137.97) = -1.78, p = .077$). However, females reported significantly higher levels of social media use ($t(111.49) = -2.06, p = .042$), general exposure to influencers ($t(127.57) = -3.06, p = .003$), and parasocial relationships with influencers in comparison to males ($t(138.25) = -2.61, p = .010$). For more details, see Table 3.

Table 3

*Group differences by gender on control variables (Welch's *t*-tests) ($N = 207$)*

Variable	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Age	24.03	2.64	23.57	2.43	1.22	135.29	.224	[-0.28, 1.20]
News consumption	3.60	1.16	3.35	1.14	1.48	142.50	.140	[-0.08, 0.58]
Parasocial relationship	3.22	0.85	3.55	0.83	-2.61	138.25	.010*	[-0.57, -0.08]
Social media use	2.96	0.84	3.19	0.61	-2.06	111.49	.042*	[-0.45, -0.01]
Exposure to general influencers	3.02	1.02	3.46	0.88	-3.06	127.57	.003**	[-0.72, -0.15]

Variable	Male		Female		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Exposure to political influencers	3.08	1.33	3.42	1.25	-1.78	137.97	.077	[-0.72, 0.04]

Note. Welch's *t*-tests were used due to unequal group sizes. *p* < .05 marked with *, *p* < .01 with **.

Additional analysis

To evaluate potential redundancy among the three parasocial opinion leadership functions, modification indices from the original structural model were inspected. High values suggested substantial shared variance that was not accounted for by the model, indicating that the three parasocial opinion leadership functions might empirically overlap.

Thus, an exploratory SEM was estimated in which all nine items measuring parasocial opinion leadership functions were combined into a single latent factor. The model fit was again below the common threshold for an acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), $\chi^2(267) = 678.09$, CFI = 0.820, TLI = 0.796, RMSEA = 0.086, 90% CI [0.078, 0.094]. All items loaded strongly on the combined factor (standardized loadings = 0.52–0.90), with good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$, 95% CI [0.88, 0.94]).

However, the combined factor did not significantly predict political interest ($\beta = 0.099$, $p = .318$) or political engagement ($\beta = 0.053$, $p = .397$). This finding suggests that, even when conceptualized as a single dimension, it did not account for meaningful variance in these outcomes.

To complement these quantitative analyses and to further understand participants' understanding and following of political influencers, the open-ended question asking them to state their favorite influencer was analyzed. Out of the total sample of 207 participants, 183 valid responses were collected after excluding blanks and irrelevant entries. Responses were cleaned (lowercased, stripped of diacritics and punctuation) and recoded into canonical

categories using a predefined dictionary of name variations. Entries mentioned only once were labeled as ‘other’ ($N = 51$).

The most frequently named influencers were *Kovy* ($N = 76$), *Shluk buněk* ($N = 39$), and *Jsem v obraze* ($N = 27$). These results illustrate the diversity of participants’ influencer preferences, with a clear concentration on a few prominent figures (see Appendix, Figure 3).

Discussion

Due to the increasing popularity of SMIs as informational sources, not just as entertainment creators (Newman et al., 2021), deriving from the theoretical framework of Stehr et al. (2015), this study aimed to explore whether parasocial opinion leadership functions would affect young adults’ political engagement through the mediating role of political interest.

Firstly, none of the parasocial opinion leadership functions showed significant associations with political engagement, either directly or indirectly through political interest. One possible explanation is that although these functions are conceptually distinct, they have rarely been empirically validated as correlates of political behavior. Stehr et al. (2015) proposed that parasocial opinion leadership is based on media figures’ ability to simplify and contextualize information for audiences. However, the direct connection between these functions and political engagement has not been firmly demonstrated. Rather, this relationship has largely been theorized through indirect pathways. For example, prior research indicates that political interest is related to political engagement (Shehata & Amnå, 2017; Prior, 2010).

Another interpretation of these functions is that they may serve more as moderators of other relationships rather than as direct predictors. While they provide insights into how audiences can more easily process influencer content, additional factors such as perceived credibility or alignment with relevant issues may be necessary for these functions to influence political engagement-related behaviors (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Tsiotsou, 2015). This aligns with further research indicating that influencers’ political impact on young audiences is

significantly shaped by perceived similarity and trustworthiness, which can strengthen parasocial bonds and enhance political interest (Harff, 2022).

In contrast, reported exposure to political influencers was positively associated with political interest. This pattern aligns with research highlighting that incidental exposure to political content on social media can be linked to greater civic curiosity among young audiences (Bode, 2015; Heiss & Matthes, 2019; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). While Schmuck et al. (2022) showed that frequent exposure relates to perceived simplification, this study's results suggest that even mere exposure to political influencer content may incentivize greater political interest, regardless of whether users perceive it as simplified.

Even though there was no significant relation between exposure to political influencers and political engagement in this cross-sectional study, Harff and Schmuck (2023) reported that higher engagement with political influencers over time was associated with higher self-reported online and offline political participation among youth. This suggests that longitudinal designs may reveal effects that are not detectable in cross-sectional surveys.

This finding is consistent with the notion that exposure to political content, particularly from relatable influencers, may gradually raise awareness and interest in civic matters. Similarly, Harff and Schmuck (2024a) found that following political influencers was associated with internal political efficacy and intentions to participate, indicating that such exposure may nurture fundamental indicators of political engagement. Engaging political communication can foster deeper civic interest and participation (Norris, 2000). Andersen (2021) further conceptualizes political engagement as a multidimensional construct, encompassing political interest, political efficacy, and political knowledge, that develops through sustained exposure to relevant political content.

Political interest itself was strongly associated with political engagement, supporting expectations based on established models of civic participation (Prior, 2010; Shehata & Amnå, 2017). This finding supports the notion that political interest, together with efficacy beliefs

about one's ability to understand and engage with politics (Bandura, 1977), functions as a motivational correlate of participatory behaviors such as voting, activism, and political discussion. While the proposed mediating role of political interest between parasocial opinion leadership functions and engagement was not observed, the significant indirect association from reported exposure to political influencers to political engagement via political interest suggests that these variables may be interrelated in ways consistent with theoretical frameworks, while acknowledging that causality cannot be inferred.

Another notable pattern involved the contrasting significant associations of different types of influencer exposure. Exposure to political influencers was positively related to political interest, whereas general influencer exposure showed a negative association with political interest. Similarly, Harff's and Schmuck's (2023) findings showed that following political influencers was positively related to political participation, whereas general exposure to influencers was negatively related to participation. While political influencer exposure may correspond with higher curiosity about political issues, entertainment-focused influencer content could be linked to distraction or reduced salience of political information.

An alternative interpretation is that young people with pre-existing political interests may be more inclined to follow influencers who frequently discuss political issues (Harff, 2022). Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) showed that higher levels of political participation are often associated with greater self-directed exposure to political information. Schwaiger et al. (2022) similarly noted that politically engaged young people are more likely to seek out influencers who address public affairs. From this perspective, the observed relationships may reflect a process of selective exposure.

Further, social media use was significantly and positively associated with political engagement. This finding aligns with Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis, which found that over 80% of coefficients linking social media use and political participation were positive, with nearly half being statistically significant. This suggests a general trend of social media

supporting participatory behaviors. Social media environments allow users to encounter, share, and comment on political content, enabling low-effort interaction, particularly among younger audiences (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

Another significant and positive association was found between news consumption and political interest. Prior research has shown that news media serve not only as sources of factual content but also as guides that show which issues are socially relevant and personally meaningful (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) propose a reciprocal model of political learning, where news exposure and political interest mutually reinforce each other over time.

Lastly, the covariate analyses revealed differences in media habits based on gender. Female participants reported higher overall exposure to influencers, higher parasocial relationships with influencers, and greater social media use compared to male participants. These findings align with prior research indicating that influencer cultures are often more salient among young women (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020; Raun, 2018).

In summary, this research contributes to the field by demonstrating that reported exposure to political influencers and functions of parasocial opinion leadership are empirically distinct, with different associations to civic outcomes. Although there was a positive correlation between exposure to political influencer content and political interest, none of the parasocial opinion leadership functions demonstrated significant direct or indirect associations with political engagement. Additionally, the negative association between general influencer exposure and political interest highlights the importance of distinguishing between political and lifestyle content. By clarifying that exposure itself may be a stronger correlate of political interest than parasocial perceptions, this study refines existing models of how influencers contribute to the development of political attitudes and engagement among young adults.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. The reliance on cross-sectional data prevents any assumption of causal relationships or a clear determination of the direction among variables within the theorized model. To address this limitation, future research would benefit from employing longitudinal designs capable of capturing the development and possible amplification of parasocial opinion leadership functions as individuals' relationships with social media influencers deepen over time (Dekonninck & Schmuck, 2024).

Secondly, the present study employed a non-probability sampling strategy, specifically a snowball sampling method. While efficient for recruiting participants within defined networks, this approach inherently limits the representativeness of the sample and increases the likelihood of excluding broader demographic and cultural segments of the young adult population (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Berndt, 2020).

Although the sample size achieved in this study ($N = 207$) was above the a priori requirement and adequate for detecting effects of small-to-medium size, it may have been insufficient given the complexity of the SEM specified. Structural equation models with many latent variables and covariates require substantially larger samples to achieve stable estimation and satisfactory global fit indices (MacCallum et al., 1996). This likely explains why the overall model fit did not reach conventional thresholds (CFI and $TLI < .90$; $RMSEA > .08$). The limited sample relative to model complexity, therefore, represents the main limitation of this study.

Nevertheless, the available data provided adequate power to detect the primary hypothesized associations, specifically the link between exposure to political influencers and political interest, and allowed for an exploratory examination of indirect effects. While the model fit was suboptimal, interpreting the estimated paths still yields valuable insights into the potential mechanisms at play and provides a foundation for future studies with larger samples to more rigorously evaluate the model structure.

Additionally, the study targeted solely young adults residing in the Czech Republic, which further restrains the generalizability of the conclusions beyond this characteristic national context. Comparative research, including participants from other Eastern and Central European countries, would be highly beneficial in assessing the cross-cultural strength and stability of the observed associations.

This study focused on SMIs who engage with political content. However, the specific characteristics and communicative styles of these influencers were neither measured nor systematically controlled. Participants were asked to think of their favorite political influencer after being presented with a definition adapted from prior research (Schmuck et al., 2022). The primary purpose of this task was to anchor respondents' cognitive focus on the domain of political influencer content (Tsotsou, 2015; Harff & Schmuck, 2024b). Regardless, it was not possible to verify precisely which SMIs participants had in mind when responding or to ensure a uniform understanding of the term "political influencer" across the sample.

Lastly, future research would benefit from experimental designs capable of isolating causal effects by exposing participants to systematically manipulated influencer content. In such studies, the messages should be precisely analyzed and coded to confirm the presence of political themes and topics (Kim & Vishak, 2008). This approach would allow for a more precise review of how specific characteristics of influencer communication shape political engagement outcomes.

Implications

Despite its limitations, this study provides valuable insights and increases our understanding of parasocial opinion leadership (Stehr et al., 2015) and the cognitive functions via which SMIs engage their audiences. It offers an unexplored perspective on how exposure to political SMIs and the parasocial opinion leadership functions they employ on social media may shape political participation and sheds some light on the relationships among multiple factors involved in this complex dynamic.

Consequently, these findings emphasize the significance of viewing influencers as potential partners in civic education and public communication campaigns. As Riedl et al. (2021) note, political influencers can play a formative role in making political topics more accessible and engaging for younger audiences, particularly. This is further supported by Dekoninck and Schmuck (2024), who established that following SMIs who frequently address environmental issues can significantly increase both cause-oriented and political sphere-oriented participation among young people. Further research indicates the rise of educational influencers, who have begun to play visible roles in disseminating educational content and shaping public perceptions of teaching (Carpenter et al., 2023).

On the other hand, it is important to adopt a more cautious view of SMIs because young audiences are especially susceptible to influencers' political messaging. According to Van Houtven and Schmuck (2025), this vulnerability is partly due to their still-developing political identities and their relatively low dependence on traditional media sources. Additionally, because influencers often lack professional qualifications in political or social issues, they may inadvertently expose their followers to misinformation, oversimplified narratives, or unsubstantiated claims.

Finally, although the direct effects of parasocial opinion leadership functions were not confirmed in this analysis, this gap emphasizes critical avenues for future research to uncover under which conditions, and through which nuanced mechanisms, these functions may shape followers' political behaviors. Recognizing the contexts and moderators that activate the influence of parasocial opinion leadership could especially advance both theoretical understanding and the development of more targeted engagement strategies. By refining theoretical models and embracing more rigorous methodological approaches, future research can more precisely map the role of influencers in contemporary civic life.

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Appendix

Measures of the study

Gender: *"Please specify your gender:"*

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

Age: *"Please specify your age:"*

- 18–30 (each age selectable)
- None of these (→ disqualify: "Thank you, but you do not meet the age requirement.")

Education: *"What is your highest educational qualification?"*:

- Less than high school
- High school diploma
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate

News consumption: *"How often do you watch/read/listen to the news?"*

Scale: 1 = Never or rarely, 5 = Several times per day

M = 3.43, SD = 1.15

Social media use: *"How often do you do the following on social media?"*

Scale: 1 = Never, 5 = Very Frequently

- MU1: Check your social media profile or other social networks.
- MU2: Check social media at work or school.
- MU3: Post photos.
- MU4: Browse profiles and photos.
- MU5: Read postings.
- MU6: Comment on postings, status updates, photos, etc.
- MU7: Click "Like" to a posting, photo, etc.

Cronbach's α = .742, 95% CI [.680, .791] M = 3.11, SD = 0.70

General exposure to influencers:

Definition: "On platforms like Instagram, YouTube or TikTok, "influencers" are users who frequently post content and have many followers. In the Czech Republic, influencers include Kovy (Karel Kovář), Anna Šulc, Shopaholic Nicol (Nikola Čechová), Mikýř (Martin Mikyška), Jan Špaček (@fabulacejanaspacka), among others. They don't have to be celebrities, even someone you know who posts regularly about topics like lifestyle or politics can be an influencer."

How much do you agree with the following statement?

Scale: 1 = Never or rarely, 5 = Very frequently

- EX1: I view content from influencers.
- EX2: I actively search for content of influencers.
- EX3: I randomly come across content from influencers.

Cronbach's α = .806, 95% CI [.763, .844] M = 3.31, SD = 0.95

Exposure to political influencers:

Definition: "I follow influencers on social media (e.g., Instagram, YouTube) who post about political topics. These may include issues such as elections (national or European), economy, environment, immigration, taxation, cryptocurrency, gender, social justice, or national identity. By political topics, we mean any content related to societal issues, governance, policy, or values, regardless of political stance."

How much do you agree with the following statement?

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree

M = 3.3, SD = 1.29

Parasocial relationship scale: "Now think of a social media influencer (SMI) you like and from whom you see content, who at least occasionally talks about politics.

Please write their name in the open field: _____"

How much do you agree with the following statement?

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree:

- PSR1: The SMI makes me feel comfortable, like being with a friend.
- PSR2: I look forward to seeing more content from the SMI.
- PSR3: If the SMI were to appear on another platform/channel, I would look at the content.
- PSR4: The SMI seems to understand the things I want to know.
- PSR5: If I saw a story about the SMI in a newspaper/magazine, I would read it.

- PSR6: I would love to meet the influencer in person.

Cronbach's $\alpha = .837$, 95% CI [.790, .876] M = 3.43, SD = 0.85

Attention check: *"To ensure you are paying attention, please select a fake job occupation."*

- Dentist
- Dinosaur trainer (correct)
- Teacher
- Accountant
- Waiter

Disqualification: Participants selecting any answer other than "dinosaur trainer."

Parasocial opinion leadership functions: *"Still thinking of this influencer, how much do you agree with the following statements?"*

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree

Arousal of interest

- AR1: The SMI draws attention to specific political topics.
- AR2: The SMI encourages others to engage more with political topics.
- AR3: The SMI induces followers to search for information about political topics.

Cronbach's $\alpha = .858$, 95% CI [.790, .908]; M = 4.13, SD = 0.97

Perceived provided orientation

- OR1: The SMI points out how one can participate politically.
- OR2: The SMI shares experiences with political participation.
- OR4: The SMI explains forms of political participation.
- OR5: The SMI gives examples of how they have participated politically.

Cronbach's $\alpha = .844$, 95% CI [.796, .881] M = 3.62, SD = 1.05

Perceived simplification of political content

- PSP1: The SMI makes political topics more understandable.
- PSP2: The SMI can explain political topics in a way that is not too complicated.
- PSP4: The SMI shows that political topics are not boring and abstract.
- PSP5: The SMI explains political terms in a way that you understand them.
- PSP6: The SMI does not use political jargon but simple language.

Cronbach's $\alpha = .900$, 95% CI [.851, .935] M = 4.18, SD = 0.89

Political interest: *"How much do you agree with the following statement? "*

I am interested in politics.

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree

M = 3.52, SD = 1.06

Political engagement: "How often have you done the following in the past 12 months?"

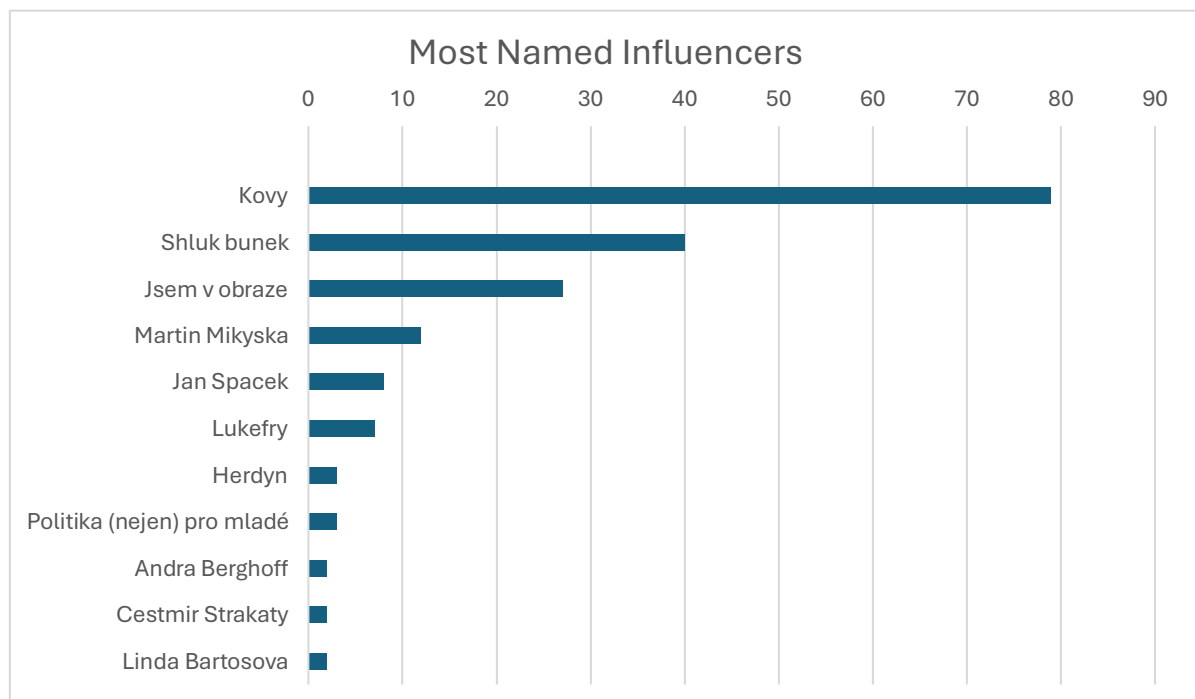
Scale: 1 = Never, 5 = Very frequently

- PP1: Signed a petition or collected votes.
- PP2: Collected or donated money for causes.
- PP3: Deliberately boycotted products.
- PP4: Participated in a protest.
- EE1: Posted/shared a post about social or political causes.
- EE2: Commented on something concerning social/political topics.
- EE3: Liked or reacted to a post about social/political topics.
- EE4: Sent a post to someone in a private message.
- EE5: Talked to someone about social/political topics in real life.

Cronbach's α = .826, 95% CI [.788, .856] M = 2.52, SD = 0.81

Figure 3

Most named influencers (N=183)



Note. The figure displays the most frequently named influencers. Responses grouped under the *Other* category (n = 51) are not shown in the plot due to their low frequencies.

AI disclosure

Source	Function	Used in Chapters
GPT-4.0 (AI)	Wording check (ensuring clarity, academic tone and grammar)	Full thesis
Grammarly	Wording check (grammar, academic tone)	Full thesis
DeepL Translate	Translation	Survey Measures; German Abstract

Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) are increasingly engaging with political topics, yet their role in shaping political engagement remains underexplored. This study utilizes the concept of parasocial opinion leadership functions to investigate whether SMIs affect political engagement among young Czech adults aged 18 to 30, and whether this effect is mediated by political interest. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted with a sample size of 207 participants, and the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The model assessed three parasocial functions: the arousal of interest, perceived provided orientation, and perceived simplification of political content. While none of the parasocial functions demonstrated significant direct or indirect associations with political engagement, exposure to political influencers was positively linked to political interest, which in turn was related to engagement. Furthermore, general exposure to lifestyle influencers was negatively associated with political interest, while news consumption and social media use emerged as positive predictors of political interest. These findings indicate that the influence of SMIs is shaped not only by parasocial dynamics but also by the type of content and media habits. This highlights the importance of political interest as a key pathway to youth's political engagement.

Keywords

Social media influencers, young adults, political engagement, political interest, parasocial opinion leadership functions, influencer exposure

Abstract

Social Media Influencer (SMI) beschäftigen sich zunehmend mit politischen Themen, doch ihre Rolle bei der Gestaltung des politischen Engagements ist noch nicht ausreichend erforscht. Diese Studie untersucht auf Grundlage des Konzepts der parasozialen Meinungsführerschaft, ob SMIs das politische Engagement junger tschechischer Erwachsener im Alter von 18 bis 30 Jahren beeinflussen und inwiefern dieser Effekt durch politisches Interesse vermittelt wird. Es wurde eine Online-Querschnittsbefragung mit einer Stichprobengröße von 207 Teilnehmenden durchgeführt, und die Daten wurden mittels Strukturgleichungsmodellierung analysiert. Das zugrunde liegende Modell differenzierte zwischen drei parasozialen Funktionen von SMIs: dem Wecken politischen Interesses, der Bereitstellung politischer Orientierung und der Vereinfachung politischer Inhalte. Keine dieser Funktionen zeigte jedoch einen signifikanten direkten oder indirekten Einfluss auf das politische Engagement. Stattdessen erwies sich die gezielte Exposition gegenüber politisch aktiven Influencer:innen als positiver Prädiktor für politisches Interesse – das wiederum signifikant mit politischem Engagement zusammenhing. Im Gegensatz dazu war eine generelle Orientierung an Lifestyle-Influencer:innen negativ mit politischem Interesse assoziiert. Nachrichtenkonsum und die Nutzung sozialer Medien insgesamt wirkten sich hingegen positiv auf das politische Interesse aus. Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen, dass der politische Einfluss von SMIs weniger durch parasoziale Dynamiken allein erklärbar ist, sondern wesentlich von der Art der Inhalte und den individuellen Mediennutzungsmustern abhängt. Politisches Interesse fungiert dabei als zentrale vermittelnde Variable und Schlüssel zum politischen Engagement.

Keywords

Social Media Influencer, junge Erwachsene, politisches Engagement, politisches Interesse, parasoziale Meinungsführerschaft, Influencer Engagement