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The Role of Social Media Influencers on the Political Engagement of
Young People in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

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1. Introduction

“This is me. A celeb who can do these things with a single word, the top of the tops, at that. A power influencer.” (Seo Ari in Celebrity Netflix Series, 2023, ep. 1, 02:50)

The quote above is a line spoken by Seo Ari, a famous social media influencer in the Netflix Korea series *Celebrity*. In the first episode, she explains that in today's digital era, a social media influencer is able to make a big impact in every aspect of life she touches, as simple as bringing in a lot of customers in a deserted restaurant by uploading photos of food with positive reviews. In that series, we can see how social media influencers, as famous people, need to handle their lives with the opinion of the public. They have to handle the pain of criticism, fake rumors, and even the jealousy from people who once called them friends. All the hardships to maintain their fame and get love from fans, sometimes can change dramatically into receiving hate from haters. However, despite facing numerous challenges in a world full of glittering lights, Seo Ari, the protagonist, manages to rise above her struggles, grow stronger, and ultimately regain her popularity. After all, social media influencers are also human; they will feel blessed when the comment section on their social media account is full of positive messages, but they can't always stay bright when the camera is off after reading the negative comments. The one who can influence people can be influenced by people themselves.

Now, let's talk more about the benefits of becoming social media influencers (SMIs). Being famous and influential can also make it easier for SMIs to generate wealth, especially if the quality of the influencer's products or services is marketable. That's why the business world often intersects with SMIs. The great thing about SMIs is that even though they tend to play in the entertainment and business realms, they are also able to touch every aspect of life in accordance with their background and persona carried on social media, for example, in the political aspect. In a democratic country where politicians need votes to become officials, SMIs play a big role in the election process, especially to influence young voters. Previous research has already talked about how SMI works in political communication (e.g., Riedl et al., 2023). Their voices can play a role in mobilizing mass movements (e.g., Dekonick & Schmuck, 2022), creating political apathy (e.g., Hasell & Chinn, 2023), changing political decisions (e.g., Schwemmer & Riedl, 2025), reshaping the public image of politicians (e.g., Schwemmer & Riedl, 2025), and influencing the political participation of young people (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023). Moreover, if the SMI is more credible and famous, then any opinion and content they post on social media can be easily accepted and followed by the

public, especially young people (e.g., Peter & Muth, 2023). They have the privilege to be seen, heard, and trusted.

The presence of SMIs is inseparable from the existence of loyal and large followers. These followers are mostly young people who actively use social media (Pew, 2024). This trend is rooted in an era that requires younger generations to adapt more quickly to the digital world than previous generations, who did not grow up interacting through communication technologies. In earlier periods, limited access to information left many youths polarized by geography and their social circles (e.g., Twenge, 2018). Traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, restricted the diversity and immediacy of accessible information (e.g., Salaudeen, 2020). With the development of digital technologies, however, sources of information have shifted, creating broad and immediate access for the wider community. Today, young people across the globe are constantly connected to information and messages through their smartphones (Pew, 2022). This constant connectivity fosters a dual existence: an offline life and an online life. When young people do not find suitable role models offline, they turn to the online sphere, where admired figures slowly evolve into SMIs, followed and celebrated regardless of their activities. Crucially, in addition to lifestyle and entertainment, many SMIs now function as political communicators—they endorse candidates, frame issues, and mobilize followers in ways that shape public opinion and political participation (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Riedl et al., 2023). It can thus be concluded that SMIs are not only born from the demands of active social media users seeking role models but also from a communication environment in which they increasingly occupy a central role in the mediation of political life.

How SMIs work to influence many social media users varies. It can start from the individual profiles of SMIs themselves, it can be based on the content they post, it can be through an algorithm system that refers to certain topics, it can be through search fields with certain keywords on social media, or it can even be through conversations between social media users (e.g., Alves de Castro, 2023; Enke & Borchers, 2019). For young people who are still in the stage of self-discovery and searching for life goals, the presence of SMIs on social media seems like a breath of fresh air and a role model for them, especially in the context of political issues that are being discussed (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2023; Peter & Muth, 2023). When SMIs who are trusted by their followers and other young people suddenly talk about things related to politics, this is very likely to make young people interested in knowing more about political life (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Harff & Schmuck, 2024). Not only

political interest, but other aspects of politics can also emerge, such as political criticism, apathy towards politics, cynicism towards politics, intention to have political effectiveness, want to participate in politics, or even negative emotions triggered by deep disappointment and great anger (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Peter & Muth, 2023). All these political aspects show how strong the voices of SMIs are in the political engagement of young people, not only happening in one nation, but also happening everywhere, all over the world.

We can observe through various online sources the role of SMIs in recent demonstrations and the unstable political situations in many countries. For instance, the social media trends “Brave Pink” and “Hero Green” emerged as symbols of solidarity and peaceful protest against social issues such as police violence, rising living costs, and government transparency in Indonesia in August 2025. Many social media users, mostly young people, expressed their support for the movement by changing their Instagram profile pictures to pink. The movement was further amplified by some of Indonesia's biggest SMIs, including Jerome Polin, Salsa Erwina Hutagalung, and Andovi da Lopez, who played a crucial role in promoting “Brave Pink” and “Hero Green”, and the 17+8 Demands through their social media platforms. These situations can also be observed in Austria, where SMIs played a key role in both promoting far-right marches and amplifying counter-protests, shaping public perceptions and mobilizing participants through their platforms. In Hong Kong, SMIs contributed to debates over the removal of cultural and political symbols, using social media to raise awareness and engage audiences in discussions about heritage and political identity. Similarly, in Serbia, SMIs helped organize and broadcast protests in Belgrade against populist governance, advocating for justice for victims of the Novi Sad disaster. In each case, SMIs significantly contributed to the visibility, organization, and public engagement of these movements through their digital platforms. From this, we can conclude that SMIs not only spark interest and entertain their audiences on social media, but can also transform that engagement—particularly among young people—into political action (Munzir et al., 2025).

Moreover, the way SMIs communicate with their followers can still vary according to the education, language style, local culture, political system, and the specific situation in each country (e.g., Bentley et al., 2021; Lee & Alhabash, 2025). Therefore, this dissertation examines SMIs and the various forms of political engagement that influence the young people in four different countries: Austria and Serbia in Europe, and Hong Kong and Indonesia in Asia. The findings from these four countries are expected to provide readers

with a reference for understanding the diverse dynamics related to the presence and role of SMIs in the development of political communication globally.

1.1 Research Gap

In recent years, many studies have examined SMIs and their relationship with politics (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Schmuck et al., 2022). However, although SMIs have increasingly emerged as central figures in online communication, I am sure several important gaps remain in the academic understanding of their role in shaping young people's political attitudes and behaviors. Several research gaps are the focus of this dissertation, as explained below:

Unexplored Internal Motivation. First, the internal psychological processes that explain why young people are receptive to political messages from SMIs remain underexplored. Existing studies emphasize exposure, authenticity, and parasocial relationships but rarely account for deeper motivational drivers. In this regard, applying eudaimonic theory—which emphasizes the pursuit of meaning, moral reflection, and self-realization—offers a promising avenue to explain how young people engage with political content shared by SMIs. Such an approach extends beyond hedonic motivations of entertainment and pleasure, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of sustained political engagement (e.g., Oliver & Raney, 2011). Moreover, integrating concepts from self-determination theory and intrinsic motivation research may provide insights into how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape youths' receptivity to political messaging (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000). This perspective highlights that engagement is not purely passive; instead, it reflects active cognitive and emotional investment in content that aligns with personal values and social identity. Additionally, considering the role of moral and civic identity formation can elucidate why certain SMIs are more effective in mobilizing youth participation, particularly in politically or socially significant campaigns (e.g., Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Understanding these internal psychological mechanisms is crucial for constructing a comprehensive model that captures both the affective and cognitive pathways through which SMI-mediated political communication impacts young audiences.

Unrevealed Negative Emotions. Second, although scholars acknowledge that online interactions with SMIs may evoke negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, or distrust, the mechanisms behind these effects are not yet clearly theorized. Negative affect is particularly

relevant in politics, as it may either encourage protest and activism or foster disengagement and withdrawal (e.g., Jasper, 1998; van Troost et al., 2013). Without disentangling these emotional dynamics, it remains difficult to evaluate the overall democratic implications of influencer-driven political communication (UNESCO, 2023; Landmann, 2021). Moreover, the intensity and valence of these emotions may be mediated by factors such as prior political attitudes, social identity, and the perceived credibility of the influencer (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Weeks, 2015). Research from political psychology and media effects theory suggests that negative emotions can serve both as catalysts for political mobilization and as triggers for selective exposure or avoidance behaviors, depending on contextual and individual-level moderators (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Nabi, 2003). Additionally, the interactive nature of social media, including features such as commenting, sharing, and algorithmically curated content, may amplify emotional contagion and polarize audience responses, complicating the assessment of normative outcomes for democratic deliberation (e.g., Bakshy et al., 2015; Tandoc et al., 2018). A more rigorous integration of affective mechanisms into models of SMI-mediated political communication is therefore essential to understand both the empowering and potentially destabilizing consequences of these interactions on civic engagement.

Unintegrated Theoretical Approaches. Third, despite the growing body of research on SMIs, the application of established media and communication theories remains limited and fragmented. Existing studies have primarily focused on descriptive or behavioral aspects of SMI–follower interactions, often overlooking the potential of theoretical frameworks such as Parasocial Relationships Theory (e.g., Breves & van Berlo, 2025; Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Park & Hoffner, 2024), Eudaimonic Theory (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024; Delle Fave et al., 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011), and Uses and Gratification Theory (e.g., Alam et al., 2024; Parmelee & Roman, 2019; Sun et al., 2025). While these theories have been widely applied in broader media studies, their integration into SMI research remains scarce, especially in the context of political communication and youth engagement. This theoretical underutilization limits our ability to explain the psychological and emotional mechanisms underlying influencer impact, including how followers build bonds, derive meaning, and seek gratification from SMI content. As a result, existing research often lacks the conceptual depth needed to move beyond surface-level descriptions of influencer behavior. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing a stronger theoretical foundation that can support more rigorous

empirical studies and offer a richer understanding of the ways in which SMIs shape political attitudes and behaviors.

Unexamined Political Power of Human SMIs. Fourth, while SMIs frequently engage in political criticism and propose solutions that resonate with young audiences, potentially fostering political interest, systematic research into their mobilizing power remains limited. Much of the existing studies focus on individual cases, single platforms, or specific political events, without offering a comprehensive framework for understanding how SMIs drive political engagement among youth (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2022). This gap is especially important given the rise of AI-generated influencers and automated political content. However, despite these technological developments with the existence of AI-influencers, authentic SMIs continue to wield significant influence, leveraging their personal credibility, parasocial relationships, and unique presence to shape political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Boulianne, 2020; Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Moreover, the ways SMIs blend entertainment, personal branding, and political messaging complicate conventional models of political communication, underscoring the need for a nuanced theoretical approach that accounts for platform affordances, algorithmic curation, and the distinctive authenticity of human influencers. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for assessing the potential of SMIs to enhance political knowledge and participation but also for critically examining the risks of misinformation, echo chambers, and performative activism in digitally mediated political spaces.

A Comparison Between Two Continents: Europe and Asia. Finally, existing research tends to adopt a single-country or region-specific focus, with little attention to cross-regional comparisons. In other words, still scarce. In particular, no comparative study has simultaneously examined the role of SMIs in Europe and Asia, despite differences in political systems, regulatory environments, and media cultures that are likely to shape how young people respond to influencer content. Addressing this gap, the present study surveys young people across four countries—Austria, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, and Serbia—representing two distinct world regions, in order to advance a comparative understanding of the relationship between SMIs and political engagement (e.g., Casero-Ripollés, 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2022). Furthermore, a comparative approach enables the exploration of contextual moderators, such as cultural norms regarding authority and civic expression, media regulation, and platform-specific engagement patterns, which are critical for

developing a more generalizable theory of influencer-mediated political communication. By integrating cross-regional evidence, this study contributes to both the empirical and theoretical literature, offering insights into how political influence via social media transcends national boundaries while remaining sensitive to local sociopolitical and technological contexts.

Taken together, these gaps make it clear to me that we need a more systematic, conceptually clear, psychologically grounded, and cross-regional approach to studying SMIs and political engagement. In this research, I aim to address these shortcomings by developing a comparative framework that considers both the motivational and emotional dimensions of young people's interactions with SMIs. Drawing on theories such as parasocial relationships theory, eudaimonic theory, and uses and gratifications theory, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of why youth are drawn to political content on social media and how these engagements shape their attitudes and behaviors. By including participants from different regions, I also want to explore how political systems, media environments, cultural norms, and platform-specific features influence these interactions, highlighting both shared patterns and unique local dynamics. Through this work, I aspire not only to clarify conceptual distinctions between SMIs and PSMIs but also to provide insights that might help educators, policymakers, and platform designers foster meaningful political engagement among young people. Ultimately, my goal is to contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the evolving role of SMIs in shaping young people's political outcomes across diverse contexts.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

In this dissertation, there are three study results, which are divided into Chapters 5, 6, and 7. The explanation of the introduction, state of the art, theoretical framework, and methodological approach is the initial chapter, which is divided into Chapters 1 to 4. Meanwhile, after the presentation of the study results, there are several chapters that discuss key results, discussions, references, and finally the abstract in Chapter 11. Let's begin with Chapters 1 to 4.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the role of SMIs in contemporary society. I then discussed their influence in politics, both at local and global levels, highlighting that the phenomenon of SMIs is universal and international, with significant implications for the development of political communication. Following this, I identified several research gaps that this study aims to address and provided a brief overview of the three studies I conducted during my

doctoral studies. Chapter 2 will explain the state of the art in this study. Meanwhile, in Chapter 3 we will discuss the theoretical framework, and the methodological approach will be explained in Chapter 4. After that, I will start to explain the three studies results starting from Chapter 5.

Study I, described in Chapter 5, discusses the role of SMIs in providing political criticism through the content they posted on their social media accounts. The activities of SMIs in cyberspace can spark the younger generation's interest in politics, but can also lead to political apathy. Especially with the parasocial relationship theory that makes the audience of social media users, who are mostly the younger generation, easily influenced due to feelings of trust and closeness to their favorite SMIs.

Continuing the discussion from the previous chapter, Study II, presented in Chapter 6, explores how initial sparks of engagement with internal motivation can evolve into concrete action. In this context, my co-authors and I examine how young people's exposure to content from Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and Political Social Media Influencers (PSMIs) influences their sense of political efficacy and their decisions to participate in political activities. This study also highlights the distinctions between SMIs and PSMIs, offering a clearer understanding of how these two groups differ and how each uniquely impacts youth political engagement.

Finally, in the third study, presented in Chapter 7, my co-authors and I summarize the insights gained regarding how the powerful voices of SMIs shape youth political engagement, particularly in moments of mobilization. The study explains that SMIs' posts on social media can influence the psychological responses of young people, often triggering negative emotions such as anger. Moreover, this mobilization by SMIs can sometimes foster a sense of cynicism among youth toward politics. At the same time, these emotional responses are complex and may not always result in disengagement; in some cases, they can encourage critical reflection and a deeper awareness of political and social issues. This duality underscores the nuanced role of SMIs in the digital political landscape—acting both as catalysts for engagement and as potential conduits for frustration, disillusionment, or misinformation. Through this study, we aim to provide a more balanced understanding of how emotional, cognitive, and informational factors interact to shape youth political behavior in the age of social media.

Furthermore, in Chapter 8, I outline the key findings of this dissertation, highlighting the most significant results from the research. Chapter 9 then provides a comprehensive discussion of these findings in relation to various theoretical perspectives, research methods, and the broader development of political communication. This discussion also examines how social media technologies and the role of SMIs contribute to shaping dynamic political situations at both local and global levels. The dissertation concludes with references (Chapter 10) and a complete abstract in the final Chapter 11. An overview of the three main studies included in this dissertation is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The list of three studies is in this dissertation.

Study I	Munzir, A.A., Neureiter, A., Matthes, J., & Chan, M. (submitted to Social Media + Society). Sparking Political Interest in Young People? Exposure to Constructive and Destructive Political Criticism of SMIs, Political Apathy, and Political Interest in Four Countries.
Study II	Munzir, A. A., Neureiter, A., Matthes, J., Chan, M., & Bojić, L. (2025). From sparks to action: The role of political influencers for young adults' political efficacy and political participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia. <i>Frontiers in Political Science</i> , 7, Article 1620631. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1620631
Study III	Munzir, A. A., Matthes, J., Chan, M., & Bojic, L. (submitted to Information, Communication, & Society). Powerful Voices of Influencers: Mobilization, User Engagement, Emotions, and Political Cynicism among Young Adults in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia.

2. State of the Art

It is undeniable that advances in communication technology have brought significant changes to human interaction, including in the realm of political communication. A dozen years ago, social media primarily served as a platform for communication among users only (e.g., Gilardi, 2022). However, in recent years, a new phenomenon has emerged—social media influencers (SMIs), who act as role models within online communities appear (e.g., Archer, 2024). These SMIs use various platforms that align with their personal profiles, self-image, and content style. Some gain popularity on YouTube, while others rise to prominence on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (e.g., Benevento, 2025). Recently, Threads has also gained attention, especially after many users left Twitter/X (e.g., Zhang, 2024). Beyond entertainment, there are also professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn, which focus on users' professional identities in the workplace (e.g., Utz, 2016). Whether we realize it or not, exposure to political information on social media is unavoidable (Matthes et al., 2020), especially with SMIs as pioneers in providing public opinion and turning them into effective political communicators.

The study of SMIs initially began from their role in health communication, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when online platforms became essential channels for information dissemination (e.g., Feldkamp, 2021; Mason et al., 2021; Pöyry et al., 2022). The reduction of in-person gatherings and increased reliance on digital communication encouraged many individuals to pursue careers as content creators, gradually transforming some into SMIs as their follower counts grew (e.g., Flaherty, 2025; Kaňková et al., 2024). These SMIs played a dual role: while many disseminated accurate health guidance, some also produced misleading or oversimplified content, complicating efforts by healthcare professionals to provide reliable information to the public (e.g., Atypon et al., 2023; Gupta et al., 2022). The visibility and reach of SMIs were amplified by engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, which incentivized content strategies that prioritized attention over accuracy (e.g., Flaherty, 2025). Following the initial waves of the pandemic, the influence of SMIs expanded beyond health-related topics. Many began engaging with lifestyle, entertainment, and social issues, eventually penetrating political discussions and shaping public discourse (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Naderer, 2023; Rothut, 2025).

SMIs have proven capable of framing political issues in ways that resonate with specific audiences, particularly younger users who increasingly turn to social media rather than traditional news sources for information (e.g., Borchers, 2025). Their ability to combine

relatability, entertainment, and perceived credibility enables them to affect political attitudes, mobilize engagement, and even influence voting behavior in certain contexts (e.g., Goodwin, 2023; Schwemmer, 2025). Consequently, political communication now intersects with the dynamics of SMIs' culture, raising important questions about the dissemination of information, the formation of public opinion, and the ethical responsibilities of those who command large online followings (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025).

2.1 Research on SMIs and Political Engagement

Early studies on SMIs in politics examined how social media personalities began integrating political content into their online personas, shifting from purely lifestyle-oriented communication to more politically engaged forms of expression. Suuronen et al. (2021) demonstrated how Finnish SMIs started addressing political and social topics, signaling the rise of SMI-led political discourse beyond traditional political actors. Similarly, Riedl et al. (2021) highlighted that SMI's growing engagement with "meaningful content" reflects a broader trend in which online figures use their platforms for civic and ideological communication. Besides, a study from Arnesson (2022) blurred the boundaries between personal branding and political advocacy, establishing SMIs as new intermediaries in the digital public sphere.

Subsequent research by Schmuck et al. (2022) has explored how SMI's credibility, authenticity, and relational closeness with audiences enable them to mobilize political interest and participation, particularly among younger demographics. Studies have found that SMI's relatable communication style fosters perceived authenticity, which enhances youth engagement and lowers political cynicism (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2024). Further studies from Reinikainen et al. (2025) and Harff and Schmuck (2024) showed that SMIs can effectively encourage political participation, especially when followers perceive them as genuine and ideologically consistent. Another study from Naderer (2023) also proves that SMIs act as unconventional political agents, shaping opinion formation and motivating action through parasocial relationships and perceived trust.

More recent studies from Borchers (2025) and Kluver (2024) position SMIs as strategic actors within institutional and electoral contexts, showing how political communicators and parties increasingly collaborate with them to reach digital publics. For instance, SMIs can support political campaigns and even influence election outcomes by amplifying political messaging in personalized formats. Meanwhile, Ceccobelli and Colombo

(2025) and von Sikorski et al. (2025) emphasized that SMI's hybrid role—balancing entertainment, advocacy, and persuasion—poses both opportunities and challenges for democratic communication. As research continues to expand globally, studies from Zeib and Shahzad (2025) and Goodwin et al. (2023) mentioned that the political influence of these digital figures is increasingly recognized as a defining feature of contemporary political communication ecosystems.

Beyond electoral and campaign contexts, SMIs also shape political knowledge, issue awareness, and discourse framing. Studies by Fischer et al. (2022) and Gonzalez et al. (2023) show that SMIs strategically frame political topics on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, blending personal narratives with policy discussions. Sehl and Schützeneder (2023) emphasized that format choices, such as short-form videos or interactive content, directly impact the perceived accessibility of political information. Further, Hasell and Chinn (2023, 2025) demonstrated that lifestyle SMIs can indirectly influence political attitudes by shaping followers' trust in information sources, highlighting the nuanced ways in which aspirational online behavior intersects with political cognition.

Research also indicates that SMIs play a role in fostering political polarization and public debate dynamics. Flamino et al. (2023) and Brooks and Wellman (2024) found that SMI's endorsement patterns and content curation can amplify partisan divides, while Rothut (2025) and Rossette-Crake (2025) suggest that SMI's performative oratory contributes to both engagement and polarization within digital publics. Moreover, Udupa (2024) and Manfredi et al. (2024) note that SMIs can intersect with global diplomacy, disinformation, and algorithmic amplification, underscoring the broader societal and democratic implications of their political activity. Collectively, these studies depict SMIs not only as communicators and mobilizers but also as critical intermediaries shaping the contours of modern political participation and discourse.

In addition to shaping political attitudes and mobilization, SMIs also function as intermediaries in the broader information ecosystem, impacting public trust and knowledge dissemination. Hasell and Chinn (2025) found that the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs directly affects whether audiences accept political information from them, suggesting that SMIs operate as alternative epistemic authorities. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2023) demonstrated that factors such as parasocial relationships and source credibility significantly influence Gen-Z followers' perceptions of information quality and willingness to share political

content. These findings underscore that the political influence of SMIs extends beyond engagement metrics to the actual construction and circulation of knowledge among digital publics. At the end, recent research also highlights the global and comparative dimensions of SMIs in politics, illustrating how these figures operate across different political systems and cultural contexts (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024). Arnesson and Reinikainen (2024) provide a broader overview of SMIs in politics across nations, emphasizing the intersection of personal branding, political advocacy, and promotional labor. This study suggests that SMIs are no longer peripheral actors but central components in contemporary political communication, capable of influencing participation, knowledge, and opinion formation on both local and global scales.

2.2 Research on SMIs and Youth Political Outcomes

While I previously discussed SMIs in a general political context, in this part, I focus on research that highlights their role as significant agents of political socialization among younger audiences, as well as their connection to political outcomes in this dissertation. Muth and Peter (2023) demonstrated that SMIs shape young people's political opinions and behavioral intentions by embedding political and civic topics within lifestyle-oriented narratives that feel accessible and authentic. Similarly, Schmuck et al. (2022) found that SMI's conversational and relatable communication style can reduce political cynicism and increase political interest among adolescents and emerging adults. **Political interest** itself refers to the degree of attention and curiosity individuals have toward political issues, actors, and events (Dalton, 2020). Meanwhile, **political cynicism** can be understood as a pervasive skepticism or mistrust toward political institutions and actors (Easton, 1975). These findings underscore that SMI-led communication can serve as a gateway for civic engagement among youth populations traditionally less engaged with institutional politics. Moreover, Harff and Schmuck (2024) observed that young individuals increasingly rely on SMIs for political information, suggesting that SMIs have become a meaningful component of youth political learning environments.

SMI's perceived authenticity and interpersonal closeness further enhance their capacity to act as opinion leaders in political contexts. Harff (2025) showed that SMI's intimate and emotionally oriented communication style fosters trust, thereby increasing followers' openness to political messaging. This is in line with a study from Hasell and Chinn (2025), which found that followers' trust in SMIs strongly predicts their acceptance of political information disseminated online. Authenticity thus serves as a key mediator of

persuasive influence, positioning SMIs as credible and affective intermediaries within the digital political sphere. Naderer (2023) similarly highlighted that SMI's parasocial relationships with followers can translate into heightened motivation for political action, illustrating that trust-based relational communication can yield tangible participatory outcomes among young audiences. Such outcomes often manifest through enhanced **political efficacy**—the belief that one's political actions can make a difference in political processes (Morrell, 2003).

Beyond shaping attitudes, SMIs also play an active role in mobilizing **political participation**, which refers to individual or collective actions intended to influence political decision-making, ranging from voting to online activism (Verba et al., 1995). Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022) found that SMIs can effectively encourage pro-environmental and civic engagement through parasocial interaction, moral framing, and the strategic blending of personal and collective appeals. Likewise, Reinikainen et al. (2025) showed that SMIs can initiate participatory behavior when their political messaging aligns with followers' perceived authenticity and ideological consistency. These results are reinforced by Goodwin et al. (2023), who described SMIs as “political relational actors” capable of mobilizing digital publics by leveraging their community-building skills and social capital. Collectively, these studies emphasize that SMI's communicative practices can transform passive digital consumption into active political participation, particularly among younger generations.

The growing academic attention to SMIs or PSMIs also reveals how they function as new intermediaries in youth political engagement. Riedl et al. (2023) conceptualized PSMIs as relational political actors who operate at the intersection of personal branding and civic communication, bridging the gap between institutional politics and networked publics. Arnesson (2022) similarly noted that SMI's ideological positioning and authenticity labor reframe political participation as a socially embedded and emotionally charged process rather than a purely rational activity. In electoral contexts, Klüver (2024) found that SMIs can even affect election outcomes by amplifying political messages through personalized, interactive formats that resonate with digital-native audiences. Taken together, these findings suggest that SMIs and PSMIs are not peripheral commentators but central mediators in how youth encounter, interpret, and act upon political issues.

In parallel, studies have shown that SMIs also influence political criticism and political apathy among youth. **Political criticism** involves the evaluative and often skeptical

appraisal of political actors and institutions, which, when constructive, can strengthen democratic accountability (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Shapiro, 2023). However, excessive exposure to performative or negative political discourse online can fuel **political apathy**—a sense of detachment or lack of motivation to engage in politics (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). SMI's framing of political issues may either reduce apathy through relatable advocacy or exacerbate disengagement when content appears opportunistic or insincere (Harff, 2025; Hasell & Chinn, 2025). Thus, the impact of SMIs on youth political behavior can oscillate between empowerment and fatigue, depending on the tone, perceived authenticity, and ideological clarity of their communication.

Moreover, an emerging body of literature explores how SMIs contribute to shaping broader patterns of political discourse and polarization among young users. Gibson et al. (2023) warned that the increasing prominence of online PSMIs may accelerate democratic deconsolidation by reinforcing partisan narratives and amplifying affective polarization. Similarly, Rossette-Crake (2025) and Rothut (2025) argued that the performative and emotionally charged nature of SMI's communication may simultaneously enhance engagement and deepen ideological divides within digital publics. These findings complicate optimistic interpretations of SMI-led participation, indicating that while SMIs can democratize political communication, they may also intensify polarization dynamics within youth audiences.

2.3 Research on Cross-national Studies of SMIs

Cross-cultural research suggests that the influence of SMIs on youth political outcomes reaches far beyond Western contexts. For instance, Zeib and Shahzad (2025) found that SMIs in Pakistan actively foster civic engagement and trust-building, even within politically complex environments. In a similar vein, Udupa (2024) highlighted how commercial and the role of SMIs in politics in India navigate and sometimes intersect with data-driven disinformation networks, shaping youth perceptions in subtle yet meaningful ways. Meanwhile, Manfredi et al. (2024) showed that SMI diplomacy represents an exciting new frontier in international communication, connecting youth engagement with broader geopolitical narratives. Together, these studies paint a multifaceted picture of political engagement—a concept encompassing a range of orientations, including interest, efficacy, participation, and even constructive criticism—that reflects how individuals think, feel, and act in the political sphere (Verba et al., 1995; Dalton, 2020; Easton, 1975; Morrell, 2003; Kaid & Holtz, 2008). In this sense, SMIs are not just mobilizers of youth participation; they

are reshaping the very ways young people experience and make sense of political life in today's digital democracies.

Cross-national studies also reveal that SMIs operate within both universal and context-specific patterns of political communication. Peres et al. (2020) examined the strategies of political leaders worldwide, distinguishing between narrowband SMIs, who target local or specialized audiences, and global icons, whose messages resonate across borders. Their findings suggest that some SMI's strategies are finely tuned to local media ecosystems, while others rely on universal communication norms that enable cross-national appeal. Complementing this, Lee and Alhabash (2025) explored how SMIs contribute to nation branding, showing that social media personalities can build meaningful relationships with foreign audiences. Together, these studies highlight the remarkable ability of SMIs to navigate cultural particularities while participating in global political discourse.

Comparative research further emphasizes the role of SMIs in shaping youth political behavior across nations. Brooks et al. (2020) studied student political participation across six European countries, finding that exposure to politically active peers and digital opinion leaders is linked to higher levels of engagement, though the forms and intensity of participation vary depending on national political culture. Chinn et al. (2023) similarly showed that science SMIs polarize audiences differently across platforms and national contexts, illustrating how digital environments shape interpretation and action. Meanwhile, Panlee (2024) documented the influence of academic figures in Thailand, demonstrating how scholars leverage celebrity and social media to advance political movements, emphasizing the role of culturally specific status cues and societal hierarchies in shaping influencer impact.

Studies examining SMI-driven nationalism and ideological mobilization add further nuance. Chung and Cheng (2022) observed that conservative YouTube SMIs in Hong Kong construct patriotic networked publics through culturally resonant narratives and algorithmically guided content dissemination. Likewise, Xu and Schneider (2025) examined the rising role of SMIs in global digital propaganda, showing that transnational flows of political content increasingly depend on individuals operating outside formal institutions, who bridge borders while promoting ideologically aligned messages. These insights highlight the complex interplay of local political contexts, platform affordances, and SMI-mediated communication in shaping digital publics worldwide.

Moreover, cross-national research demonstrates that SMIs extend their impact beyond politics into consumer and civic behaviors. Van Nguyen and Le (2026) studied green SMIs across multiple countries, finding that credibility, trust, and engagement drive environmentally responsible behaviors, illustrating how SMIs' strategies can translate across cultures when norms of trust are respected. Abidin et al. (2021) examined the role of SMIs during the COVID-19 pandemic across Australia, China, Japan, and South Korea, showing that their messaging both reflected and shaped public understanding of health crises. Altogether, these studies underscore that while SMIs are deeply embedded in local cultural and media ecosystems, they increasingly function as transnational actors, whose influence is shaped by the interplay of global media trends and culturally specific audience dynamics.

2.4 Research on SMIs in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

2.4.1 Austria

Austria is a Central European country with a population of approximately 9 million people, characterized by high levels of urbanization, education, and economic development (Statistik Austria, 2024; World Bank, 2024). The country's population is relatively balanced by gender and has a median age of about 43 years, reflecting a mature demographic structure (Statistik Austria, 2024). Education is highly valued in Austria, with strong public and private universities and a high rate of tertiary education attainment. Austrian culture is deeply rooted in music, arts, and intellectual traditions, with cities like Vienna historically recognized as centers of cultural production and critical debate (e.g., Beller, 2006; Johnson, 2020).

In terms of communication infrastructure, Austria is highly connected, with internet penetration exceeding 95% and mobile subscriptions outnumbering the total population (World Bank, 2024). Social media usage is widespread, reaching more than 80% of citizens, with platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook serving as major spaces for news consumption and social interaction. Traditional media remain relevant, particularly public service broadcasting such as Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), which plays a central role in national information flows (e.g., Kaltenbrunner et al., 2024).

Political communication in Austria reflects both institutional stability and digital transformation: political parties, civil society actors, and SMIs increasingly use social media to mobilize publics, shape issue agendas, and engage younger voters (e.g., Kaltenbrunner et al., 2024). Although public trust in traditional media remains relatively high, online platforms

are becoming crucial arenas for political debates, often amplifying discussions around migration, climate policy, and European Union governance.



Figure 1. Austria Map with the Flag Background

Research from Austria provides important insight into how SMIs function as communicators of both public health and socio-political messages within a European democratic context. Arendt et al. (2025) conducted one of the first experimental studies in Austria to examine the so-called *Papageno effect*¹ in SMI's communication, showing that SMIs can reduce harmful online discourse by framing sensitive topics such as mental health in constructive, hope-oriented ways. Their findings emphasize the potential of SMIs to act as positive social agents, using authenticity and emotional resonance to engage audiences. Complementing this, Engel et al. (2024) analyzed how Austrian adolescents perceive SMIs as health information sources, finding that trust and parasocial closeness substantially shape how young audiences internalize SMIs' messages. Together, these studies illustrate that in Austria, SMI's credibility is deeply intertwined with perceived moral and emotional sincerity—a pattern that parallels how Austrian media audiences value transparency and interpersonal warmth in public communication. This body of work highlights that Austrian SMIs are not merely digital marketers but emerging public educators and affective intermediaries within mediated civic life.

In Austria's recent elections, SMIs or PSMIs have become prominent in campaign strategies. For instance, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)² has led much of the digital campaigning among its base, using emotionally charged content, provocative messaging, and “enemy framing” to amplify mobilization (e.g., Kierig, 2024; Election-Watch.EU, 2025). The

¹The Papageno effect refers to the protective influence of positive media reporting on suicide, showing that stories of people overcoming suicidal crises can reduce suicide rates (e.g., Niederkrötenhaller et al., 2010).

²The FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs / Freedom Party of Austria) is a right-wing populist and national-conservative party in Austria, known for anti-immigration, Eurosceptic, law-and-order, and “homeland” oriented rhetoric (e.g., Ennser-Jedenastik, 2020).

FPÖ's social media engagement outpaced other parties in interactions across major platforms in mid-2024 (e.g., Kierig, 2024). Additionally, Election-Watch.EU (2025) monitored Austria's 2024 general election campaign and found that polarizing content, especially around migration, received significantly more reach and reactions than moderate messages. Extremist or toxic content was especially amplified on platforms such as Telegram and Twitter. This suggests that SMI tactics and campaign strategies are increasingly leveraging affect, polarization, and identity in ways similar to what SMIs elsewhere do.

2.4.2 Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a densely populated global city with around 7.5 million residents and one of the highest population densities in the world (e.g., Chan et al, 2022). It has a highly urbanized environment and a well-educated population, with high levels of English and Cantonese literacy. Culturally, Hong Kong represents a unique fusion of Eastern and Western traditions, and it has long served as a major media and financial hub in Asia (e.g., Chan et al., 2022). The territory's education system is well-developed, with strong university networks and high levels of digital literacy, particularly among young people (e.g., Lo & Hung, 2022).

Communication technology in Hong Kong is near-universal: internet penetration exceeds 96%, and almost all residents use smartphones (e.g., Chan et al., 2022). Around 83% of the population actively uses social media, with platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook playing a key role in everyday communication (e.g., Chan et al., 2022). Traditional media, once vibrant and pluralistic, have experienced increasing political pressure and ownership concentration in recent years (e.g., Chan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, they remain influential, particularly among older generations.

In Hong Kong, it is still possible to scroll through Instagram, exchange messages on WhatsApp, and check updates on Facebook without the use of any additional digital tools, and this seamless access has become deeply embedded in daily life (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2024). However, this experience contrasts sharply with what I encountered when visiting other parts of the region in mainland China a few years ago. In cities such as Guangzhou, these same platforms were entirely inaccessible, concealed behind the extensive infrastructure of the Great Firewall of China (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2024). To re-establish a connection with the global digital sphere, many individuals—including myself—were compelled to rely on virtual private networks (VPN)³ as a necessary intermediary. Whereas in Hong Kong, the use

³VPN (Virtual Private Network) in China is a technology that encrypts a user's internet traffic and routes it through servers outside the Chinese mainland to bypass China's internet censorship regime — the "Great Firewall" — and access blocked or restricted foreign websites and services (Feng et al., 2023).

of VPN remains largely optional, in the mainland it functions as a critical tool for accessing international information and communication channels (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2024). This personal account underscores a significant digital divide within one national boundary, illustrating how differing regulatory frameworks and political approaches to information control can shape contrasting online environments.

Political communication in Hong Kong has been profoundly shaped by social media over the past decade. During key protest movements—such as the Umbrella Movement⁴ in 2014 and the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests—SMIs, activists, and citizen journalists used digital platforms to coordinate demonstrations, share narratives, and mobilize international attention (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2024). SMI's communication in Hong Kong today is characterized by a mix of overt political messaging and subtle discursive strategies in response to tightening political restrictions, making the online sphere both dynamic and contested (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2024).



Figure 2. Hong Kong Map with the Flag Background

The Hong Kong context offers a strikingly different perspective, showing how SMIs can become entangled with ideological and nationalist discourses in a highly polarized media environment. Chung and Cheng (2022) analyzed conservative YouTubers in Hong Kong and found that these creators play a central role in constructing patriotic networked publics—online communities that integrate political messaging with entertainment content. Their work demonstrates how SMIs mobilize audiences through cultural cues, memes, and affective storytelling, thereby contributing to state-aligned digital nationalism.

⁴The Umbrella Movement was a large-scale pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong in 2014 in which tens of thousands occupied central urban areas for 79 days, demanding genuine universal suffrage, sparked by Beijing's decision to limit who could stand for election. This movement also became a powerful symbol of civil resistance in Hong Kong, with protesters using umbrellas to shield themselves from pepper spray and tear gas, turning the object into an icon of the city's struggle for democratic rights. (e.g., Hui, 2015).

Meanwhile, Ng (2025) explored the commercial side of SMI culture in Hong Kong, revealing that local SMIs employ sophisticated digital marketing strategies that blend personal branding with social commentary. Such strategies underscore how commercial and political logics intertwine in Hong Kong's media ecosystem, where political communication often takes hybridized or coded forms. Taken together, Hong Kong research portrays SMIs as ambivalent figures—simultaneously vehicles for creative self-expression and instruments of ideological mobilization—reflecting the broader tensions between commerce, identity, and politics in the city's digital culture.

Hong Kong's political situation provides a vivid example of SMIs or PSMIs during periods of unrest. During the protest movements, there was a surge in political commentary channels on YouTube; new content creators emerged who used their platforms to interpret protest developments, share eyewitness accounts, and organize or mobilize followers. One post-protest report noted that several personalities, including opposition political figures and former journalists, gained traction by framing the social unrest and anti-government sentiment. Celebrity activists like Denise Ho have played a dual role: not only participating in demonstrations physically but also using their celebrity and SMIs status to draw media attention and signal solidarity (Lau, 2024). Ho's activism during the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and subsequent protests has been noted in multiple media accounts as bridging entertainment, identity, and political dissent (Lau, 2024).

2.4.3 Indonesia

Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world, with an estimated population of approximately 277 million people as of 2023 (Worldometers, 2025). It is a large archipelagic nation characterized by rich ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, with a young demographic profile and significant regional disparities in development and education. Educational attainment has improved substantially in the past two decades, but access and quality still vary across provinces (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). Culturally, Indonesia blends traditional and modern influences, with strong oral storytelling traditions and vibrant social media use among youth populations.

Internet usage in Indonesia has expanded rapidly, with internet penetration estimated at 73–80% and more than 190 million active social media users (Meltwater, 2024). Smartphones are the dominant mode of access, reflecting a mobile-first digital culture. Popular platforms include TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Traditional media

such as television and radio still plays important roles, particularly in rural regions, but its influence is increasingly challenged by online content creators and SMIs (e.g., Meltwater, 2024).

In Indonesia, the pervasive presence of buzzers⁵ has become a notable aspect of the digital landscape. These entities, often operating through numerous fake accounts, engage in activities such as posting, liking, and sharing content to sway public opinion, particularly during critical periods like elections. Panatra et al. (2019) demonstrated that buzzers played a prominent role in the 2019 presidential election, highlighting how these digital actors can manipulate engagement metrics and create echo chambers that distort public perception. This phenomenon underscores a significant challenge to the integrity of information dissemination in the digital age, raising concerns about the ethical implications of such practices and their impact on democratic processes. Rather than being mere extensions of state propaganda, Rasidi (2023) argues that buzzers function as “twilight institutions,” operating in the grey area between state and society. They are likened to cybermilitias—privatized agents of influence that align with the state’s extractive capitalist practices. Buzzers portray their work as a form of “shadow play,” viewing themselves as “dalang” (master puppeteers) who orchestrate narratives from behind the scenes, highlighting the performative and clandestine nature of their operations.



Figure 3. Indonesia Map with the Flag Background

Political communication in Indonesia has been transformed by social media, especially during election cycles such as the 2019 Indonesian general election and the 2024 Indonesian general election. Political parties, candidates, and civil society groups actively collaborate with SMIs to reach young voters and shape public opinion. Social media platforms have also become spaces for protest, civic campaigns, and political satire, although they are increasingly subject to regulatory scrutiny and concerns about disinformation (e.g., Subekti et al., 2025).

⁵Buzzers are individuals or groups who manipulate public opinion online, often through coordinated campaigns, to influence political outcomes in Indonesia (e.g., Rasidi, 2023).

Studies in Indonesia on SMIs reflect the country's vibrant digital culture and expanding democratic participation. Kurniawan et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of research on social media and political participation, concluding that SMI's communication significantly enhances civic and electoral engagement, particularly among young voters. Their meta-analysis highlights that SMIs often act as bridges between entertainment and political discourse, reducing perceived barriers to participation in Indonesia's pluralistic democracy. Munzir et al. (2025) expanded on this by showing how SMIs and PSMIs can transform "sparks" of online interest into tangible acts of participation, from petition signing to offline activism. They argue that the relational and emotional tone of influencer communication—characterized by approachability and humor—plays a crucial role in transforming passive followership into active political involvement. Collectively, these findings illustrate that in Indonesia, SMIs occupy a powerful position as informal political educators, merging cultural expression with democratic engagement. Their role extends beyond persuasion: they help redefine what participation means for digitally native citizens navigating religious, cultural, and generational divides.

In Indonesia, SMI's communication is deeply embedded in the electoral process. In the 2024 presidential election, candidates actively recruited SMIs to reach younger voters, using TikTok, Instagram, and live streaming to present more relatable personas. Presidential campaigns in 2024 reportedly used SMIs to craft messages that softened their public image and increased emotional connection (e.g., using humor, everyday visuals) during campaign phases. Moreover, the political campaign industry in Indonesia is increasingly commodified; SMIs are not just peripherals but integral parts of campaign strategy.

2.4.4 Serbia

Serbia is a Southeastern European country with a population of approximately 7.1 million people. It has a moderately aging population but still retains a significant youth demographic. Education levels are solid, and digital literacy has improved steadily in the past decade, though disparities persist between urban and rural areas (e.g., Jakovljevic et al., 2020). Serbian culture combines strong local traditions with influences from Central and Eastern Europe, and its media culture reflects both a rich broadcasting history and contemporary digital transformations (e.g., Jakovljevic et al., 2020). Internet access in Serbia is around 85.4%, and approximately 81.5% of the population uses social media platforms regularly (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). Popular networks include Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Television remains widely consumed, with both public

and private broadcasters, while print media continues to decline in circulation. Many citizens view traditional media as politically biased, and online spaces have emerged as critical venues for alternative news and public debate (Freedom House, 2023).



Figure 4. Serbia Map with the Flag Background

Political communication in Serbia is marked by tensions between state-aligned media and independent digital voices. SMIs and online activists play a growing role in shaping political narratives, particularly around protests such as the 2020 Serbian protests⁶. Social media platforms provide spaces for mobilization and dissent, often compensating for limitations in traditional media pluralism. These dynamics reflect the increasingly important role of SMIs and content creators in shaping political participation and engagement among Serbian citizens (Baltezarević & Baltezarević, 2024). Serbian research highlights a distinct media environment where SMI's culture intersects with journalism and youth civic discourse. Anđelić (2021) examined SMI-generated content as a journalistic source within Serbian news media, noting that journalists increasingly rely on SMI's posts to gauge public sentiment and frame social issues. This dynamic illustrates how SMIs indirectly shape media agendas and political narratives, even without explicit political intent. Regional studies by Perčić et al. (2022) further show that Serbian SMIs, particularly in lifestyle and beauty sectors, foster strong audience co-creation practices that reinforce identity and community ties. Although primarily commercial, these interactions encourage forms of digital participation that can translate into civic or political engagement. In the Serbian context, where trust in traditional institutions remains fragile, SMIs often function as micro-opinion leaders who mediate between online publics and mainstream media, signaling a gradual shift toward more

⁶The 2020 Serbian protests were sparked by a deadly train station canopy collapse in Novi Sad, leading to widespread demonstrations against government corruption and perceived authoritarianism, which influenced political mobilization and contributed to the 2020 electoral boycott (e.g., Kralj et al., 2024).

participatory forms of communication in Southeast Europe (Munzir, 2025; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025).

In Serbia, recent protests have shown how social media and SMIs-like figures are playing important roles in organizing, information dissemination, and resistance, especially where mainstream media is seen by many as state-influenced (Milošević-Đorđević & Žeželj, 2017). In the protests following a tragic canopy collapse at a railway station, actor Branislav Trifunović emerged as one of the voices mobilizing people through Twitter and other social platforms, arguing that social networks remain one of the only ways for truth to travel. These protests have also been characterized by a leaderless structure; yet SMIs or well-known personalities have appeared in symbolic roles—helping shape narratives, bridging between different protest groups, and drawing international media attention. Social media functions as both an organizing tool and a mode of accountability, especially in exposing corruption or failures of infrastructure that the public perceives are ignored by official channels (Antonović, 2025).

2.4.5 Why Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia?

The reason why I chose Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia because they offer diverse political, media, and demographic contexts, allowing me to examine the role of SMIs in shaping youth political engagement in meaningful ways. Austria represents a stable liberal democracy with strong institutions, high media freedom, and well-educated youth, providing a context where SMIs coexist alongside trusted traditional media (Krapotnik, 2024). In contrast, Hong Kong offers a semi-autonomous environment with advanced digital infrastructure, high social media access, and a history of youth-led political activism, making it an important case for studying SMI's communication under restrictive political conditions (Chan & Chen, 2024). Indonesia, as the world's fourth most populous country and a consolidating democracy, is characterized by a mobile-first social media culture and a large, politically active youth population, where SMIs play a central role in electoral campaigns, civic mobilization, and political discourse (e.g., Munzir et al., 2025). Serbia presents a hybrid regime context with contested media landscapes, low trust in traditional media, and digitally active youth, highlighting the potential of SMIs to shape political narratives and mobilize engagement (Baltezarević & Baltezarević, 2024). Despite the growing importance of SMIs in these countries, research examining their political role in high-quality international journals remains scarce, which provides a clear empirical gap that I aim to address. Taken together, these four countries across Europe and Asia provide rich and varied contexts that allow me to

examine SMI's strategies, audience reception, and political effects across very different social, cultural, institutional settings, and technological conditions.

While I focus this study on Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, I recognize that the role of SMIs in shaping youth political engagement is a global phenomenon with significant potential for cross-national research. Many other countries with high digital connectivity and vibrant social media ecosystems—such as the United States, Brazil, South Korea, Nigeria, and others—also provide fertile ground for examining how SMIs influence political attitudes, mobilization, and issue framing. For instance, in Portugal and Brazil, politically polarized environments mean that SMIs often act as alternative sources of information and mobilizers of civic participation (e.g., Deslandes & Ferreira, 2025). In South Korea, digitally savvy youth engage deeply with celebrity and lifestyle SMIs, offering insights into cultural variations in influencer credibility and political persuasion (e.g., Lee, 2025). In Nigeria, SMIs can help bridge gaps in formal political communication, particularly among urban youth with high social media access (e.g., Egbunike, 2020). Considering these additional contexts enriches our understanding of how SMIs operate across different environments and cultures in the future.

Moreover, I see great value in investigating countries that are underrepresented in current research, such as hybrid regimes, conflict-affected states, or rapidly digitizing societies. By comparing SMIs' dynamics across different regions, I can better understand how SMIs navigate political constraints, leverage cultural norms, and encourage youth participation. This approach highlights the global relevance of my study while remaining sensitive to the unique political, social, and technological contexts of each country.

3. Theoretical Framework

In examining the influence of SMIs on young people's political attitudes and behaviors, this dissertation is anchored in communication and media psychology theories that offer complementary perspectives on how individuals engage with media figures, interpret mediated messages, and translate them into socio-political responses. Across the three studies, a consistent conceptual thread is maintained, while distinct theoretical lenses are strategically employed to address different dimensions of this phenomenon. The first study draws on Parasocial Relationship Theory to explain the socio-emotional connections young people form with SMIs and how these bonds shape their political attitudes and engagement (e.g., Brevers & Berlo, 2025; Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Park & Hoffener, 2024). By treating parasocial relationships as a moderating mechanism, this study examines how the strength of followers' perceived intimacy and trust can amplify or attenuate the effects of political criticism—whether constructive or destructive—on political apathy and interest.

The second study is informed by Eudaimonic Theory, which emphasizes meaningful and reflective media experiences rather than mere hedonic enjoyment (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024; Delle Fave et al., 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how young audiences respond to SMIs whose content may inspire reflection, purpose, or moral engagement. In this context, eudaimonic motivations are positioned as a moderator, helping to explain why exposure to general SMIs may spark political curiosity but does not necessarily translate into higher political efficacy or participation, in contrast to exposure to political SMIs (PSMIs).

And for the third study, I employ Uses and Gratifications Theory, extending its classical assumptions into contemporary digital environments by examining how authenticity, mobilization, and user engagement gratifications shape emotional and attitudinal responses to influencer content across multiple cultural contexts (e.g., Alam et al., 2024; Parmelee & Roman, 2019; Sun et al., 2025). Taken together, these three theoretical perspectives provide a layered and cohesive framework: parasocial bonds explain the psychological closeness between audiences and SMIs; eudaimonic motivations shed light on the depth and meaningfulness of audience engagement; and UGT reveals the active gratifications and motivations underlying media use. This integrated approach not only ensures theoretical consistency across the studies but also deepens the understanding of how SMIs culture intersects with youth political engagement in a globalized media environment.

3.1 Parasocial Relationship Theory

In recent years, I have become increasingly fascinated by the evolving dynamics between audiences and SMIs, particularly through the lens of Parasocial Relationship Theory. Traditionally, parasocial relationships (PSRs) have been understood as one-sided emotional bonds formed between audiences and media figures, such as television hosts or celebrities. However, with the rise of interactive platforms such as social media, these relationships have taken on new forms that are more immediate and immersive. As Media Psychology research indicates, PSRs no longer emerge only from passive consumption but are cultivated through ongoing, often reciprocal digital interactions that blur the boundary between the personal and the mediated self (e.g., Breves & van Berlo, 2025).

As I examine SMI's roles in shaping digital intimacy, it becomes evident that their perceived authenticity and accessibility intensify these parasocial bonds. SMIs often use storytelling, behind-the-scenes content, and direct engagement through comments or live sessions to simulate personal connections with followers. This dynamic, as Hoffner and Bond (2022) note, has profound implications for emotional well-being, as followers may experience both emotional support and vulnerability within these relationships. For me, this duality highlights how PSRs in the SMIs context operate at a deeper affective level, where followers' emotional investments are often comparable to those in real-life friendships, despite the inherently unidirectional nature of these bonds.

Reflecting further on this, I find it particularly compelling how parasocial connections can also serve as powerful drivers of social and behavioral influence. Park and Hoffner (2024) demonstrate how strong PSRs with eco-celebrities can amplify the virality of climate information, suggesting that emotional bonds can effectively mobilize collective action. In the context of SMIs, this means that PSRs are not merely passive emotional attachments but can actively shape attitudes, behaviors, and even social movements. From my perspective, understanding the nuanced mechanisms behind these relationships is essential for critically engaging with the ethical, psychological, and communicative implications of SMI culture in the digital era. Further, I would like to explain how this theory is applied in my study. The theoretical framework of Study 1 is illustrated in Figure 5.

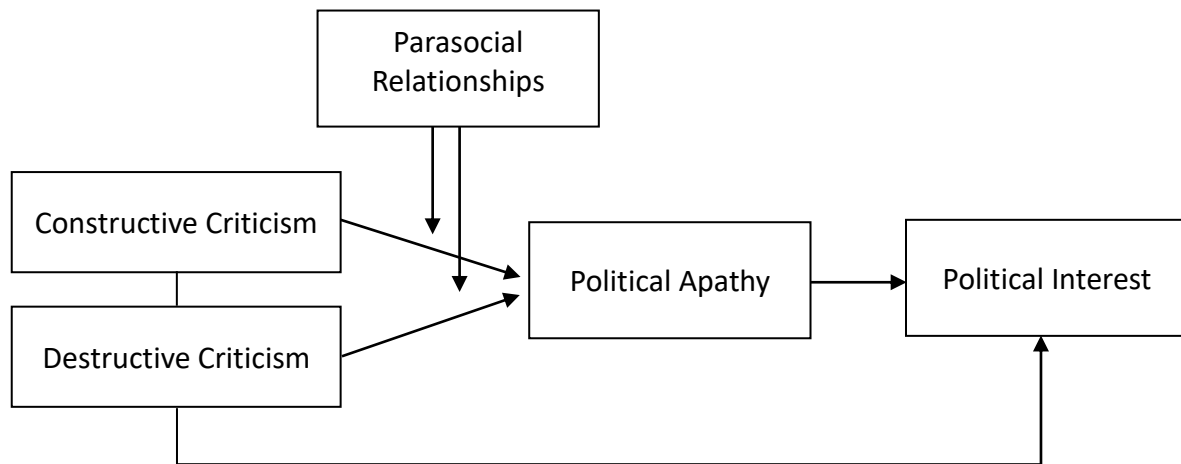


Figure 5. Theoretical Framework Study 1

In the figure above, PSR acts as a moderator and strengthens the relationship between SMIs and their followers, resulting in a greater overall effect. When the PSR is strong, the influence on youth political outcomes is also greater. Conversely, when the PSR is weak, the influence effect is also weak. This allows us to examine whether the presence of SMIs who provide political criticism and offer solutions to social media users—especially their loyal followers, most of whom are youth—can genuinely spark their interest in politics.

3.2 Eudaimonic Theory

In exploring the role of SMIs in shaping youth engagement with meaningful content, I find Eudaimonic Theory to be a particularly compelling lens. Unlike hedonic motivations, which focus on pleasure, enjoyment, and escapism, eudaimonic motivations emphasize personal growth, self-reflection, and a sense of purpose (Oliver & Raney, 2011). In my view, this theoretical approach is crucial to understanding why some audiences engage more deeply with content that goes beyond mere entertainment. When SMIs share narratives related to personal challenges, social issues, or political concerns, their content has the potential to foster meaningful reflection among followers—encouraging them to consider their values, responsibilities, and roles as active members of society.

What makes this especially interesting for my study is how SMIs can use their platforms to inspire rather than simply entertain. Bartsch and Schneider (2014) highlight how non-escapist forms of entertainment can stimulate political interest and information seeking, showing that audiences can be moved not just emotionally but cognitively as well. This aligns with what I observe in the current media landscape: many SMIs actively blend personal storytelling with civic discourse, encouraging followers to think critically and reflect

on real-world issues. In this context, eudaimonic experiences are not accidental; they are intentionally cultivated through strategic communication, emotional authenticity, and narrative depth.

Furthermore, I believe that these eudaimonic elements can foster a more engaged and reflective youth audience. As Delle Fave et al. (2011) emphasize, eudaimonic well-being is closely tied to meaning-making and personal development. This suggests that when SMIs share meaningful content—such as advocating for social justice, discussing climate change, or reflecting on personal growth—they are not just entertaining their followers but potentially contributing to their psychological and civic development. For my study, this perspective provides a valuable framework to examine how eudaimonic experiences mediated through SMIs can motivate youth to engage more critically with political and social issues, rather than passively consuming content. Further, I would also like to explain how this theory is applied in my study. The theoretical framework of Study 2 is illustrated in Figure 6.

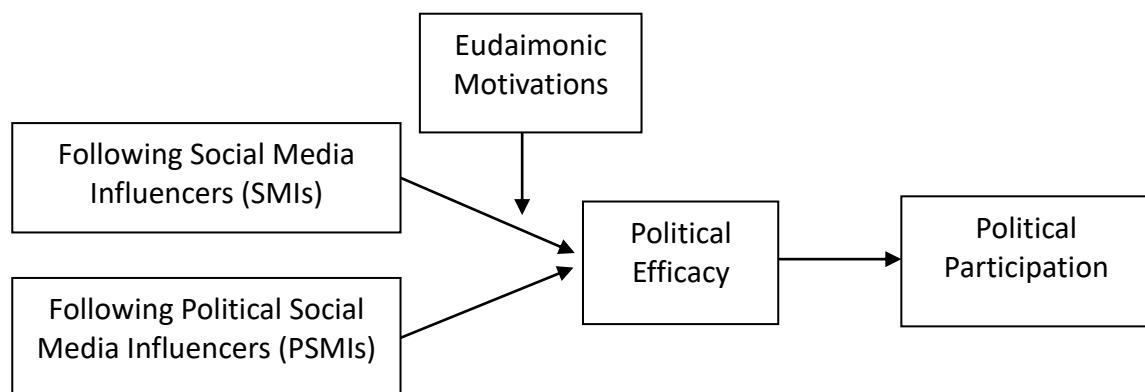


Figure 6. Theoretical Framework Study 2

In the figure above, Eudaimonic Theory explains how meaningful and reflective engagement with the following SMIs and Political Social Media Influencers (PSMIs) can strengthen the relationship between these SMIs and their impact on the political outcomes of young people. In this study (Study 2), I differentiate between SMIs and PSMIs, who are specifically engaged in political content. This distinction allows us to analyze whether exposure to meaningful and value-driven content from SMIs and PSMIs can motivate young followers not only to care about political issues but also to act on them. When the level of eudaimonic motivation is high, the impact on youth political outcomes becomes more significant. Unlike the previous stage, where the focus was on sparking interest in politics,

this stage examines how that initial spark can be transformed into concrete actions, such as political participation.

3.3 Uses and Gratification Theory

In understanding why audiences actively follow and engage with SMIs, I find Uses and Gratification Theory particularly relevant. This theory emphasizes that media users are not passive recipients but active participants who seek out media to satisfy specific needs—whether for information, personal identity, social interaction, or entertainment (e.g., Whiting & Williams, 2013). In the context of SMIs, followers often choose who to engage with based on how well these SMIs fulfill their personal gratifications (e.g., Parmelee & Roman, 2019; Sun et al., 2025; Venus et al., 2025). As Alam et al. (2024) highlight, these gratifications can extend to influential social causes, such as public health campaigns, where audiences may follow SMIs not just for entertainment but to gain credible information and guidance. From my perspective, this active role of the audience is critical for understanding the dynamics between SMIs and their followers in today's digital ecosystem.

I also find it significant that gratifications are diverse and layered, especially among young audiences. For example, Parmelee and Roman (2019) note that political leaders on platforms like Instagram attract followers not only because of their authority but also because they fulfill social and identity-related needs—such as belonging to a community, expressing political views, or aligning with shared values. Similarly, SMIs and PSMIs often blend personal content with issue advocacy, making their presence meaningful to followers who are looking for more than surface-level engagement. In my observation, this multidimensional gratification helps explain why followers remain loyal to certain SMIs and why SMI's content can be such a powerful tool for shaping attitudes and behaviors.

Moreover, the applications of this theory in education go even deeper into motivations. As Sun et al. (2025) demonstrate in their work on edu-influencers (SMIs in education), audiences are motivated not only by informational needs but also by the desire for personal growth, inspiration, and meaningful interaction. This resonates with my study, as I seek to explore how SMIs and PSMIs fulfill similar needs among youth when discussing political and social issues. By framing SMI-follower relationships through Uses and Gratification Theory, I can better understand the different types of gratifications that drive young audiences to not only consume but also interact with—and be influenced by—the

content they encounter online. Further, this theory serves as the foundation for my study. The theoretical framework of Study 3 is illustrated in Figure 7.

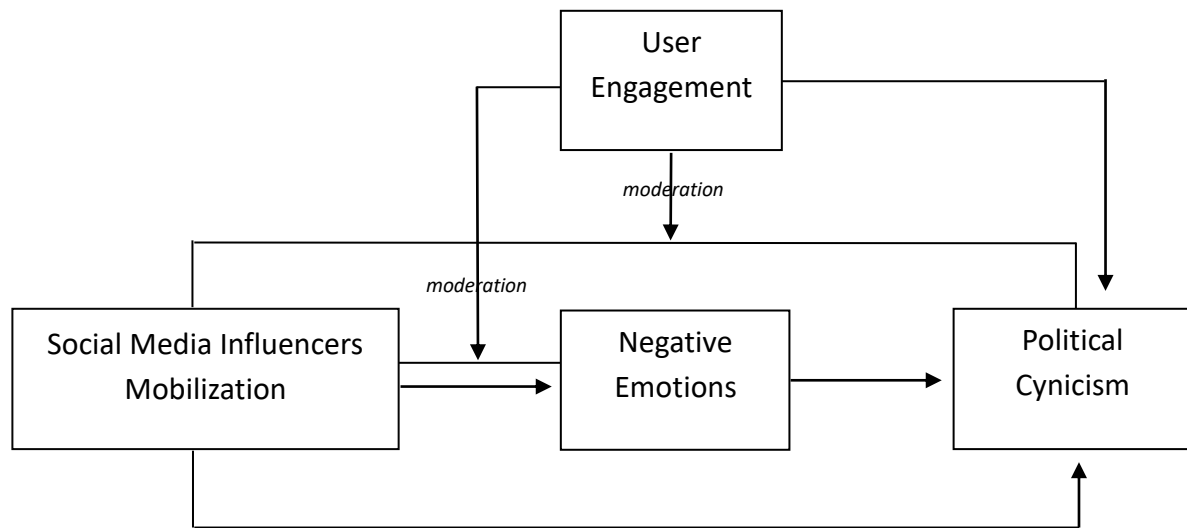


Figure 7. Theoretical Framework Study 3

In the figure above, Uses and Gratification Theory explains how young audiences actively seek out and engage with SMIs to satisfy specific informational, social, and emotional needs. In this study (Study 3), I examine whether exposure to SMI content can not only spark interest and reflection but also inadvertently trigger negative emotions and political cynicism among youth. When the gratifications sought from these SMIs are high—such as the desire for credible information, social validation, or entertainment—their content can exert a strong emotional and cognitive impact, shaping perceptions of politics in ways that may include skepticism or disillusionment. From my perspective, this underscores how powerful the voices of SMIs are: they do not merely inform or entertain, but can mobilize audiences in ways that profoundly affect both engagement and emotional responses to political life.

3.4 Viral Influencers Behavioral Effect (VIBE) Working Model

In this dissertation, I present the Viral Influence & Behavioral Effect (VIBE) Working Model as a new conceptual framework developed by integrating the theoretical frameworks from all three. The model can be understood as a working model, as it corresponds with the foci of the studies presented in this dissertation. There are four steps in this model, divided into: Social Media Influencers Activities, Followers/Social Media Users Activities, Psychological Processing with Theoretical Support, and Behavioral Outcomes. While this dissertation focuses on the variables studied, the VIBE Working Model is flexible and can

accommodate other relevant variables at the same stages of the process. An overview of the model is presented in Figure 8.

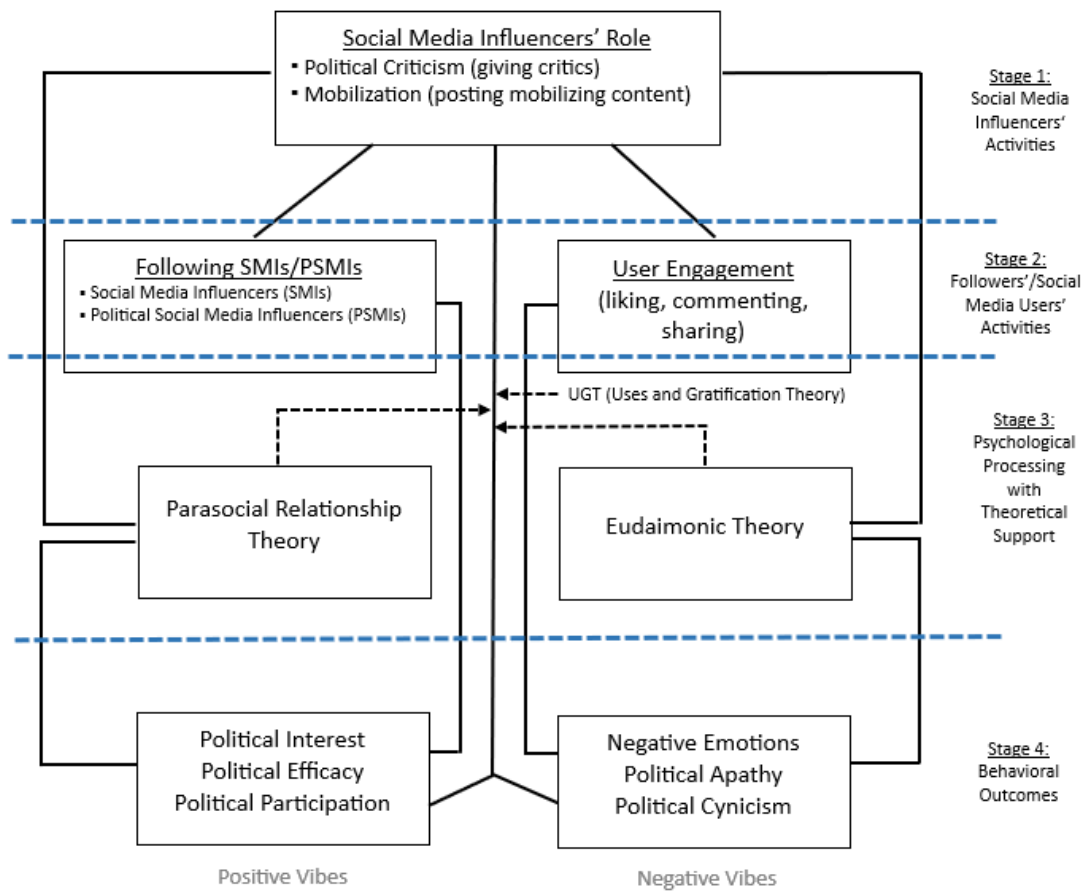


Figure 8. Viral Influencers Behavioral Effect (VIBE) Working Model

The VIBE Working Model rests on my assumption that there is a psychological dimension in how young people process and respond to the role of SMIs in shaping political outcomes. The working model can be understood as a working model, as it corresponds with the foci of the studies presented in this dissertation. In what follows, I explain how this working model works from the initial exposure to political content to the eventual emergence of either positive or negative vibes.

In the first stage, I foreground the role of **SMIs as political actors through their activities on social media**. SMIs produce and disseminate political content that can range from constructive or destructive criticism to policy discussions, mobilization calls, emotional appeals, or even more strategic persuasion efforts (e.g., Liu, 2023; Prasad & Ioannidis, 2022; Raver et al., 2012; Dubois et al., 2020). From my perspective, these mobilization messages are particularly powerful because they help shape the emotional climate of political

discourse. Consistent with previous research, I understand that such communication can trigger negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and fear (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011; Schmuck et al., 2022), as well as political cynicism toward political institutions and actors (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Miller & Listhaug, 1990). I also recognize that the intensity of these effects depends on the political environment: in politically repressive or unstable settings, such as Hong Kong, Indonesia, or Serbia, emotional and cynical responses tend to be stronger than in stable democracies like Austria (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). Moreover, when SMIs use political misinformation or manipulative persuasive strategies, they can further amplify negative affect and mistrust (e.g., Dubois et al., 2020; Goodwin et al., 2023; Wijayanto et al., 2024). I view these SMI activities as the starting point of emotional and cognitive activation within the VIBE Working Model, shaping the tone for subsequent stages of engagement and psychological processing.

In the second stage, I focus on **how followers and social media users actively engage with political content** disseminated by SMIs. In my conceptualization, engagement behaviors include liking, sharing, commenting, reposting, discussing, or fact-checking content within personal networks. I consider this stage critical because user engagement can either amplify or buffer the emotional impact of SMI mobilization. For instance, in contexts like Austria and Serbia, active engagement may weaken the relationship between mobilization and negative emotions, helping users process political information more critically and lowering emotional intensity (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2021; Wang & Sundar, 2022). By contrast, in politically repressive contexts such as Hong Kong and Indonesia, engagement can amplify political cynicism, reinforcing distrust and frustration (e.g., Hasell et al., 2024). I also pay close attention to the quality and intention behind engagement: while some users engage reflexively, others engage critically, shaping how political messages are interpreted and circulated (e.g., DeVerna et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2018). Furthermore, engagement can increase the visibility of emotionally charged content, allowing negative affect or cynicism to spread through peer networks (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025). I see these dynamics as creating an interactive feedback loop between SMIs and audiences, intensifying the emotional and cognitive impact of political communication.

In the third stage, I emphasize the **psychological mechanisms** that mediate the relationship between exposure to SMI content and political outcomes. Here, I build on theories of emotional political communication and parasocial interaction to explain how users

internalize and interpret the content they encounter. I argue that mobilization messages—especially those framed in emotional or cynical ways—activate affective responses such as anger, frustration, or fear, which then shape how users evaluate political issues (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Schmuck et al., 2022; Bartosiak et al., 2025). These emotions can fuel political cynicism, understood as a general mistrust of political institutions and actors (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004). I also highlight the role of PSR, which can strengthen the perceived credibility of the message source and thereby amplify its psychological impact (e.g., Harff, 2022; Hoffner & Bond, 2022). In addition, I view eudaimonic motivation as an important moderating factor: young adults who seek meaningful engagement may process content more critically, potentially buffering negative effects in certain contexts (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2012; Schemer et al., 2024). However, in environments marked by low trust or political repression, the same content can exacerbate feelings of powerlessness and disillusionment (e.g., Gilens & Page, 2014; Bachrach, 2017). For me, this stage reflects how emotional and cognitive filters shape users’ political perceptions and attitudes.

The fourth and final stage of the VIBE Working Model deals with how these psychological processes translate into **behavioral outcomes**. Based on my understanding, positive vibes—such as increased political efficacy, trust, and hope—can lead to higher levels of political engagement and participation, including voting, activism, and online advocacy (e.g., Beaumont, 2010; Campbell et al., 1954; Hayes & Bean, 1993; Wolak, 2018). In contrast, negative vibes—such as anger without constructive outlets, fear, and political cynicism—can result in political disengagement, apathy, or distrust (e.g., Farthing, 2010; Zhang, 2022; Schmuck et al., 2022). In extreme cases, such negative emotions can even contribute to protest behavior or disruptive political action, as seen in Indonesia in 2025 when widespread dissatisfaction escalated into mass demonstrations (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025; Naderer, 2023). I recognize that these outcomes are highly context-dependent: in stable democracies like Austria, emotional responses may translate more directly into institutional participation, whereas in more repressive or transitional contexts such as Hong Kong or Serbia, cynicism may dampen engagement or redirect it toward contentious political action (e.g., Hasell et al., 2024; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). For me, this final stage illustrates how the entire communicative chain—from SMI activity to user response and psychological processing—culminates in tangible political behaviors that can either strengthen or strain democratic processes.

4. Methodological Approach

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a comparative survey design to collect and analyze data across four countries: Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia. I selected a quantitative design because it enabled systematic measurement, statistical analysis, and an objective examination of cross-national patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bryman, 2016). By using a comparative survey method, I aimed to explore both similarities and differences across national contexts and to produce findings that could be generalized beyond individual cases (De Vaus, 2014).

The target population for this study consisted of individuals aged 16 to 24 years, representing a critical developmental stage characterized by transitions in education, entry into the labor market, identity formation, and increasing autonomy in social and political attitudes (Arnett, 2000; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). Focusing on this age group facilitated an examination of the perspectives of young people, a demographic often central to social change and policy considerations.

4.1 Questionnaire Development and Translation Process

The questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of relevant literature and previously validated instruments to ensure both conceptual rigor and empirical validity (Fowler, 2014). The initial version of the questionnaire was prepared in English and subsequently adapted for use in each participating country through a translation and back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). The English version was translated into the local languages of Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia by professional translators who were native speakers of the respective languages. Independent bilingual translators then back-translated these versions into English. Discrepancies between the original and back-translated versions were systematically reviewed and resolved through expert panel discussions to ensure semantic and conceptual equivalence (Beaton et al., 2000). This procedure enhanced the linguistic and cultural comparability of the instrument, ensuring that questionnaire items maintained their intended meaning across all language versions and supporting measurement validity in cross-national analyses. The preview of the online questionnaire before distribution can be seen in Figure 9.

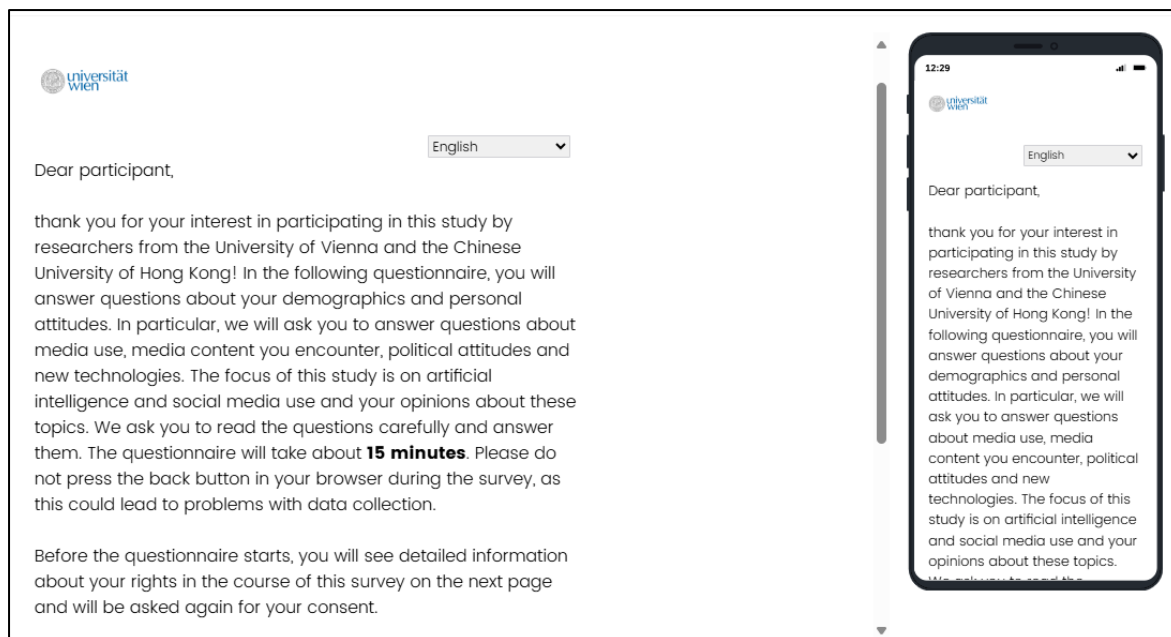


Figure 9. Preview of the online questionnaire before distribution

4.2 Data Collection

The finalized questionnaires were distributed online with the assistance of a professional survey company. This method facilitated broad reach, standardized administration procedures, and timely data collection. Each questionnaire was provided in the local language of the respondents, which minimized language barriers, enhanced comprehension, and increased the reliability of the collected data (Harkness et al., 2010). The use of an online platform also allowed for efficient data management and real-time monitoring of response rates across the four countries.

The survey preparation phase lasted one year and included questionnaire design, translation, and back-translation, and pilot testing. In the second year, the online questionnaire was distributed simultaneously in the four participating countries. The data collection period lasted several months, during which the responses were gathered and monitored to ensure appropriate stratification and data quality. Following data collection, the dataset was cleaned and prepared for statistical analysis, including handling of missing data, outlier detection, and verification of measurement scales.

4.3 Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using R, an open-source statistical environment well suited for quantitative research. Several R packages were used to support the data analysis process, including: *dplyr*, *haven*, *psych*, *epiDisplay*, *lm*, *car*, *interplot*, *interactions*, *lavaan*, *semPlot*, etc. Prior to hypothesis testing, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis

(CFA) was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the measurement model. CFA was used to verify the factor structure of the constructs and to ensure that the observed variables accurately represented their underlying latent constructs (Byrne, 2016). After confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, multiple regression analysis was performed to test the research hypotheses. This statistical technique was selected to examine the effects of multiple independent variables on the dependent variables simultaneously while controlling for potential confounders (Field, 2018).

5. Study 1 (Submitted)

Sparking Political Interest in Young People? Exposure to Constructive and Destructive Political Criticism of SMIs, Political Apathy, and Political Interest in Four Countries

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Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) increasingly act as political opinion leaders whose voices are trusted. However, it remains unclear how they might influence young people's political interests. We conducted a comparative cross-sectional survey investigating the associations of political criticism—divided into constructive and destructive criticism—by SMIs with political apathy and political interest among young people in Austria, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, and Serbia. Results showed that constructive criticism by SMIs is positively associated with young people's political interest in all countries. Also, we found that the relationship between exposure to destructive criticism and political apathy was stronger among young people with strong PSRs in all four countries. The implications of these findings are discussed within the specific contexts of each country.

Keywords

Social media influencers, political criticism, political apathy, political interest, comparative survey

1. Introduction

Anyone can voice political criticism regardless of their background or position (e.g., Eagleton, 2005). Freedom of speech, as an essential democratic principle, is often exercised by social media influencers (SMIs) who express their opinions and critiques on social media freely. SMIs, as well-known figures or micro-celebrities, hold credibility that allows them to influence political aspects (Lewis, 2020). They can shape public sentiment, particularly

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among young people, regarding ongoing political issues, and research highlights their ability to persuade and mobilize audiences (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2022). Notably, the more prominent and influential an SMI is, the greater their capacity to motivate political engagement among youth (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023).

SMIs not only discuss politics, but they also actively criticize politicians, parties, and broader political institutions. That is, political criticism extends beyond mere opinion expression; it can initiate discussions, foster diverse perspectives, and occasionally lead to heated debate (e.g., Wodak, 2002). Political criticism can also drive political change, yet it may inadvertently increase political apathy. Political apathy has dual origins: internal attitudes within individuals or external influences, such as exposure to SMI's political criticism, which can decrease political interest (e.g., DeLuca, 1995; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023).

Despite the growing influence of SMIs, little research has examined how their political criticism—particularly when differentiated into constructive (solution-oriented) and destructive (hostile and uncivil) forms—relates to young people's political apathy and interest, particularly outside Western contexts. Comparative research from countries such as Indonesia and Hong Kong remains scarce. To address this gap, we conducted a cross-sectional survey across four culturally and politically diverse countries—Austria, Serbia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong—examining the relationships between exposure to political criticism by SMIs, political apathy, and political interest among young people. We also investigated the moderating role of parasocial relationships (PSRs) relating to emotional bonds with SMIs (e.g., Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Since different political systems and institutions might play a critical role in political communication research (e.g., Beaujot, 2012), we have chosen Austria and Serbia as representatives of European Countries and Indonesia and Hong Kong as representatives of Asian Countries.

Political systems and media landscapes influence information flow, engagement levels, and pathways for youth involvement (e.g., Dahlgren, 2013; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In Austria and Serbia, formal parties and traditional media remain important sources of political information, yet SMIs have emerged as relatable intermediaries, translating complex topics into accessible and engaging content (e.g., Munzir et al., 2025). In Serbia, where institutional trust is low and youth cynicism is high, SMIs serve as informal intermediaries, providing credibility that traditional actors may lack. In Austria, where institutional trust is

higher, SMIs similarly act as personalized sources that leverage parasocial relationships to stimulate curiosity and interest among young citizens. In Asian contexts such as Indonesia and Hong Kong, SMIs fill different gaps: Indonesia's democratic, decentralized governance and vibrant social media use allow influencers to engage citizens directly, bypassing traditional filters, while Hong Kong's constrained political environment makes SMIs an alternative avenue for youth to access political information and discussion (e.g., Munzir et al., 2025). Across these contexts, SMIs operate both locally and globally, connecting youth to political narratives, debates, and campaigns in ways that traditional institutions cannot fully achieve, highlighting their growing significance as catalysts of political engagement (e.g., Munzir et al., 2025), especially in sparking political interest in young people.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

The parasocial relationships (PSRs) theory gives insights into the relationship between SMIs and young people as their followers (e.g., Harff, 2022; Park & Hoffner, 2024). Hoffner and Bond (2022) defined PSRs as socio-emotional connections that individuals establish with media figures, including celebrities or famous characters, such as SMIs. These relationships can enhance feelings of social connectedness and community, develop feelings of intimacy, assist in coping, support personal growth, promote identity exploration, and contribute to the reduction of prejudice through parasocial contact (e.g., Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Therefore, this study employs PSR theory in a moderating role to examine the role of SMIs in sparking young people's political apathy and political interest.

2.1 Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

In recent years, numerous SMIs have increasingly produced content on political issues and participated in political events, amplifying their role as actors in the political communication environment (e.g., Suuronen et al., 2022). Political content generated by these SMIs can meaningfully engage young people by stimulating political interest (e.g., Harff, 2022; Harff & Schmuck, 2023), thereby potentially transforming previously passive or disinterested users into more politically active individuals (e.g., Naderer, 2023). A prominent example of this phenomenon is Rezo, a German influencer whose political speech on YouTube had a profound impact on young people's political attitudes and participation (e.g., De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022).

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The pathway to becoming a successful SMI in politics involves a strategic combination of business acumen, responsiveness to audience demand, and adaptation to evolving social media trends (e.g., Fischer et al., 2022). Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) have introduced dynamics like the “ratio” phenomenon, where posts can gain disproportionate visibility either organically or through manipulation (e.g., Harris et al., 2023). SMIs who skillfully leverage these platform-specific affordances can shape political discourse in impactful ways. For instance, Hasan Piker (widely known as HasanAbi), an SMI in politics based in the United States, has used these tactics effectively to provoke engagement from politicians and celebrities alike, amplifying the reach and political significance of his posts (e.g., Harris et al., 2023). Similarly, Indonesian celebrity Fedi Nuril used his personal account to express his political views during the 2024 Indonesian presidential election. His posts quickly went viral, mobilizing significant attention from netizens and shaping the political interest of young Indonesians who had previously recognized him primarily as an actor.

Additionally, it is essential to understand not only the role of SMIs themselves but also the dynamics of the relationship between SMIs and their followers, particularly in the process of political information reception and interpretation. This aligns with Harff’s (2022) findings, which indicate that even incidental exposure to PSMI’s content can enhance followers’ political interest and engagement. However, the opposite effect is also possible: exposure to political content from SMIs may lead some followers to disengage or lose interest in politics altogether (e.g., Harff, 2022). These divergent outcomes highlight the complex and ambivalent role of SMIs in shaping young people’s political attitudes and behaviors in both empowering and demobilizing ways.

2.2 Political Criticism: Constructive and Destructive

Generally, the power of political criticism can affect both general and specific political changes. However, as Franklin (2008) noted, the impact of political criticism directed at the government or politicians on young people’s perceptions varies depending on the context and situation, such as the type of criticism raised by SMIs. Thus, based on the work of Franklin (2008), we distinguish between two types of political criticism of SMIs: constructive and destructive.

Constructive criticism combines positive and hopeful elements to provide useful feedback and promote improvement. It balances negative and positive aspects through

supportive language that fosters optimism (Fong et al., 2016). In education, pairing criticism with encouragement enhances performance (Fong et al., 2016), while in politics, it can transform negative perceptions into positive expectations (Meier, 2018). By offering solutions rather than blame, constructive criticism avoids hurtful language, reduces anxiety, and helps individuals respond more effectively to challenges (Baron, 1988; Fong et al., 2018).

According to Baron (1988), *destructive criticism* is based on a critical nature, negative feedback, and the potential to increase anxiety and provoke anger in the recipient. This hostile form of criticism can have numerous adverse effects. For instance, it may lead to conflicts between the critic and the criticized. Also, it can damage professional relationships, such as those between supervisors and staff, or affect other interactions (Baron, 1988). Furthermore, Baron (1990) explained that the negative consequences of destructive criticism are often difficult to overcome, typically resulting in decreased performance and avoidance behavior from the criticized individual.

2.3 Political Criticism and Political Apathy

One of the aspects that plays a significant role in shaping political engagement and influencing various segments of society is media content (e.g., Newton, 1999). For instance, Newton (1999) suggested that reading news in newspapers is positively related to political knowledge, interest, and understanding. However, with the advancement of communication technologies, traditional media competes with social media as a key source of political information. The presence of SMIs, often regarded as internet celebrities, provides an alternative source of political news for individuals, particularly young people. Engaging celebrities in disseminating political content can shape public opinion and influence political engagement (e.g., Becker, 2012).

While social media can foster political interest, it can also lead to political apathy—characterized by feelings of helplessness, futility, and indifference toward politics (Dean, 1960; Rosenberg, 1954; Dahl et al., 2020). Individual factors, such as political information-seeking behavior on social media (e.g., Yamamoto et al., 2017), and contextual factors, such as exposure to constructive political content, can mitigate apathy. Specifically, constructive criticism from SMIs—messages that highlight problems while offering solutions—can instill hope and a sense of efficacy, encouraging re-engagement with politics (e.g., Baron, 1988; Fong et al., 2018; Prasad & Ioannidis, 2022). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Exposure to constructive political criticism of SMIs is negatively related to young people's political apathy.

In contrast, destructive criticism from SMIs can provoke chaos, anxiety, anger, and other negative emotions (e.g., Baron, 1988; Baron, 1990), which may contribute to heightened political apathy among young people. Such criticism can exacerbate disillusionment and avoidance of political discussions, often perceived as burdensome (e.g., Shapiro, 2023). More specifically, when SMIs criticize politics by pointing to flaws, shortcomings, and deficiencies without offering any solutions and using hostile language, young people may get a sense of powerlessness. The take-home message is that politics is inherently flawed, and nothing can be done about it. Therefore, young adults may believe there is no point in engaging in politics, leading to apathy. Based on this reasoning, we assume that destructive political criticism from SMIs might be positively related to political apathy among young individuals. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Exposure to destructive political criticism of SMIs is positively related to young people's political apathy.

2.4 The Moderating Role of Parasocial Relationships with SMIs

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) refer to enduring, one-sided emotional bonds that audiences form with media figures, distinct from brief parasocial interactions (Rubin & Rubin, 1985; Hartmann, 2016). SMIs' credibility often depends on their attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, similarity to followers, and regular engagement (e.g., Cheng et al., 2024). Prior research shows that strong PSRs enhance perceived SMI's credibility and increase user engagement, such as liking or sharing posts (e.g., Balaban et al., 2022; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Park & Hoffener, 2024). This suggests that stronger PSRs amplify the impact of SMI communication on followers' attitudes and behaviors, including political ones. For instance, Liu (2023) found that public trust in Nanshan Zhong, a respected scientist, fostered optimism during the COVID-19 crisis—illustrating how credibility and emotional connection can enhance message influence. Accordingly, we argue that when SMIs provide constructive political criticism, strong PSRs can strengthen their positive effect by reducing political apathy among young people. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H3: The association described in H1 is stronger for young people with strong PSRs than those with weak PSRs.

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By contrast, destructive criticism consists of harsh words and can lead to negative outcomes (Baron, 1988). However, destructive criticism can be very powerful when SMIs influence their followers, as negative information has a strong persuasive potential (e.g., Prasad & Ioannidis, 2022). This dynamic can result in followers becoming apathetic toward politics because they trust the harsh criticism expressed by the SMIs (e.g., Harff, 2022). This trust develops from the strong PSRs between the SMIs and their followers (e.g., Harff, 2022). Therefore, we argue that when strong parasocial relationships exist, SMIs who engage in destructive criticism will contribute even more to increasing political apathy among young people. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

H4: The association described in H2 is stronger for young people with strong PSRs than those with weak PSRs.

2.5 Political Apathy and Political Interest

Feelings of apathy toward politics can be linked to young people's political interest, especially as politics tends to be perceived as a difficult topic for young people to discuss (e.g., Henn & Weinstein, 2006; Russel, 2004; Sloam, 2007). Furthermore, political apathy may affect a person's level of political interest and their decision to engage in politics because they may see no point in following politics, which is a serious concern in terms of democratic theory (e.g., Dean, 1960; Prior, 2010). This connection happens because there is a psychological involvement in politics with respect to apathy and interest (e.g., Chen & Zhong, 1999). For example, some young people choose not to care and are not interested in politics, possibly because they feel apathy and frustration already toward politics and its process (Sloam, 2007). In other words, apathy fosters the impression that personal political involvement does not lead to anything. So, if nothing can be achieved or changed with politics, it is very hard for young individuals to maintain interest. Thus, based on this explanation, we argue that if young people already feel apathetic about politics, they might not be interested in knowing more about politics. Hence:

H5: Young peoples' political apathy is negatively related to their political interests.

2.6 Country Differences

Different countries face various political problems (e.g., Auvinen, 1997; Landman, 2022), particularly in political communication (e.g., Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Pfetsch & Esser, 2013). According to Caramani (2017), comparative politics is needed to understand the

changes that have shaped policy decisions within a country. Freedom of speech and the extent to which citizens can criticize political leaders also vary across nations (e.g., Barend, 2005; Sadurski, 1999). The rise of SMIs further complicates this landscape, as they increasingly influence political communication and public opinion both nationally and globally (e.g., Tapsell, 2020). In this study, we examine Austria, Serbia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong—countries that differ in political systems, culture, and the societal role of SMIs. Given these contextual differences, we do not formulate country-specific hypotheses but instead explore whether the proposed relationships are consistent across contexts or vary by country. Thus, we propose our research question as follows:

RQ1: How do the assumed associations in H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 differ across countries?

3. Method

We conducted a comparative cross-sectional survey among young people aged 16–24 in Austria ($N = 497$), Serbia ($N = 497$), Indonesia ($N = 535$), and Hong Kong ($N = 600$) to examine the relationship between SMIs and political engagement. The questionnaire, developed in January 2024, was translated and back-translated into German, Serbian, Indonesian, and Chinese to ensure semantic and conceptual equivalence (Brislin, 1970). Data were collected between March and April 2024 through a professional survey company, ensuring balanced samples by age and gender. Using R, we applied multiple regression analyses to assess the effects of exposure to political criticism by SMIs on political apathy and interest while controlling for other relevant variables (Cohen et al., 2013; Field, 2024).

3.1 Sample and Procedure

We recruited a youth sample aged between 16–24 years ($M = 20.72$, $SD = 2.41$) based on quotas for gender and education (based on the International Standard Classification of Education; ISCED) in Austria (age: $M = 20.33$, $SD = 2.50$; female: 50.09%; medium education: 64.13%; high education: 25%; political ideology: $M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.43$), Serbia (age: $M = 20.57$, $SD = 2.21$; female: 50.89%; medium education: 64.13%; high education: 25%; political ideology: $M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.64$), and Indonesia (age: $M = 20.92$, $SD = 2.39$; female: 51.3%; medium education: 64.13%; high education: 25%, political ideology: $M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.54$). While in Hong Kong (age: $M = 21.01$, $SD = 2.48$; female: 48.33%; medium education: 56%, high education: 43.83%). The questions included several social media

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platforms most widely used by young people in the four countries, and how much time they have spent using social media.

3.2 Measures

Constructive Criticism

The constructive criticism variable was measured using four statements developed specifically for this study. Respondents were asked to rate these statements on a 7-point Likert scale, reflecting the frequency with which their preferred influencers engage in constructive criticism, with options ranging from “never” to “very often”. The four statements are as follows: 1) when influencers pointed out flaws and problems in current politics, they used arguments, 2) when influencers criticized current political development, they cited facts, 3) when influencers opposed a political decision, they explained the reasons well, and 4) when influencers criticized political actors, they did this with arguments and facts ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.97$, $\alpha = 0.91$).

Destructive Criticism

The destructive criticism variable was measured using four statements developed specifically for this study. Respondents were asked to rate these statements on a 7-point Likert scale, reflecting the frequency with which their preferred influencers engage in destructive criticism, with options ranging from “never” to “very often”. The four statements are as follows: 1) Influencers criticized politicians or the government in a way some would describe as disrespectful, 2) influencers used foul language to comment on politics, 3) Influencers commented on political developments in an uncivil manner, 4) influencers turned to insults and obscene language when commenting on politics ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.93$, $\alpha = 0.89$).

Parasocial Relationship

The parasocial relationship was measured using five statements adapted from Dekoninck and Schmuck (2023). Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The five statements are as follows: 1) He/She makes me feel comfortable, just like with a friend, 2) I look forward to seeing future content from him/her, 3) If he/she does not post anything longer than usual, I miss his/her content, 4) I would like to meet him/her in person. 5) I feel compassion toward him/her when he/she makes a mistake ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 2.01$, $\alpha = 0.91$).

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Political Apathy

Political apathy was assessed using four statements adapted from Pinkleton et al. (2012). Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The statements are as follows: 1) Participating in the elections takes too much time, 2) staying informed about the government is too much trouble, 3) keeping up on political issues takes too much time, and 4) participating in elections is more trouble than it’s worth ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 2.00$, $\alpha = 0.81$).

Political Interest

Political interest was measured using two statements adapted from Nanz and Matthes (2022) and Schmuck et al. (2022). Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The statements are “I am very interested in politics” and “Politics is an interesting topic for me” ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 2.01$, $\alpha = 0.89$).

Control variables

We added four items about traditional media use. Respondents were asked to rate how often they used traditional media use on a 7-point Likert scale, reflecting the frequency, with options ranging from “never” to “always”. The four items are: 1) TV News, 2) Newspapers, 3) Radio, and 4) Online websites ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 2.12$, $\alpha = 0.74$). Moreover, we measured political ideology with options ranging from “left” to “right” on a 7-point level ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 2.28$). Additionally, we measured age ($M = 20.72$, $SD = 2.41$), gender (50.09%), and education (medium: 64.13%, high: 25%).

3.3 Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was performed using the lavaan package for regression path models in R (e.g., Brown & Moore, 2012; Rosseel, 2012). Additionally, we used Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to show two distinct factors – constructive and destructive criticism. For our four countries, we used separate regression models. For our conceptual model, please see Figure 1.

[Figure 1 around here]

4. Results

The results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) confirmed the two-factor structure of political criticism (see Figure 2). The Model fit was good: CFI = .8; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .08, SRMR = 0.04. A nested model comparison revealed that a two-factor solution is superior to a one-factor solution.

[Figure 2 around here]

Further, based on the analysis for **H1**, our results suggest that constructive criticism from SMIs does not have a significant impact on political apathy among young people in Austria ($b = -0.050$, $SE = 0.053$, $p = 0.346$), Serbia ($b = 0.021$, $SE = 0.059$, $p = 0.725$), and Indonesia ($b = -0.001$, $SE = 0.056$, $p = 0.992$). This means that receiving constructive criticism from SMIs does not appear to make young people more or less politically apathetic in these countries. Interestingly, in Hong Kong, there was a small but significant positive association ($b = 0.114$, $SE = 0.056$, $p = 0.041$), indicating that higher exposure to constructive criticism was associated with slightly higher political apathy among youth there.

Regarding **H2**, we found that in all four countries, destructive criticism from SMIs is positively associated with political apathy. Specifically, higher levels of destructive criticism were linked to increased political apathy in Austria ($b = 0.222$, $SE = 0.057$, $p < .001$), Serbia ($b = 0.229$, $SE = 0.059$, $p < .001$), Indonesia ($b = 0.358$, $SE = 0.047$, $p < .001$), and Hong Kong ($b = 0.356$, $SE = 0.051$, $p < .001$). In simpler terms, when SMIs criticize politicians or policies in a harsh or negative manner, young people tend to feel more detached or uninterested in politics across all countries we studied.

Concerning PSRs, our analysis for **H3** indicated that the level of PSR does not change the effect of constructive criticism on political apathy in any of the four countries (Austria: $b = -0.014$, $SE = 0.032$, $p = 0.67$; Serbia: $b = -0.033$, $SE = 0.028$, $p = 0.232$; Indonesia: $b = -0.051$, $SE = 0.027$, $p = 0.061$; Hong Kong: $b = -0.042$, $SE = 0.037$, $p = 0.254$). In other words, even when young people have stronger one-sided “friendships” with their favorite SMIs, constructive criticism does not significantly influence their political apathy.

However, for **H4**, we observed that parasocial relationships do play a role when it comes to destructive criticism. Specifically, the association between destructive criticism and political apathy was stronger for young people who have stronger PSRs with SMIs in all four countries (Austria: $b = 0.102$, $SE = 0.034$, $p = 0.003$; Serbia: $b = 0.068$, $SE = 0.031$, $p =$

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0.028; Indonesia: $b = 0.052$, $SE = 0.026$, $p = 0.046$; Hong Kong: $b = 0.122$, $SE = 0.037$, $p = 0.001$). This suggests that when youth feel a stronger personal connection to an SMI, harsh or negative commentary from that SMIs has an even greater effect on increasing political apathy. The moderation effects of PSR on this relationship are illustrated in Figures 3–6, with Figure 3 showing Austria, Figure 4 showing Serbia, Figure 5 showing Indonesia, and Figure 6 showing Hong Kong.

[Figure 3, 4, 5, and 6 around here]

Finally, for **H5**, we examined whether political apathy relates to political interest. We found a negative association in Austria ($b = -0.220$, $SE = 0.055$, $p = 0.000$) and Serbia ($b = -0.197$, $SE = 0.048$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that young people who feel more politically apathetic also report lower political interest. In Indonesia ($b = 0.004$, $SE = 0.055$, $p = 0.947$) and Hong Kong ($b = 0.063$, $SE = 0.050$, $p = 0.204$), there was no significant relationship, suggesting that political apathy may not directly affect political interest in these contexts. A detailed overview of the results for each country is presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 around here]

Answering RQ1, we found striking similarities across the four countries in how different types of SMI criticism relate to political apathy. While constructive criticism was linked to political apathy in Hong Kong, this relationship did not appear in Austria, Serbia, or Indonesia. In contrast, destructive criticism showed a consistent positive relationship with political apathy across all countries, and this relationship became stronger when young people felt a stronger PSR with the SMIs. In other words, when SMIs use more negative or harsh tones in their messages, young people are more likely to feel detached or indifferent toward politics, especially if they already feel emotionally connected to these SMIs. We did not find any moderating effect of PSR in the case of constructive criticism.

For the control variables, we found there was no significant relationship between traditional media use and political apathy in Austria ($b = -.026$, $SE = 0.049$, $p = 0.59$), Serbia ($b = 0.073$, $SE = 0.048$, $p = 0.13$), Indonesia ($b = 0.004$, $SE = 0.055$, $p = 0.066$), or Hong Kong ($b = 0.042$, $SE = 0.066$, $p = 0.530$). This means that whether or not young people consume traditional media does not seem to influence how apathetic they feel toward politics in these countries. Social media and influencer content may therefore play a stronger role in shaping political attitudes than traditional media.

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When we examined age, we found a positive relationship between age and political apathy in Austria ($b = 0.057$, $SE = 0.024$, $p = 0.018$), meaning slightly older participants were more likely to feel politically apathetic. In Serbia ($b = 0.019$, $SE = 0.035$, $p = 0.593$), Indonesia ($b = -0.002$, $SE = 0.029$, $p = 0.951$), and Hong Kong ($b = 0.004$, $SE = 0.027$, $p = 0.876$), the results were not significant, suggesting that age does not play a strong role in shaping political apathy in these contexts. For political interest, age was only significantly related in Indonesia ($b = 0.067$, $SE = 0.033$, $p = 0.042$), indicating that older youth tend to be slightly more politically interested. However in Austria ($b = 0.000$, $SE = 0.026$, $p = 0.991$), Serbia ($b = 0.039$, $SE = 0.036$, $p = 0.272$), and Hong Kong ($b = 0.017$, $SE = 0.024$, $p = 0.483$), there were no significant effects.

For gender differences, it was revealed that there was no significant relationship between gender and political apathy in Austria ($b = 0.145$, $SE = 0.110$, $p = 0.190$), Serbia ($b = -0.157$, $SE = 0.143$, $p = 0.273$), or Indonesia ($b = -0.238$, $SE = 0.125$, $p = 0.057$). However, in Hong Kong, gender was positively associated with political apathy ($b = 0.357$, $SE = 0.112$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that some gender groups—likely women, depending on coding—reported higher apathy levels. Meanwhile, for political interest, gender was significantly related only in Austria, where we observed a negative association ($b = -0.364$, $SE = 0.135$, $p = 0.007$), indicating that one gender group (again, depending on coding) tends to express lower political interest. In other countries: Serbia ($b = -0.257$, $SE = 0.146$, $p = 0.078$), Indonesia ($b = -0.237$, $SE = 0.129$, $p = 0.067$), and Hong Kong ($b = -0.093$, $SE = 0.109$, $p = 0.392$), gender differences were not significant.

Further, the results for education showed no significant relationship between higher education levels and political apathy in any country (Austria: $b = 0.144$, $SE = 0.253$, $p = 0.569$; Serbia: $b = -0.039$, $SE = 0.245$, $p = 0.873$; Indonesia: $b = 0.122$, $SE = 0.274$, $p = 0.657$; Hong Kong: $b = -0.069$, $SE = 0.127$, $p = 0.586$). Similarly, education was not significantly related to political interest in any of the four countries (Austria: $b = 0.317$, $SE = 0.266$, $p = 0.234$; Serbia: $b = 0.295$, $SE = 0.302$, $p = 0.329$; Indonesia: $b = 0.122$, $SE = 0.274$, $p = 0.657$; Hong Kong: $b = -0.069$, $SE = 0.127$, $p = 0.586$). This suggests that having higher education does not necessarily make young people more or less politically apathetic or interested—perhaps because influencer communication cuts across educational boundaries and reaches both highly educated and less educated audiences alike.

Also, for political ideology, we found no significant relationship between political ideology and political apathy in Austria ($b = 0.024$, $SE = 0.040$, $p = 0.551$), Serbia ($b = 0.031$, $SE = 0.043$, $p = 0.474$), or Indonesia ($b = 0.021$, $SE = 0.044$, $p = 0.633$). Interestingly, when it came to political interest and political ideology, we observed a negative relationship in Austria ($b = -0.0129$, $SE = 0.050$, $p = 0.010$). This suggests that individuals with certain ideological leanings may be less politically interested, although this pattern did not appear in Serbia ($b = 0.067$, $SE = 0.044$, $p = 0.13$) or Indonesia ($b = -0.013$, $SE = 0.046$, $p = 0.785$).

5. Discussion

Social media influencers (SMIs) have become a central source of political information for young people, with prior research highlighting their ability to mobilize audiences and shape political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Balaban et al., 2022; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Liu, 2023). Often known for publicly criticizing political actors and institutions, SMIs play a prominent role in shaping how youth perceive and engage with politics. This study examined the effects of constructive criticism and destructive criticism on young people's political apathy across Austria, Serbia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. Findings revealed that constructive criticism was positively associated with political apathy only in Hong Kong, suggesting that even well-intentioned critique may discourage political engagement in restrictive political environments. In contrast, in Austria, Serbia, and Indonesia, constructive criticism showed no significant relationship with political apathy, indicating that such critical yet solution-focused messages do not necessarily discourage participation. These cross-country differences underscore the importance of political context and suggest that critical communication by SMIs is not inherently harmful when oriented toward problem-solving rather than mere attack.

In contrast, destructive criticism was consistently linked to higher political apathy in all countries studied. Hostile and uncivil messages appear to amplify feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and cynicism, fostering disengagement and the perception that political participation is futile (e.g., Prasad & Ioannidis, 2022; Raver et al., 2012; Baron, 1988, 1990). Parasocial relationships (PSRs)—the one-sided emotional bonds between SMIs and their followers (e.g., Harff, 2022; Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Park & Hoffner, 2024)—further shaped these effects. While PSRs did not moderate the relationship between constructive criticism and apathy, they significantly intensified the impact of destructive criticism. Young people with strong PSRs were more likely to become disengaged when

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exposed to hostile messages, likely because they perceived such communication as more credible and personally relevant (e.g., Cheng et al., 2024). This finding aligns with evidence that followers may trust SMIs more deeply than acquaintances, giving their opinions greater persuasive weight.

Finally, the relationship between political apathy and political interest differed across contexts. A significant negative association emerged in Austria and Serbia, suggesting that higher apathy corresponded to lower political interest (e.g., Farthing, 2010; Zhang, 2022), whereas this pattern was not observed in Indonesia or Hong Kong. This variation may reflect broader cultural and institutional differences: in European settings, participation is often viewed as a civic duty, making apathy more detrimental to engagement, while in Asian contexts, communal and familial norms may sustain political interest even amid detachment. Overall, these findings illustrate the complex interplay between SMI communication style, audience relationships, and national context in shaping young people's political engagement.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, internal factors beyond exposure to political criticism by SMIs, such as individual motivations and personal dispositions, also shape young people's political interest and engagement (e.g., Neundorff et al., 2013). For instance, entertainment motivation—the tendency to use social media primarily for enjoyment rather than information—can influence how political content is processed and responded to (e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Tan, 2008). Future research should explore how these individual-level motivations interact with SMI-driven political communication to affect political engagement.

Second, there are methodological limitations. The cross-sectional survey design restricts causal inferences, and reliance on self-reported measures may introduce recall errors, social desirability bias, or subjective interpretations. Future studies could use experimental or qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, to provide stronger causal evidence and deeper insights.

Third, while this study offers comparative insights across four countries, its scope is limited to Europe and Asia. Expanding research to additional countries would allow a more comprehensive examination of how diverse political, cultural, and media contexts shape the effects of SMIs on youth political engagement, revealing potential variations in responses to political content.

7. Implications

SIMs play an increasingly central role in shaping the political information environment across countries (e.g., Suuronen et al., 2022; Woolley, 2022). Their persuasive power enables them to significantly influence how young people perceive, discuss, and engage with politics. Understanding the magnitude of this influence is crucial for political communicators—such as spokespersons, social media managers, political candidates, and elected representatives—who seek to connect meaningfully with young voters. Recognizing that SIM’s political criticism is not inherently harmful allows political actors to collaborate strategically with SIMs in ways that encourage critical yet constructive political discourse (e.g., Arnesson, 2023), fostering a more informed and reflective political culture among young audiences.

At the same time, SIMs themselves need to be aware of the potential consequences of their political messaging. While critical commentary can be democratic values by holding power to account and stimulating debate, purely hostile or destructive criticism—though effective at attracting attention and engagement—can inadvertently fuel political apathy and weaken participation. Thus, SIMs are not merely passive content creators but active political actors who bear a degree of responsibility. Encouraging them to adopt constructive approaches to political criticism can help strengthen democratic discourse rather than undermine it.

8. Conclusion

This study offers important insights into the role of SIMs in shaping young people’s political apathy and interest across different national contexts. The findings reveal that destructive criticism expressed by SIMs tends to heighten political apathy among youth, fostering feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and disillusionment with the political process—effects that were particularly evident in Austria and Serbia. By contrast, constructive criticism does not generate similar levels of apathy in three of the four countries examined (Austria, Indonesia, and Serbia), with the exception of Hong Kong, underscoring the crucial role that tone and framing play in SIM-driven political communication. Importantly, political apathy and political interest are not fixed or opposing states but rather points on a continuum shaped by perceptions of political efficacy, trust, and relevance.

The study further highlights the amplifying role of parasocial relationships (PSRs) between SIMs and followers, showing that stronger PSRs intensify the effects of destructive

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criticism; when young people feel emotionally connected to an SMI, negative messages carry more weight and are more likely to lead to political disengagement. Overall, SMIs can play a dual role in the political process: while they may foster learning and engagement, their communication can also have unintended negative consequences. A hostile or destructive tone in influencer discourse can undermine democratic participation by increasing apathy and reducing political interest among young people, potentially eroding democratic vitality over time. Although SMIs are not formal political actors, they function as powerful opinion leaders and role models whose words carry substantial weight—and with that comes significant responsibility.

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Appendix for Study I

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

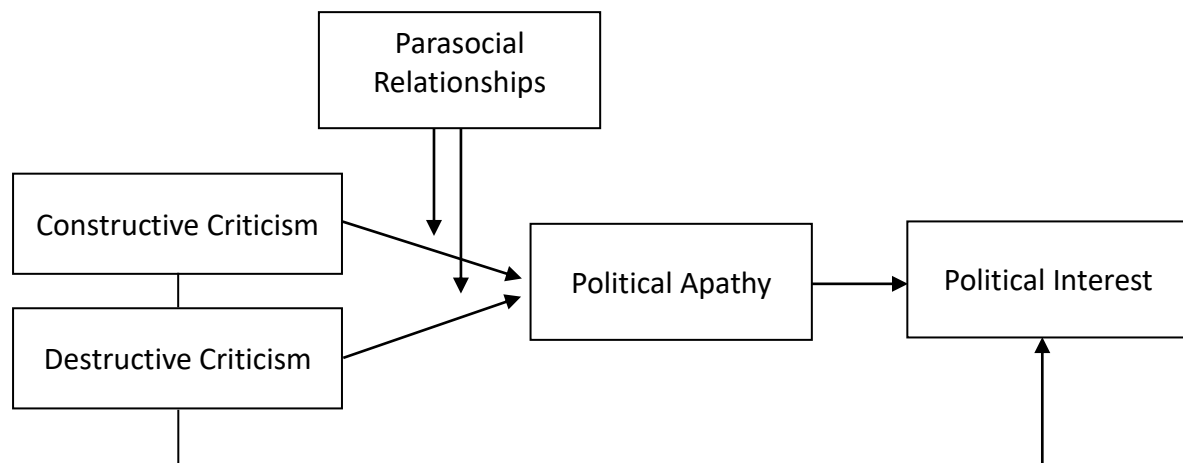


Figure 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

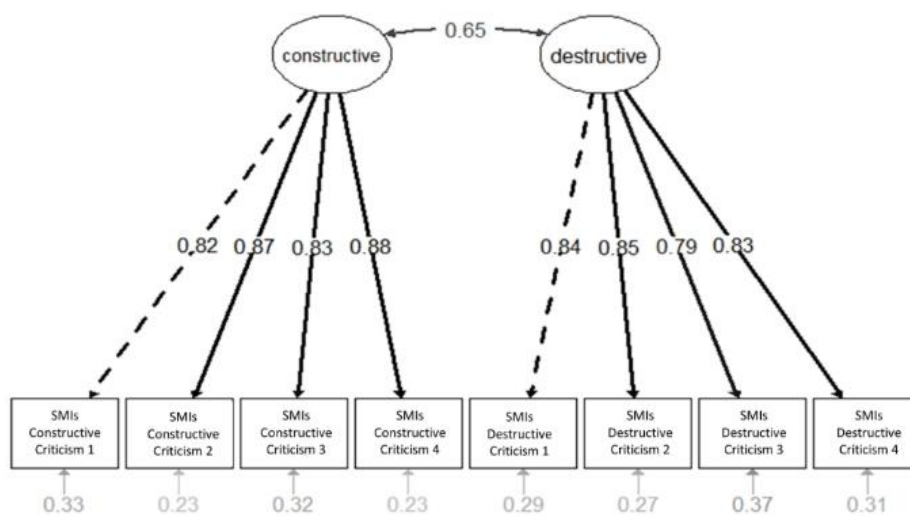


Figure 3. Moderating effect of PSR on the association between destructive political criticism of SMIs and political apathy in Austria

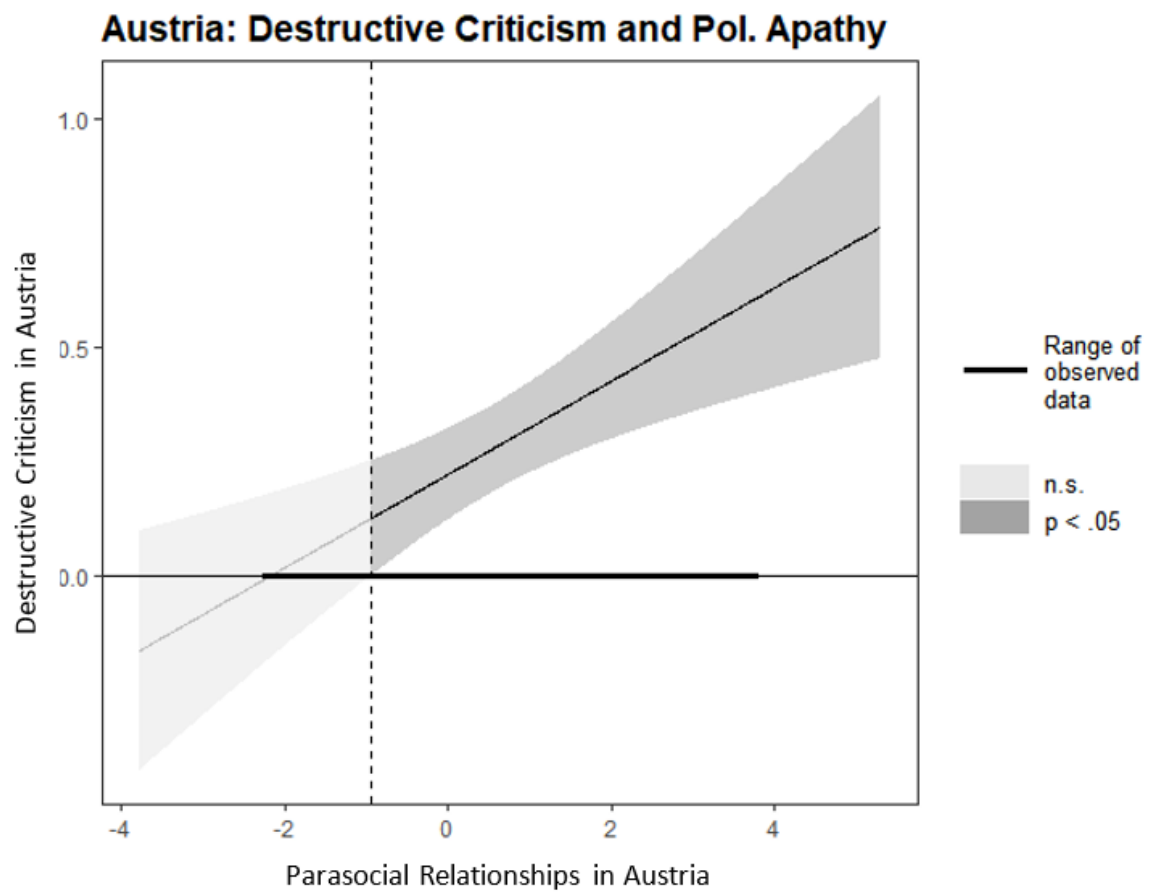


Figure 4. Moderating effect of PSR on the association between destructive political criticism of SMIs and political apathy in Hong Kong

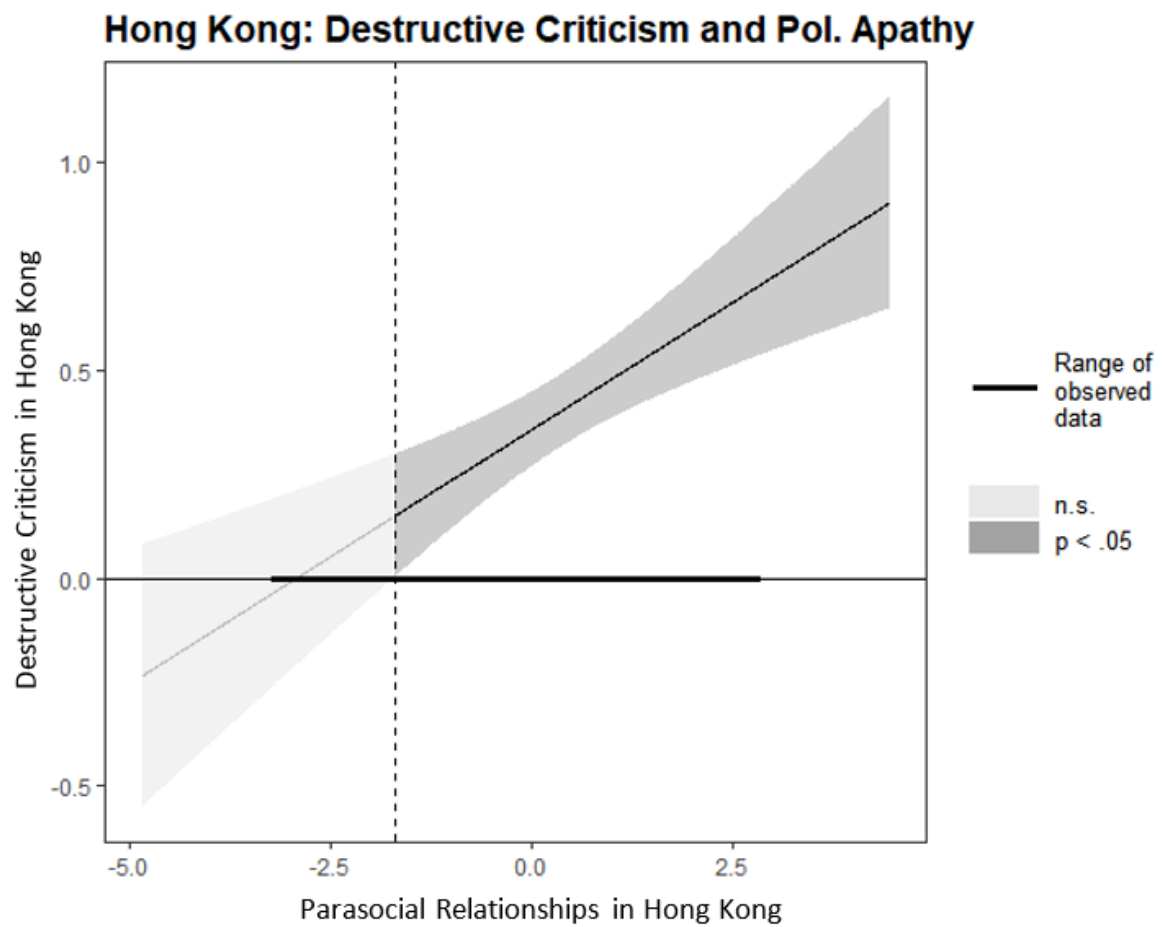


Figure 5. Moderating effect of PSR on the association between destructive political criticism of SMIs and political apathy in Indonesia

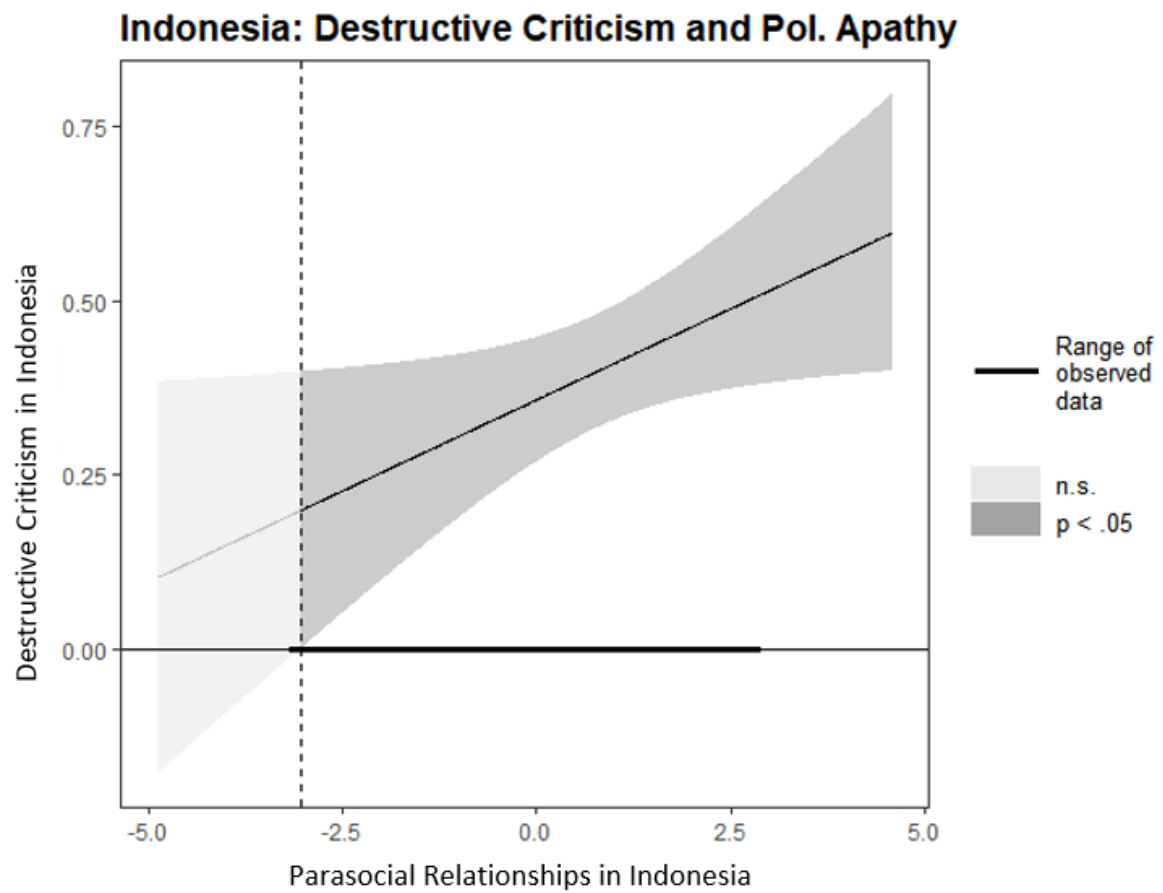


Figure 6. Moderating effect of PSR on the association between destructive political criticism of SMIs and political apathy in Serbia

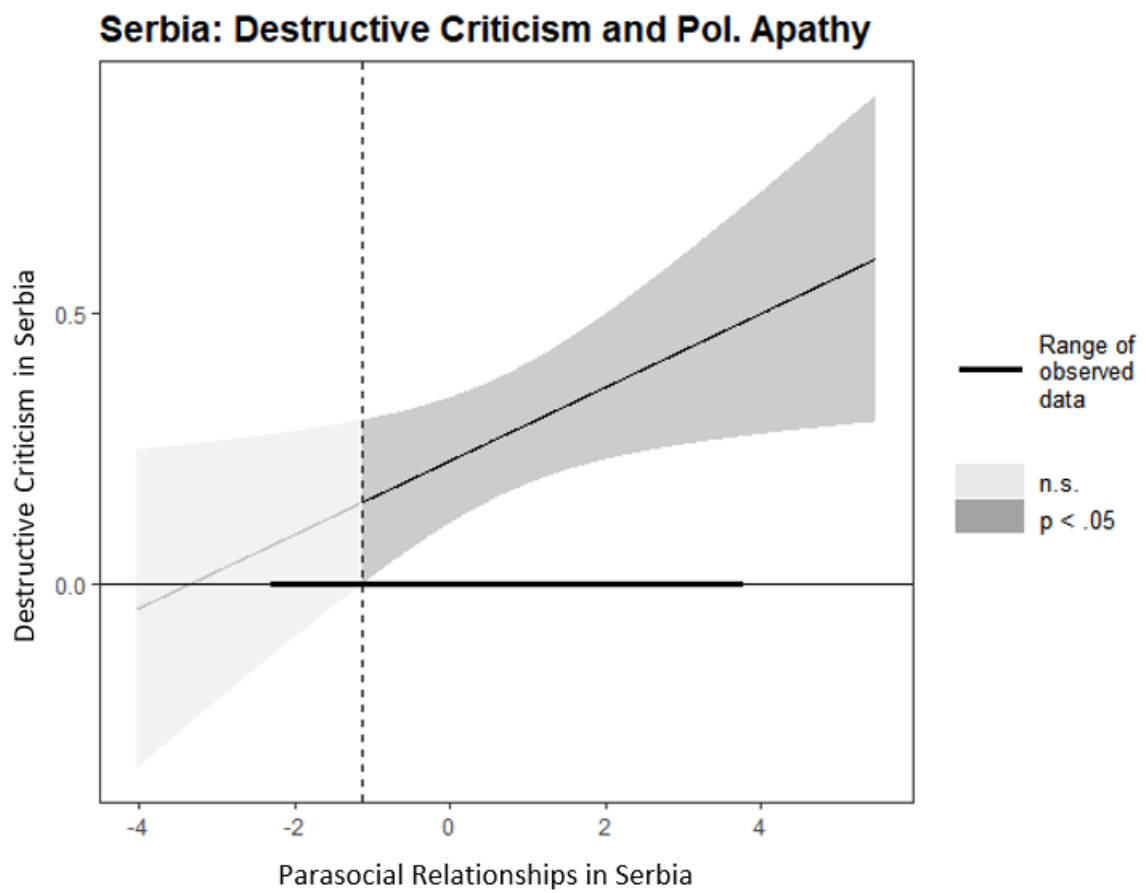


Table 1. Comparative analysis of political criticism of political apathy and political interests in Austria, Serbia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong

	Austria		Serbia		Indonesia		Hong Kong	
	Political Apathy	Political Interest	Political Apathy	Political Interest	Political Apathy	Political Interest	Political Apathy	Political Interest
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)
Constructive Criticism	-0.050 (0.053)	0.232 (0.058)*	0.021 (0.059)	0.479 (0.057)*	-0.001 (0.056)	0.601 (0.050)*	0.114 (0.056)*	0.171 (0.048)*
Destructive Criticism	0.222 (0.057)*	0.214 (0.062)*	0.229 (0.059)*	0.170 (0.066)*	0.358 (0.047)*	0.094 (0.048)	0.356 (0.051)*	0.168 (0.051)*
Parasocial Relationships	0.158 (0.052)*	-	-0.066 (0.049)	-	0.070 (0.057)	-	0.063 (0.050)	-
Constructive Criticism X Parasocial Relationships	-0.014 (0.032)	-	-0.033 (0.028)	-	-0.001 (0.027)	-	-0.042 (0.037)	-
Destructive Criticism X Parasocial Relationships	0.102 (0.034)*	-	0.068 (0.031)*	-	0.052 (0.026)*	-	0.122 (0.037)*	-
Political Apathy	-	-0.220 (0.055)*	-	-0.0197 (0.048)*	-	0.004 (0.055)	-	0.063 (0.050)
Traditional Media Use	-0.026 (0.049)	0.438 (0.061)*	0.073 (0.048)	0.169 (0.045)*	0.124 (0.054)	0.194 (0.056)*	0.042 (0.066)	0.649 (0.051)*
Age	0.057 (0.024)*	0.000 (0.026)	0.019 (0.035)	0.039 (0.036)	-0.002 (0.029)	0.067 (0.033)*	0.004 (0.027)	0.017 (0.024)
Female Gender ¹	0.145 (0.110)	-0.364 (0.135)*	-0.157 (0.143)	-0.257 (0.146)	-0.238 (0.125)	-0.237 (0.129)	0.357 (0.112)*	-0.093 (0.109)
High Education ²	0.144 (0.253)	0.317 (0.266)	-0.039 (0.245)	0.295 (0.302)	-0.122 (0.274)	0.122 (0.274)	-0.069 (0.127)	-0.069 (0.127)
Medium Education ³	0.021 (0.135)	0.268 (0.162)	-0.049 (0.193)	-0.004 (0.251)	-0.119 (0.203)	-0.104 (0.239)	-	-
Political Ideology	0.024 (0.040)	-0.129 (0.050)*	0.031 (0.043)	0.067 (0.044)	0.021 (0.044)	-0.013 (0.046)	-	-
<i>R-Square</i>	0.188	0.336	0.086	0.341	0.270	0.450	0.388	0.550

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. Reference category: Male; ¹Reference category: Low education.

Bridge Between Paper 1 and Paper 2

Building on the findings of our first study, *Sparkling Political Interest*, which examined the consequences of political criticism by social media influencers (SMIs) on young people's political apathy, the next study advances this line of inquiry by focusing on a more politically active of influencers—Political Social Media Influencers (PSMIs)—and their potential to shape young adults' political efficacy and participation. The first study revealed that while constructive criticism by SMIs does not necessarily foster political disengagement, destructive criticism consistently heightens political apathy across different countries (e.g., Balaban et al., 2022; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Liu, 2023; Prasad & Ioannidis, 2022; Raver et al., 2012). This suggests that the tone and style of influencer communication can play a decisive role in shaping how young audiences perceive and relate to politics. Moreover, the presence of parasocial relationships (PSRs) was found to amplify the negative effects of destructive criticism on political apathy, underlining the persuasive power of influencers who have cultivated loyal and emotionally connected followings (e.g., Cheng et al., 2024; Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Park & Hoffner, 2024).

While the first study provides important insights into how SMIs communication may discourage political engagement through apathy, it also raises a crucial question: What happens when SMIs engage more directly and consistently with political issues, not just through criticism, but as active political actors? This is the starting point of the second study. Unlike general SMIs, PSMIs produce explicitly political content with the intention of shaping political opinions, stimulating critical reflection, and encouraging political participation (e.g., Borchers, 2025; Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019). The focus thus shifts from how influencer tone can foster disengagement to how PSMI's orientation and activity can foster efficacy and participation in politics.

This shift is theoretically and empirically significant for several reasons. First, if destructive criticism can discourage young people from participating in politics, PSMIs may offer a counterforce by fostering a sense of empowerment and efficacy (e.g., Beaumont, 2010; Hayes & Bean, 1993; Wolak, 2018). Second, while the first study demonstrated cross-national differences in how apathy relates to political interest (e.g., Farthing, 2010; Zhang, 2022), the second study investigates whether similar cross-national patterns emerge when examining the relationship between following PSMIs and political efficacy (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Peter & Muth, 2023). Third, whereas SMIs often address politics indirectly,

PSMIs explicitly position themselves as political voices—potentially increasing the weight of their messages in the minds of young audiences (e.g., Klüver, 2024; Rose & Rohlinger, 2024; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023).

Finally, moving from *Sparkling Political Interest* to *From Sparks to Action* allows us to examine how political communication on SMIs can both undermine and strengthen democratic engagement. While hostile communication by general SMIs can erode political interest and trust (e.g., Suuronen et al., 2022; Woolley, 2022), PSMIs may provide a bridge back to engagement by increasing young people’s confidence in their own political outcomes (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2012; Schemer et al., 2024). This second study thus responds directly to the gaps identified in the first: it explores a more active and politically explicit type of influencer, and it investigates how exposure to these figures may shape young people’s perceptions of their political efficacy and their likelihood to participate in democratic processes.

6. Study II (Published)

From Sparks to Action: The Role of Political Influencers for Young Adults' Political Efficacy and Political Participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

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Keywords: Political Social Media Influencers, Young Adults, Eudaimonic Motivation, Political Efficacy, Political Participation, Comparative Survey

Abstract

Two types of social media influencers play an important role in political communication: general social media influencers (SMIs), who rarely post political content, and political social media influencers (PSMIs), who focus specifically on political content. This study examines the differences between these two types in shaping young adults' political efficacy and participation. A comparative cross-sectional survey was conducted among young adults in Austria, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, and Serbia. The study also investigated whether eudaimonic motivation toward SMIs' content moderates these relationships. Following PSMIs, but not SMIs, was positively associated with political efficacy in all countries except Serbia. Political efficacy, in turn, was positively related to intentions to participate in politics

across all countries. Additionally, following PSIMs was linked to political participation in Austria and Hong Kong. Eudaimonic motivation had a limited moderating effect. These findings highlight the differentiated role of PSIMs in enhancing young adults' political efficacy and participation, with variations across countries, providing valuable insights for future research on the influence of political social media content.

1. The Difference Between SMIs and PSIMs

Nowadays, many internet personalities create and share content on social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, attracting millions of followers (Gonzalez et al., 2024; Klüver, 2024). Over time, the role of social media influencers (SMIs) has evolved. SMIs who traditionally focus on topics like fashion and music may suddenly choose to voice their political opinions online and actively participate in politics, potentially shaping political outcomes, especially during elections (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Klüver, 2024; Suuronen et al., 2022). Many influencers have begun addressing political issues such as climate change and gender equality (Peter & Muth, 2023). They increasingly discuss political issues and can be seen as influencers making a political impact and motivating their followers to take political action (e.g., Naderer, 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022).

When prominent social media figures increasingly focus on political content, they can be classified as political social media influencers (PSIMs; Goodwin, 2023; Riedl et al., 2023). PSIMs are internet personae who are well-known on social media, consistently produce content on political issues, and significantly influence public opinion through their reach and engagement with followers (Liang & Lu, 2023; Panlee, 2024; Riedl et al., 2023). Notable examples include Hasan Abi from the United States (e.g., Harris et al., 2023) and Rezo from Germany (e.g., Borchers, 2025; De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022; Klüver, 2024). While SMIs who engage in political discussions, advocate for social change, or promote political agendas contribute to political discourse (e.g., Riedl et al., 2023), not all qualify as PSIMs. For example, influencers such as Daria Daria in Austria, Tina Leung in Hong Kong, Cinta Laura in Indonesia, and Anđela Jovanović in Serbia, who initially gained popularity through fashion content, have recently begun to address political topics. However, occasional engagement with political issues does not necessarily place them within the category of PSIMs. In short, SMIs gain recognition through non-political content but may still shape political views when they address such topics, whereas PSIMs are defined by their sustained focus on political content and their role in mobilizing youth political engagement. As their visibility increases,

so does their impact, making their platforms instrumental in shaping contemporary political dynamics (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Klüver, 2024).

It is inevitable that SMIs or PSMLs can play an important role in shaping the flow of political discourse in society and often motivate previously disengaged followers to become more active in politics. (e.g., Naderer, 2023). However, the difference between SMIs and PSMLs in shaping political outcomes such as efficacy or participation are far from being understood. Until now, previous studies have only focused on SMIs and their influence on youth political outcomes (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Peter & Muth, 2023; Wasike, 2023). That is, while the influence of SMIs on youth political engagement has been studied, the distinction between SMIs and PSMLs and the specific impact of PSMLs on youth political outcomes remains underexplored.

Also, following SMIs and PSMLs may affect important democratic outcomes. For instance, both could influence individuals' political efficacy and political participation (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Political efficacy itself can be defined as the belief that political change is achievable and that collective community actions can have an impact on the political system (Beaumont, 2010; Campbell et al., 1954; Craig & Maggionto, 1982; Hayes & Bean, 1993). In other words, political efficacy is a psychological construct predicting political engagement (Rasmussen & Nørgaard, 2018). Meanwhile, political participation can be described as an action taken by individuals or citizens that supports or opposes the decisions of state power holders and can influence political decisions in various sectors of government (Conge, 1988; Verba & Nie, 1987), which over time can be divided into offline and online political participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Ruess et al., 2023). With that online sphere, especially for young adults who have intense online conversations or relationships with SMIs or PSMLs, the effects on young adults' political efficacy or political participation could be strong (e.g., Riedl, 2021).

In addition, followers with different motivations may be differently affected by SMIs and PSMLs. One such motivation is referred to as eudaimonic motivation (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014). Based on the eudaimonic identity theory (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Waterman, 2011), the eudaimonic motivations can be defined as an intention to comprehend broader human needs beyond mere necessities, seek deeper, more meaningful experiences, pursuit of understanding and intellectual engagement, aiming to achieve a sense of happiness (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Delle Fave et al., 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011).

Such eudaimonic motivations may accelerate the effects of SMIs and PSMIs, on political efficacy and political participation. Prior research has explored how eudaimonic motivations impact political information processing and intentions to politically participate (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024), suggesting that the interaction between emotional responses and reflective thinking drives the effect of eudaimonic motivation. Moreover, PSMIs can trigger eudaimonic motivation that ultimately leads to political efficacy, as a study conducted by Schemer et al. (2024) showed. Furthermore, to our knowledge, no research has explored how eudaimonic motivation can drive young adults' political mindset into action when following their favorite influencers on social media. Therefore, this study will explore the relationship between following SMIs and PSMIs with young adults' political engagement, in the presence of eudaimonic motivation.

Thus, this study contributes to a research gap by investigating how two types of influencers, SMIs and PSMIs, are associated with two main political variables (i.e., political efficacy and political participation). This will be done for two regions of the world: Asia (represented by Hong Kong and Indonesia) and Europe (represented by Austria and Serbia). Importantly, the selection of these countries is not arbitrary, but rather based on the unique political contexts, digital cultures, and dynamics of young adults' political engagement that vary significantly across these nations. For instance, in Austria, as a stable democracy with a focus on media literacy, characterized by high institutional capacities to encourage young adults' political participation. The government has actively promoted media literacy among youth, including policies to provide free access to print media for those under 30. Although the influence of SMIs on politics is not as prominent here, Austria serves as an important example of a democracy where political engagement is supported through high-quality, trustworthy information systems. In contrast to Austria, Hong Kong provides a case study from a semi-authoritarian context post-2019, where political freedoms are severely restricted. Despite these challenges, youth activism remains high, particularly through social media, with the emergence of phenomena such as *yellow food influencers* – content creators who subtly promote pro-democracy values through lifestyle content – demonstrates how influencers can serve as political agents within repressive environments. Hong Kong shows how influencers navigate and influence political discourse under pressure.

On the other hand, Indonesia has a digital democracy with a dominant youth population. Social media in Indonesia plays a central role in political life. In the 2024

elections, over 20 SMIs were elected to the national parliament, reflecting their significant influence on political behavior. Indonesia stands as the most prominent example of how youth and influencers directly intersect within both formal and informal political spaces. Meanwhile, Serbia faces a phase of democratic transition, with low trust in political institutions and high political polarization. Young adults in Serbia tend to be disengaged from traditional political parties but are active in non-conventional forms of political participation, such as online petitions, protests, and digital campaigns. Serbia shows a critical perspective on how social media can function in a post-authoritarian society still forming its democratic identity.

By comparing Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, this study examines how the influence of SMIs and PSMIs on political efficacy and political participation, depending on eudaimonic motivations, varies across different political and cultural settings. These countries reflect a wide range of political contexts, from established democracies to transitional and semi-authoritarian regimes, enabling the study to assess whether the observed relationships hold consistently or vary according to each country's broader political landscape.

1.1 Theoretical Background and the Hypotheses

To obtain the study results, we created four hypotheses. In the first hypothesis, we draw on prior research indicating that SMIs, while capable of sparking enthusiasm among young followers, rarely sustain political engagement (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023). Similarly, Wasike (2023) found that following political influencers can increase interest and trust in politics, but does not necessarily lead to greater political engagement. Interviews with young people in Germany aged 16 to 22 years further suggest that much of the political content shared by SMIs fails to enhance political understanding or efficacy (e.g., Peter & Muth, 2023). Because SMIs' primary content areas are often unrelated to politics, we argue that the role of SMIs is likely to be smaller than PSMIs in relation to political efficacy. This leads us to expect that higher exposure to SMIs will be associated with comparatively lower levels of political efficacy among young adults. Thus, for the first hypothesis, we conclude as follows:

H1: Following Social Media Influencers (SMIs) is associated with lower levels of young adults' political efficacy.

On the other hand, the results of study by Harff and Schmuck (2023) also highlight that political influencers who produce political content can increase internal political efficacy. This statement is also supported in another study by Heiss and Matthes (2016) by examining political content on Facebook posted by politicians. The results of their research explain that these political posts affect young people's political efficacy. Although not many studies have addressed this, we argue that PSMTs who produce political content have a positive relationship and play a major role in young adults' political efficacy. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

H2: Following Political Social Media Influencers (PSMTs) is positively related to young adults' political efficacy.

Beyond its role in fostering political interest, eudaimonic motivation, defined as the desire to engage with media for insight, reflection, and personal growth, may influence how young adults process political content shared by social media influencers. Research suggests that individuals high in eudaimonic motivation are more likely to engage in thoughtful, critical media use, seeking out content that challenges their views or encourages deeper understanding (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Oliver & Raney, 2011). This deeper processing is linked to greater civic engagement and stronger beliefs in personal political influence (e.g., Chan et al., 2012). In the context of social media, such individuals may follow PSMTs not just for entertainment but to engage with socially and politically meaningful content (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024). Therefore, we argue that eudaimonic motivation may moderate the relationship between following PSMTs and political efficacy. Specifically, the positive effect of following PSMTs on political efficacy may be stronger for individuals with higher eudaimonic motivation, as they are more likely to process political content in ways that foster a sense of agency and political understanding. In contrast, those lower in eudaimonic motivation may engage with the same content more passively, limiting its impact. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

H3: The association described in H2 is stronger for young adults with high eudaimonic motivations than those with low eudaimonic motivations.

In addition, political efficacy is a well-established predictor of political participation, including behaviors such as voting, campaigning, and signing petitions (Anderson, 2010; Beaumont, 2010). It reflects individuals' beliefs in their ability to influence political

processes and has been shown to motivate political engagement among young adults (e.g., Reicher, 2016). Moreover, individuals' evaluations of their political experiences can shape their political attitudes and subsequently lead to action (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Wolak, 2018). Given the central role of political efficacy in democratic participation, we include this relationship as a formal hypothesis to confirm its relevance within the context of our cross-national study, which spans Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

H4: Young adults' political efficacy is positively related to their political participation.

Fundamentally, each country has its own distinct political communication patterns, which influence how political actors adapt and engage with their respective audiences (e.g., Boulianne & Larsson, 2024; Woolley, 2022). The nature of political communication is shaped by a country's specific media environment, democratic structures, and societal norms, which lead to varying political strategies and message framing. In addition, the increasing presence of SMIs and PSIMs has introduced new dynamics in political discourse. These influencers, who are prevalent across various platforms, can suddenly engage in political discussions and wield significant influence on public opinion, shaping political issues in diverse ways depending on local contexts (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2024). To explore these variations in political communication, we selected four countries in Europe and Asia, which differ in multiple aspects, such as culture, education, economy, and politics. Based on the above considerations, we developed the following research question:

RQ1: What are the similarities and differences of the H1, H2, H3, and H4 results in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia?

2. Study Framework and Methods

This study employed a comparative survey design to examine the relationship between following social media influencers (SMIs) and political social media influencers (PSIMs) and young adults' political efficacy and political participation, with particular attention to the moderating role of eudaimonic motivation. The survey was conducted across four countries: Austria ($N = 497$), Hong Kong ($N = 600$), Indonesia ($N = 535$), and Serbia ($N = 497$). Data collection took place in March and April 2024 and was coordinated by the research team at the University of Vienna, in collaboration with local partners in each participating country. A professional survey company was commissioned to assist with the

distribution of the online questionnaire. Before data collection, a translation and back-translation procedure were implemented to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence across the respective native languages – German, Chinese, Indonesian, and Serbian.

The study targeted young adults aged 16 to 24, a group considered especially relevant for this research due to their active engagement with social media and their formative stage of political socialization (Arnett, 2000; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). This age group is also particularly responsive to emotionally charged and persuasive online content (Loader et al., 2014). A stratified sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity and balance across gender, educational background, and national contexts. This approach enhances the representativeness of the sample and enables more robust comparative analysis (Bethlehem, 2009; Cohen et al., 2003). While the sample is not nationally representative, it is broadly reflective of the young adult population in each country. In addition, survey items referencing influencers were adapted to reflect the most prominent and widely followed figures on the social media platforms most commonly used by young adults in each national context. Data analysis was conducted using R software, applying multiple regression analysis.

2.1 Sample and Procedure

Our sample consists of young adults aged 16 to 24 years ($N = 2144$) divided into gender and education, and using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to classify education programs worldwide (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). Details of the number of in the four countries are as follows; Austria ($N = 505$; age: $M = 20.33$, $SD = 2.50$; female: 50.09%; high education: 30.69%; medium education: 44.15%; low education: 25.16%), Hong Kong ($N = 600$; age: $M = 21.01$, $SD = 2.48$; female: 48.33%; high education: 100%), Indonesia ($N = 536$; age: $M = 20.92$, $SD = 2.39$; female: 51.3%; high education: 24.81%; medium education: 64.55%; low education: 10.64%), and Serbia ($N = 503$; age: $M = 20.57$, $SD = 2.21$; female: 50.89%; high education: 64.21%; medium education: 6.16%; low education: 29.62%). To provide a clearer overview of the demographic composition of the sample across the four countries, the key characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

2.2 Measures

Following Social Media Influencers (SMIs). We measure the following social media influencers using three topics adapted from Harff and Schmuck (2023). Respondents were

asked to rate what kind of content the influencers whom they follow post. The ratings were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "very often". The types of content are as follows: 1) Fashion/trends/lifestyle, 2) Fitness and sports, and 3) Entertainment (e.g., music, movies, art; $M = 4.45$, $SD = 2.02$, $\alpha = 0.74$)

Following Political Social Media Influencers (PSMIs). We gauge the following of political social media influencers using three topics adapted from Harff and Schmuck (2023). Again, respondents were asked to rate what kind of content the influencers whom they follow post. The ratings were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "very often". The types of content are as follows: 1) Climate change and environment, 2) Politicians or political parties, and 3) Political news ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 2.12$, $\alpha = 0.85$)

Eudaimonic Motivation. We measure eudaimonic motivation using four statements adapted from Oliver and Raney (2011). Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The statements are as follows: 1) I like content by influencers that challenge my way of seeing the world, 2) I like content by influencers that make me more reflective, 3) I like content by influencers that focus on meaningful human conditions, and 4) My favorite kinds of influencers are the ones that make me think ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.82$, $\alpha = 0.88$).

Political Efficacy. Political efficacy in this study refers specifically to internal political efficacy, which captures individuals' confidence in their own political knowledge and competence. It was measured using three statements adapted from Craig et al. (1990), rated on a 7-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree": 1) "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics," 2) "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country," and 3) "I think that I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people" ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.90$, $\alpha = 0.83$). While these items effectively capture the knowledge and self-assessment components of internal political efficacy, we acknowledge that they represent a subset of the full construct as originally defined by Craig et al. (1990). Thus, the measurement focuses on perceived political competence rather than the broader spectrum of internal political efficacy.

Political Participation. Political participation was measured using twelve statements adapted from Knoll et al., (2018) using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "very often". We asked participants how often they have performed any of the following activities

in the last three months: 1) Supported online petition or online signature campaign, 2) Alerted others via social media or email to political events or opportunities to participate (e.g., election, petition, etc.), 3) Shared political content with the goal of influencing others, 4) Contacted a politician, political party, journalist, or media outlet via social media or email to highlight political issues, 5) Spent time online to persuade others to support a politician or political organization with arguments, 6) Created online petitions to draw attention to political issues, 7) Alerted others to political events or opportunities to participate (e.g., election, petition, etc.) in a personal conversation or phone call, 8) Supported a petition or signature campaign that I encountered on the street, 9) Tried to convince others how to act politically in conversations (e.g., vote), 10) Participated in demonstrations or protests on political issues, 11) Been actively involved in a political organization, e.g., party, club, student organization, etc., and 12) Contacted a politician/party or journalist/media in person or by phone to highlight political issues ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 2.01$, $\alpha = 0.95$).

Control variables. In this study, we control for the five following variables to account for potential confounding factors: traditional media use, age, gender, education level, and political ideology. For traditional media use, respondents were asked to rate how often they get political news from the following sources on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “always”: 1) TV News, 2) Newspapers, 3) Radio, and 4) Online websites ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 2.12$, $\alpha = 0.74$). Furthermore, respondents were asked about their age ($M = 20.72$; $SD = 2.41$), their gender (50.09% female), their education (48.6% high education; 36.24% medium education; 15.15% low education), and their political ideology in three countries (Austria, Indonesia, Serbia; $M = 3.9$, $SD = 2.28$). Data from individuals older than 24 years were excluded from the analysis to maintain a consistent age range of participants between 16 to 24 years old.

2.3 Statistical Analysis

To analyze variables across the four countries, we utilize several packages in R, including lavaan and interaction, due to their robustness in handling structural equation modeling and interaction effects, respectively (Rosseel, 2012). We analyzed the relationship in each country separately, using control variables such as traditional media use, age, gender, education, and political ideology (except for Hong Kong). Additionally, we employed Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and multiple linear regression (Brown & Moore, 2012). CFA was applied to identify underlying factors that might influence the relationships between

variables, as well as to validate the theoretical framework guiding this study (Figure 1). This step was crucial to establish construct validity before testing the structural relationships. Multiple linear regression analyses were then conducted separately within each country to examine the relationships between following SMIs/PSMIs, political efficacy, and political participation, while controlling for relevant covariates (traditional media use, age, gender, education, and political ideology where applicable). This approach allows us to capture the unique patterns within each national context and test the moderating effect of eudaimonic motivation.

3. Results

The results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) supported a two-factor structure distinguishing social media influencers (SMIs) and political social media influencers (PSMIs). The analysis demonstrated a good model fit: CFI = .95, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .062. A nested model comparison confirmed that the two-factor solution outperformed a one-factor model. For an overview of the CFA results, please see Figure 2.

Furthermore, based on the analysis for **H1**, we found no significant relationship between following SMIs and political efficacy among young adults in Indonesia, Serbia, and Hong Kong. In other words, in these three countries, whether young adults follow SMIs or not does not appear to systematically influence their sense of political competence. This suggests that SMIs in these contexts may have little to no measurable impact on political efficacy, perhaps because their content is not consistently political or because other factors such as offline political experiences or traditional media play a stronger role in shaping young people's political confidence. However, in Austria, we observed a significant negative association, indicating that following SMIs was linked to lower levels of political efficacy. This may reflect the fact that SMIs, who are typically entertainment- or lifestyle-focused rather than politically specialized, may not provide the kind of substantive political content that fosters political competence. Instead, their presence in political discussions may dilute or distract from more informative sources, potentially lowering young adults' confidence in their political abilities. H1 results in Austria ($b = -0.217$, $SE = 0.046$, $p = .000$), Hong Kong ($b = 0.043$, $SE = 0.048$, $p = .368$), Indonesia ($b = 0.064$, $SE = 0.066$, $p = .331$), Serbia ($b = -0.063$, $SE = 0.053$, $p = .233$).

Regarding **H2**, following PSMIs was positively linked to higher political efficacy in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. This suggests that in these contexts, PSMIs may serve as accessible and engaging sources of political information, encouragement, and civic guidance, which can enhance young adults' sense of competence in understanding and participating in politics. PSMIs in these countries may be perceived as credible and relatable, using their platforms to break down complex political issues into digestible content and thereby fostering political confidence among their followers. In contrast, the opposite pattern was observed in Serbia, where following PSMIs was associated with lower political efficacy. This negative association may reflect the country's unique political environment, characterized by low institutional trust and a polarized media landscape, where political influencer content could contribute to cynicism, confusion, or feelings of disempowerment among young adults. H2 results in Austria ($b = 0.226$, $SE = 0.042$, $p < .001$), Hong Kong ($b = 0.230$, $SE = 0.046$, $p < .001$), Indonesia ($b = 0.236$, $SE = 0.052$, $p < .001$), Serbia ($b = -0.121$, $SE = 0.041$, $p < .01$).

Moreover, for **H3**, we found that young adults' eudaimonic motivation significantly moderated the relationship between following PSMIs and political efficacy only in Austria. Specifically, in Austria, those with higher eudaimonic motivation showed a stronger positive link between following PSMIs and feeling politically capable. In contrast, in Indonesia, Serbia, and Hong Kong, eudaimonic motivation did not significantly influence this relationship, suggesting that contextual factors such as Austria's high media literacy and well-established democratic environment may be key to enabling motivated youth to translate online political engagement into greater political efficacy. H3 results in Austria ($b = 0.057$, $SE = 0.028$, $p < .05$), Hong Kong ($b = -0.010$, $SE = 0.024$, $p = .675$), Indonesia ($b = -0.006$, $SE = 0.030$, $p = .845$), Serbia ($b = -0.014$, $SE = 0.024$, $p = .573$).

Lastly, for our **H4**, we found a positive association between political efficacy and political participation in all countries, showing that higher political efficacy is associated with greater political participation among young adults. This means that young adults who believe they understand political issues and feel capable of influencing political outcomes are more likely to take concrete actions such as voting, attending rallies, or engaging in political discussions. This finding aligns with long-standing theories in political science, which posit that political efficacy is a key psychological driver of active citizenship. In other words, when individuals feel politically competent and empowered, they are more inclined to transform that confidence into real-world political behaviors, regardless of the specific cultural or

political context. H4 results in Austria ($b = 0.129$, $SE = 0.053$, $p < .05$), Hong Kong ($b = 0.508$, $SE = 0.045$, $p < .001$), Indonesia ($b = 0.551$, $SE = 0.044$, $p < .001$), Serbia ($b = 0.328$, $SE = 0.030$, $p < .001$). The overall analysis results can be seen in Table 2.

To address RQ1, we identified similarities in the relationships between following PSIMs and political efficacy, as well as between political efficacy and political participation. Following PSIMs was significantly associated with higher political efficacy among young adults only in three countries: Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. Meanwhile, the relationship between political efficacy and political participation was consistently significant across all countries. Additionally, traditional media usage was positively associated with political participation in every country examined. Although following PSIMs was positively related to political efficacy when moderated by eudaimonic motivation in Austria, no such moderating effect was found in Indonesia, Serbia, or Hong Kong.

Regarding control variables, traditional media use was consistently positively associated with both political efficacy and political participation across all countries. Political ideology showed mixed results: it was generally not significantly related to political efficacy but had a positive association with political participation in Austria and Serbia. Age and gender effects varied by country; for example, age was significantly related to political efficacy only in Serbia and to political participation only in Hong Kong, while gender was significantly associated with political efficacy in all countries and with political participation only in Hong Kong. Education level showed no significant association with either political efficacy or participation in any country. Please refer to Table 2 for full statistical details of all control variables.

4. Discussion

PSIMs play a greater role than "ordinary" SMIs in influencing young adults' political efficacy and participation. This study is the first to demonstrate that PSIMs have a more significant impact on young adults' political efficacy and political participation than SMIs across countries. The analysis shows that young adults in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia who followed PSIMs on social media have positive relations with political efficacy. This is because in Austria, the effective functioning of the democratic system, supported by advances in media literacy, enables young people to develop stronger critical thinking skills. In Hong Kong, strict political regulations have fostered an environment where young people are

encouraged to think creatively and use social media as a platform to express their political aspirations. In Indonesia, where young people represent a demographic majority, they have significant potential to influence the direction of the political system, especially through social media. Meanwhile, the results in Serbia differ, showing a significant negative relationship between following PSIMs and political efficacy among young adults. This finding aligns with previous studies, which suggest that while following PSIMs and being exposed to political content can increase political interest and trust, it does not necessarily translate into greater political efficacy or participation (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Peter & Muth, 2023; Wasike, 2023). However, given that Serbia is undergoing a democratic transition, characterized by low trust in political institutions and a rise in youth-led political activism on social media, future research may find that the relationship between PSIMs and political efficacy in Serbia aligns more closely with the patterns observed in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia.

While political participation is an important political outcome, our study did not directly analyze the relationship between following PSIMs and political participation. Future research should explore this potential connection. Based on prior research and the Indonesian political context, it is possible that increased political efficacy from following PSIMs may not translate into higher political participation. This phenomenon can be understood in the context of Indonesia's political landscape, where high political efficacy may exist without a corresponding increase in participation, possibly due to barriers such as limited access to formal political channels or a lack of trust in political institutions (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2024). Additionally, while social media platforms offer young people a space to engage with political content, this engagement tends to be more informational than action-oriented, leading to heightened political awareness but not necessarily translating into active participation, such as voting or attending protests. Previous research has indicated that while social media can foster political efficacy, it may not always drive tangible political actions due to the passive nature of online engagement (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024; Peter & Muth, 2023).

On the other hand, although eudaimonic motivation is conceptually relevant to political engagement, our study primarily examined its moderating role. The direct relationship between eudaimonic motivation and political efficacy remains to be explored in future research. This finding aligns with studies indicating that individuals motivated by a

desire to seek political information tend to exhibit higher political efficacy (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2012; Schemer et al., 2024). Eudaimonic motivation, which is driven by a desire for personal growth and understanding, encourages young adults to engage more deeply with political content, fostering a sense of empowerment and confidence in their ability to influence political outcomes. In countries like Austria, where media literacy is high and democratic processes are well-established, young adults are likely more equipped to critically analyze political content and, as a result, develop stronger political efficacy. In contrast, in countries with less developed media literacy or democratic institutions, eudaimonic motivations might still fuel curiosity about politics but may not always translate into the same level of efficacy due to factors such as political instability or media fragmentation. This highlights the role of cultural and institutional contexts in shaping how motivations translate into political engagement.

Furthermore, with eudaimonic motivation as a moderator, only young adults in Austria who followed PSIMs exhibited a significant positive relationship with their political efficacy. One possible explanation for this finding is that Austria has a well-established democratic culture and comparatively high levels of media and digital literacy among young adults (e.g., Trappel & Tomaz, 2021), as previously explained. This environment encourages young people to engage critically with political information and enhances their ability to assess the credibility of political content (e.g., Austin & Domgaard, 2024). Additionally, PSIMs in Austria are typically more consistent and transparent in producing issue-based political content, which may increase their perceived credibility compared to influencers in other countries (e.g., Peter & Muth, 2023). As a result, eudaimonic motivation may be more effective in enhancing political efficacy through the consumption of political content in Austria than in other contexts where digital literacy, media trust, or the influencer landscape differs.

In addition, this study revealed a significant positive relationship between political efficacy and political participation in all countries. This means that the higher the political efficacy of young adults, influenced by following PSIMs on social media in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, the more young adults reported to politically participate. In line with this, various previous studies showed that the belief of individuals that they can change a political system – in other words, their political efficacy – leads to political action, for

instance, voting in a general election (e.g., Beaumont, 2010; Campbell et al., 1954; Hayes & Bean, 1993; Wolak, 2018).

Finally, cultural and political contexts shape how PSMTs influence youth. In European countries, like Austria and Serbia, PSMTs can express their political opinions online without worrying about punishment by the state. This results in a diversity of different political opinions and discussions, forming a more transparent democratic system. In Asian countries, such as Hong Kong and Indonesia, PSMTs must be careful in sharing their opinion or responses to a political issue online with their followers because if the government or political actors are offended by this, PSMTs could have negative consequences, for instance, they can receive various unexpected punishments from the government or political actors. With all the advantages and strengths that PSMTs have, it has become increasingly clear how important the role of political influencers is in developing communication strategies during elections (e.g., Borchers, 2025). They not only provide political information but also act as advisors, guiding the public in selecting which candidates are best suited to be policymakers for the nation. This could, of course, also come with dangers, for instance, when PSMTs engage in political misinformation or use persuasion strategies to influence political outcomes (e.g., Dubois et al., 2020).

4.1 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations in this study need to be considered. First, there is a need to explore other possible variables influencing political participation in the context of PSMTs. For instance, emotions could play an important role when seeing the content of PSMTs. Previous research has shown that emotions might influence young adults to decide whether or not to engage in politics (e.g., Valentino et al., 2009; Wolak et al., 2022). This can be negative emotions such as anger after viewing political content from political influencers, followed by young adults (e.g., Valentino et al., 2009). Therefore, future research should explore how negative emotions based on following PSMTs and receiving their political content on social media can affect young adults' political mindset and political behavior.

Second, in addition to SMIs and PSMTs, there are also AI or CGI influencers who could also engage in political content online. This could become a new source of political information that can be trusted by young adults in the future (e.g., Zhang et al., 2024). Future

research needs to examine more deeply the effects of AI Influencers in politics on young adults.

Third, on the methodological part, there is a need for qualitative research, including interviews with young adults, to get deeper qualitative insights into underlying psychological processes influencing how PSIMs affect young adults' political mindset and decision to participate in politics. Especially considering that each political influencer has a different personality, originates from a different country, and has their own uniqueness, it is important to know how these factors are perceived by young adults and how effective they are regarding young adults' political outcomes.

Fourth, a limitation of the present study lies in the measurement of political efficacy, which is confined to internal political efficacy and, more specifically, the perceived knowledge dimension. Although this operationalization aligns with our research focus on young adults' self-perceptions of political competence, it does not capture other dimensions such as external political efficacy, which reflects beliefs about the responsiveness of political institutions. Future research would benefit from employing more comprehensive scales that include both internal and external political efficacy dimensions to provide a fuller understanding of how political efficacy relates to social media influencer exposure and political participation.

Last, this study relied on self-reported data from young adults. As a result, political participation was assessed based on young adults' self-reports and only in the form of intentions rather than their actual behavior, which may introduce bias. Future research is encouraged to incorporate more direct and objective measures of political participation.

4.2 Implications

Compared to SMIs, PSIMs play a very important role in attracting the attention of young adults, especially young voters during elections (e.g., Klüver, 2024; Rose & Rohlinger, 2024; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). Knowing that exposure to political content on social media due to following political influencers can engage young adults in politics, also political actors and governments could pay more attention to collaborating with political influencers, or even becoming one of the political influencers who are active on social media (e.g., Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019; Pöyry & Reinikainen, 2024; Yang & Kang, 2021).

5. Conclusion

From this study, we can conclude that PSMIs exert a greater influence on young adults' political outcomes than SMIs. Specifically, PSMIs directly and positively affect young adults' political efficacy in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. In contrast, SMIs, who rarely engage with political content, play a limited role in shaping political outcomes. These results underscore the critical role of context, suggesting that national political and media environments may shape the impact of PSMIs. Ultimately, understanding the role of PSMIs within specific political and media contexts is essential for explaining how young adults engage with democracy in the digital age.

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Appendix for Study II

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

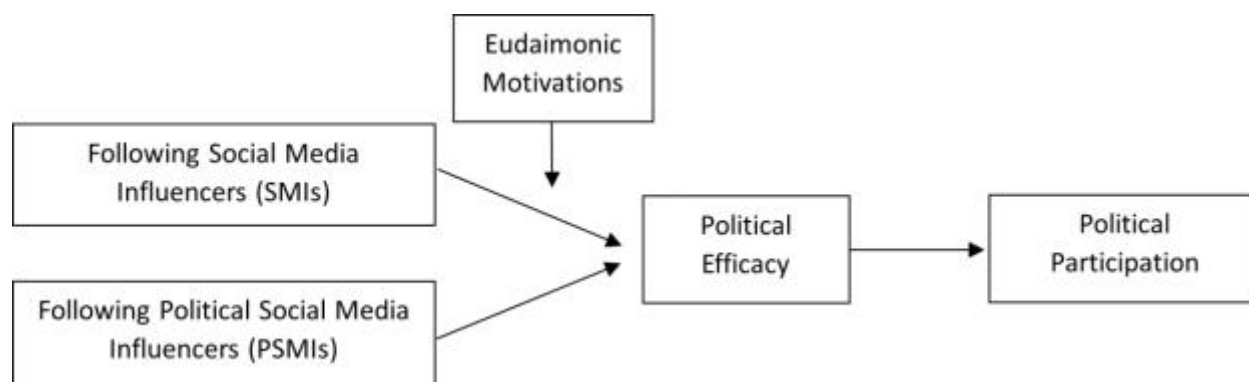


Figure 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

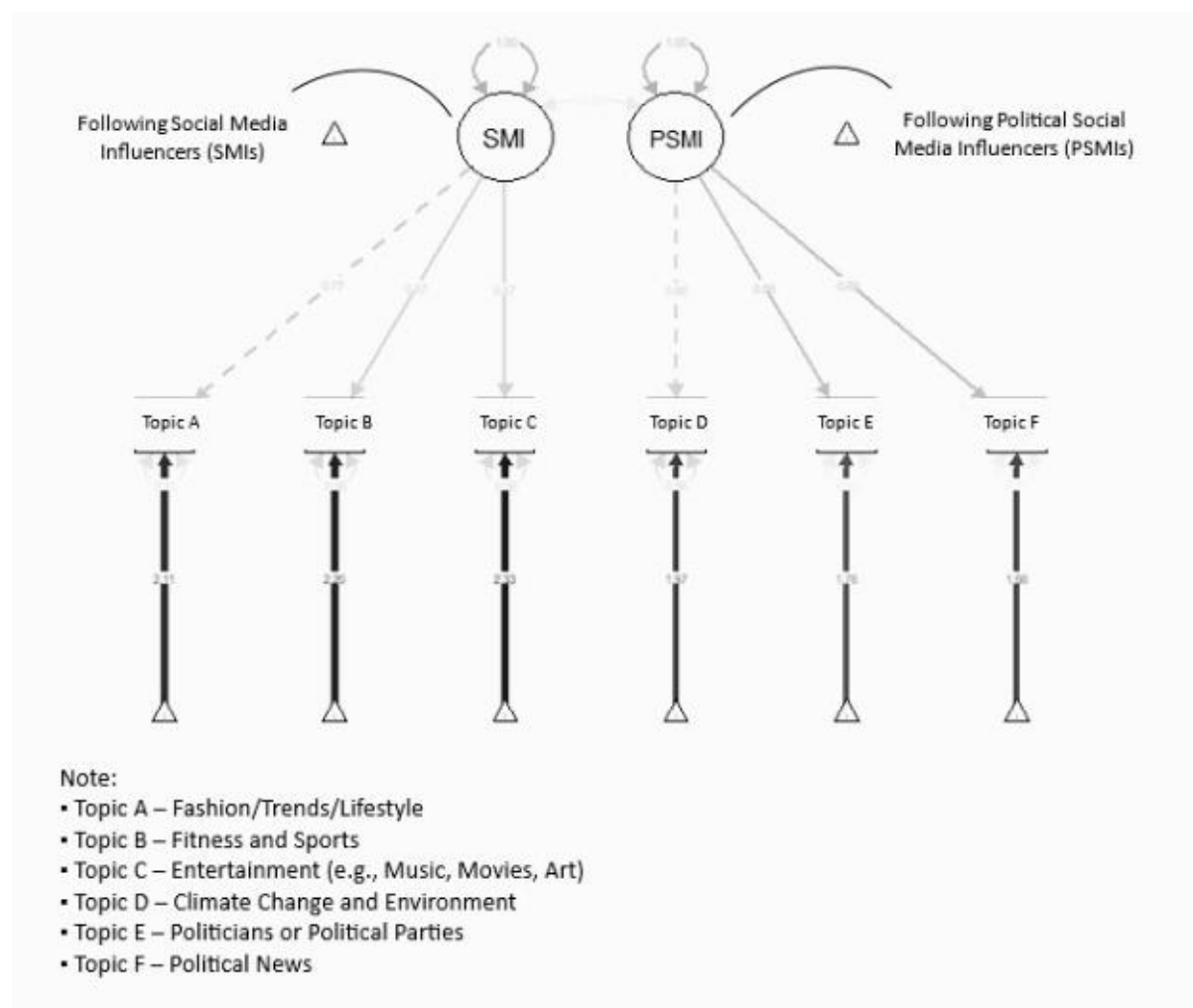


Table 1. Comparative analysis of following SMIs/PSMIs, political apathy and political participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

	Austria		Hong Kong		Indonesia		Serbia	
	Political Efficacy	Political Participation	Political Efficacy	Political Participation	Political Efficacy	Political Participation	Political Efficacy	Political Participation
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)
Following Social Media Influencers (SMIs)	-0.217(0.046)***	0.027(0.047)	0.043(0.048)	-0.027(0.039)	0.064(0.066)	0.021(0.052)	-0.063(0.053)	0.033(0.032)
Following Political Social Media Influencers (PSMIs)	0.226(0.042)***	0.339(0.047)***	0.230(0.046)***	0.232(0.042)***	0.236(0.052)***	0.097(0.050)	-0.121(0.041)*	-0.110(0.025)***
Eudaimonic Motivations	0.191(0.048)***	-	0.294(0.066)***	-	0.299(0.057)***	-	0.232(0.054)***	-
Following SMIs x Eudaimonic Motivations	-0.024(0.029)	-	0.022(0.022)	-	0.018(0.031)	-	-0.021(0.031)	-
Following PSMIs x Eudaimonic Motivations	0.057(0.028)*	-	-0.10(0.024)	-	-0.006(0.030)	-	-0.014(0.024)	-
Political Efficacy	-	0.129(0.053)*	-	0.508(0.045)***	-	0.551(0.044)***	-	0.328(0.030)***
Traditional Media Use	0.364(0.046)***	0.203(0.054)***	0.395(0.054)***	0.354(0.054)***	0.243(0.047)***	0.165(0.043)***	0.067(0.030)*	0.067(0.030)*
Age	-0.028(0.024)	-0.001(0.024)	-0.023(0.021)	-0.035(0.017)*	-0.001(0.028)	-0.017(0.027)	-0.005(0.026)	-0.005(0.026)
Female Gender ¹	-0.255(0.106)*	-0.158(0.110)	0.064(0.089)*	0.192(0.080)**	-0.306(0.114)**	-0.190(0.103)	0.050(0.101)	0.050(0.101)
High Education ¹	0.260(0.245)	0.683(0.210)*	0.072(0.104)	-0.025(0.093)	0.142(0.242)	0.250(0.224)	-0.055(0.212)	-0.055(0.212)
Medium Education ¹	0.196(0.131)	0.062(0.125)	-	-	-0.076(0.210)	-0.221(0.184)	-0.450(0.177)*	-0.450(0.177)
Political Ideology	-0.018(0.040)	0.082(0.035)*	-	-	0.07(0.039)	0.073(0.040)	0.064(0.029)*	0.064(0.029)*
R-Square	0.339	0.354	0.601	0.723	0.416	0.515	0.155	0.320

Notes. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. ¹Reference category: Male; ²Reference category: Low education.

Bridge Between Paper 2 and Paper 3

Building on the insights developed in Study 2, which explored how political social media influencers (PSMIs) can transform political interest into efficacy and participation, the next step of this research turns its attention to the *emotional and attitudinal consequences* of influencer mobilization. While the second paper highlighted the empowering potential of PSMIs—showing how their explicitly political content can strengthen young people’s sense of agency and engagement (e.g., Beaumont, 2010; Wolak, 2018; Klüver, 2024)—these positive dynamics are only one side of a more complex picture. Mobilization also unfolds within affective and institutional contexts that can amplify negative emotions and undermine political trust, particularly in sensitive or repressive political environments.

As previous research has shown, political communication does not simply inform; it moves people emotionally (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011; Degerman, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Influencer mobilization is especially prone to this dynamic because it often employs moralized narratives, urgency, and emotionally resonant appeals to spur participation. Study 3 takes this insight seriously, examining how influencer-driven mobilization relates to young adults’ negative emotions and political cynicism across four contrasting political contexts: Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia. These emotional and attitudinal responses are not merely by-products of communication but play a decisive role in shaping how young people engage—or disengage—with politics.

Where Study 2 illuminated how PSMIs can enhance young people’s sense of political efficacy, Study 3 investigates how those same mobilizing strategies can simultaneously provoke anger, fear, and frustration, thereby eroding trust in political institutions. This duality reflects the growing scholarly recognition of SMIs or PSMIs as both catalysts of engagement and amplifiers of disappointment (e.g., Dubois et al., 2020; Goodwin et al., 2023; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004). The emotional effects of influencer activity are also context-dependent: while Hong Kong shows the strongest association between influencer mobilization and negative emotions due to its repressive environment (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025; Harff & Schmuck, 2023), Austria’s stable democratic norms buffer these effects (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Miller & Listhaug, 1990).

This transition between the second and third papers is both conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, it expands the research focus from political activation and efficacy to the *affective costs and democratic implications* of mobilization. Empirically, it introduces a

cross-national comparative lens that reveals how political and communicative environments condition the emotional and attitudinal outcomes of influencer activity (e.g., DeVerna et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2018; Hasell et al., 2024). This move allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the same communicative strategies that mobilize engagement may also sow seeds of disappointment and frustration.

In addition, moving from *From Sparks to Action* to *Powerful Voices of Influencers* underscores a central argument of this research trajectory: the political role of SMIs is inherently ambivalent. While they can spark interest and inspire participation, they can also mobilize negative affect and deepen political skepticism. As illustrated by recent events in Indonesia, influencer-led mobilization can escalate into widespread unrest and mass protest (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025; Naderer, 2023). Recognizing this ambivalence is essential for theorizing the full spectrum of influencer impact—empowerment and disappointment alike—on young citizens’ democratic engagement.

7. Study III (Submitted)

Powerful Voices of Influencers: Mobilization, User Engagement, Emotions, and Political Cynicism among Young Adults in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

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Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) play an increasingly important role in shaping young adults' online behaviors, emotional responses, and political attitudes. While their capacity to encourage political engagement is well established, less is known about their potential to produce negative outcomes. This study examines the relationships between SMI mobilization, negative emotions, and political cynicism among young adults in Austria, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, and Serbia, as well as the moderating role of user engagement. Guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory, a cross-national survey ($N = 2,144$) was conducted in early 2024. The findings indicate that mobilization increases negative emotions in all four countries, with the strongest effects observed in Hong Kong. It also predicts political cynicism in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, but not in Austria. Moreover, user engagement moderates these relationships in opposite ways: it buffers negative emotions in Austria and Serbia, but amplifies political cynicism in Hong Kong. These results underscore how SMIs, together with patterns of user engagement, can both reinforce and mitigate emotional and attitudinal outcomes depending on cultural and political contexts.

Keywords: Social media influencers, SMI mobilization, user engagement, negative emotions, political cynicism, young adults

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as prominent public figures across various domains, including politics. Their ability to identify and amplify viral issues allows them to engage young audiences and influence public opinion, from promoting social movements to encouraging voter participation (e.g., Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Goodwin et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Peter & Muth, 2023; Riedl et al., 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2025). This intersection between digital media and political communication highlights how SMIs can shape young adults' emotions, attitudes, and behaviors in online environments (e.g., Alsharawy, 2025; Schmuck et al., 2022).

While prior research emphasizes the positive role of SMIs in fostering political engagement among young adults (e.g., Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Harff & Schmuck, 2023), comparatively little attention has been given to the psychological and attitudinal consequences of SMIs' mobilization. Existing research has predominantly examined how engaging with political content contributes to attitude formation, learning, and participation. However, little is known about whether such interactions might also trigger negative emotional responses. This study addresses this gap by examining whether interacting with political content—through commenting, liking, or sharing—amplifies negative emotions and political cynicism (e.g., Gerbaudo et al., 2023).

Also, although some studies have examined SMIs' impact on negative emotions (e.g., Bartosiak et al., 2025; Lajnef, 2023; Lehto, 2021) or political cynicism (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2022), cross-national comparisons remain scarce, particularly between European and Asian contexts. To address this gap, this study examines the relationships between SMI mobilization, user engagement, negative emotions, and political cynicism among young adults in Austria, Serbia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong (China). These countries differ in how SMIs influence political behavior and emotional responses. In Austria, SMI's political content is often leveraged by far-right actors, while young adults remain largely passive, expressing frustration and anger toward polarized politics (e.g., Hofmann, 2024). In Hong Kong, SMIs operate under government constraints, potentially generating anxiety and anger in politically engaged youth (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2024). In Indonesia, SMIs hold substantial political influence, engaging young voters but also risking the spread of misinformation, fueling distrust (e.g., Subekti et al., 2025). In Serbia, SMIs amplify public discontent, but traditional media dominance and government pressure limit their impact, contributing to

youth political cynicism (e.g., Milošević-Dorđević & Žeželj, 2017). By investigating these contexts, this study contributes to understanding how SMI mobilization produces negative emotions and fosters political cynicism among young adults, highlighting the role of user engagement and cross-national differences in digital political behavior.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) has evolved from its early roots in radio studies, with Herzog (1941) and Lazarsfeld (1940) emphasizing audiences' active role in selecting media to satisfy specific needs, to its formalization by Katz et al. (1973). Subsequent research integrated the framework within broader communication theory (e.g., Weaver, 1980; DeFleur & DeFleur, 2010; Papacharissi, 2014) and extended its application to emerging media, including Internet use (e.g., Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), social media (e.g., Whiting & Williams, 2013), online learning (e.g., Wu & Song, 2019), and viral TikTok challenges (e.g., Falgoust et al., 2022). This progression demonstrates UGT's adaptability and enduring relevance, providing a robust lens to examine contemporary digital media practices and informing studies of SMIs, including their role in political engagement.

This study extends UGT into the era of SMIs (e.g., Parmelee & Roman, 2019; Sun et al., 2025; Venus et al., 2025) by identifying new gratifications such as mobilization, user engagement, and negative emotions. It advances UGT beyond media selection by examining how SMI's mobilization and user engagement are linked to negative emotions and political cynicism, thereby bridging media psychology with political communication. Through a cross-national design (Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia), the study also addresses the Western bias in UGT research and highlights both universal and culturally contingent patterns.

2.1 Social Media Influencer (SMI) Mobilization

SMI's communicative ability to mobilize audiences can determine the type of opinion leadership they provide to their followers (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023), and strong mobilization often fosters a closer connection with youth, particularly when they share common interests. The political mobilization of SMIs, whether they have large or small followings, is a relatively recent phenomenon and faces challenges related to authenticity and quality control (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2023; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023; Woolley, 2022). Notably, small-scale SMIs are cost-effective and can engage highly specific audiences with

“authentic” political messages, facilitating widespread mobilization (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2023).

Previous research suggests that social media platforms, such as Facebook, can serve as tools for mobilizing groups and encouraging politically active individuals to increase their engagement (e.g., Vissers & Stolle, 2014). Although the role of SMIs in shaping audience behavior has been studied in domains such as health-related behaviors and environmentally conscious dietary choices (e.g., Phua et al., 2020), its influence in political contexts warrants particular attention (e.g., Dekonick & Schmuck, 2022). In political and electoral campaigns, SMIs are increasingly recognized as mobilization tools, especially due to their ability to engage users who may encounter political information incidentally (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2023; Stoldt et al., 2019; Peter & Muth, 2023). Research indicates that online mobilization efforts can effectively recruit individuals to participate in political activities (e.g., Vissers et al., 2012), and SMIs, in particular, has been shown to mobilize young adults (e.g., Dekonick & Schmuck, 2022; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2023).

2.2 Negative Emotions

Negative emotions are commonly defined as affective states that emerge in response to perceived threats, injustices, or frustrations, and they typically include feelings such as anger, fear, anxiety, and resentment (Lazarus, 1991; Izard, 1991; Marcus et al., 2000; Brader, 2006). In political contexts, these emotions play a crucial role in shaping individual attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011; Degerman, 2023). For instance, Marcus et al. (2000) argue that emotions like fear and anger activate distinct cognitive processes that influence political decision-making, with fear encouraging information seeking and anger fostering mobilization.

Brader (2006) also demonstrates that fear and enthusiasm in political campaigns can significantly shape voter attention, information processing, and participation. Extending this perspective, Valentino et al. (2011) show that anger can increase political participation, while anxiety may reduce it by fostering withdrawal or cautiousness. Building on this body of work, Degerman (2023) emphasizes that negative emotions are not only disruptive but can also serve as drivers of political action, mobilizing citizens in response to dissatisfaction or perceived injustice. Thus, in politics, negative emotions can both destabilize political trust and legitimacy while simultaneously motivating collective action and participation. Taken together, these insights suggest that exposure to mobilization efforts by SMIs may elicit

stronger negative emotional reactions among young adults. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

H1: SMI Mobilization is positively associated with young adults' negative emotions.

2.3 Political Cynicism

Political cynicism refers to a generalized mistrust and negative attitude toward political institutions, actors, and processes, reflecting the belief that political actors are primarily motivated by self-interest rather than the public good, and encompassing a psychological disposition characterized by distrust toward the political system and skepticism regarding political actors and governing institutions (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Miller & Listhaug, 1990; Pattyn et al., 2012). Individuals high in political cynicism are skeptical of the effectiveness, fairness, and legitimacy of democratic governance, and this disposition often manifests in disengagement from political participation, reluctance to support policies, or indifference toward civic responsibilities (e.g., Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Miller & Listhaug, 1990). In other words, politically cynical individuals are not only critical of specific politicians or decisions but also harbor a broader sense of disillusionment with the political system itself (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Dalton, 2004).

When negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or anxiety persist and are directed primarily toward political institutions and actors, they may erode confidence in democratic processes and foster political cynicism, which is a generalized mistrust and disillusionment with politics (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Demertzis, 2013). Research has shown that sustained exposure to political conflict, corruption scandals, or perceived injustices can intensify these feelings, making young adults particularly susceptible to developing cynical attitudes toward politics (e.g., Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Miller & Listhaug, 1990). In the context of social media, SMIs who actively mobilize their followers around political issues can amplify these negative emotions, potentially shaping young adults' perceptions of political actors and institutions. Consequently, political cynicism can have profound implications for democratic engagement, shaping both the likelihood of participation and the quality of political discourse within a society. Building on this perspective, we hypothesize as follows:

H2: SMI Mobilization is positively associated with young adults' political cynicism

2.4 User Engagement

User engagement on social media encompasses the active interactions users have with content, including actions such as liking, commenting, sharing, and other forms of participation (e.g., Khan, 2017; Knupfer et al., 2023). These behaviors indicate the level of interest and involvement a user has with a particular post or influencer. For instance, when a user "likes" a political post by an influencer, it signifies approval or agreement with the content (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2021; Wang & Sundar, 2022). Commenting allows users to express opinions or initiate discussions, while sharing extends the reach of the content to their network, amplifying its impact (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2021; Wang & Sundar, 2022). These interactions not only reflect user engagement but also influence the visibility and dissemination of the content, thereby shaping public discourse and potentially affecting political perceptions and behaviors (e.g., Galeazzi et al., 2024; Milli et al., 2025).

Research on social media affordances highlights that such actions are not neutral but shaped by platform logics. In political contexts, engagement with SMI's content therefore operates both as an expression of interest and a mechanism that amplifies emotional and attitudinal effects. Meanwhile, in the context of political content shared by SMIs, user engagement can function as a moderator, influencing the strength or direction of the relationship between the content and the user's emotional or cognitive responses. For instance, active engagement through liking or commenting may intensify a user's emotional reaction to political messages, reinforcing their existing beliefs or attitudes (e.g., Ferrara & Yang, 2015). Conversely, passive engagement might have a less pronounced effect (e.g., Gainous et al., 2021). The level and nature of engagement can thus modify how political content impacts an individual, highlighting the importance of considering user interaction patterns when assessing the influence of SMIs on political perceptions and behaviors (e.g., Degerman, 2023; Rothut, 2025). Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

H3: The association between SMI mobilization and negative emotions is stronger with high user engagement than with low user engagement.

H4: The association between SMI mobilization and political cynicism is stronger with high user engagement than with low user engagement.

2.5 SMI Mobilization and Emotional Effects Across Countries

SMI has emerged as a significant actor in shaping political discourse, particularly among young adults (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025). Their ability to mobilize audiences through emotionally charged content has been linked to increased negative emotions such as anger and frustration, which can, in turn, foster political cynicism (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2022). This dynamic is influenced by the political communication environment in each country, where factors like media freedom, political stability, and public trust in institutions play crucial roles. Moreover, user engagement with SMI content—through liking, commenting, and sharing—may moderate these emotional and attitudinal outcomes, potentially amplifying or mitigating their effects.

This comparative dimension is particularly relevant in light of prior findings that political discourse online is strongly shaped by national context. For instance, Althuwaini et al. (2025) show how U.S.-based subreddit discussions about Saudi Arabia reflected not only political attitudes but also broader patterns of mistrust and skepticism. Such work underscores the need to investigate how SMI mobilization interacts with different political environments to shape young adults' emotional and attitudinal responses.

Given the varying political contexts and engagement patterns across different nations, it is essential to examine how SMI mobilization influences young adults' negative emotions and political cynicism, and how user engagement moderates these relationships. This leads to the following research question:

RQ1: How does SMI mobilization shape young adults' negative emotions and political cynicism across countries, and how does user engagement moderate this relationship?

2.6 Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among SMI mobilization, user engagement, negative emotions, and political cynicism. Drawing on UGT, young audiences engage with SMIs to satisfy specific informational, social, and emotional needs (e.g., Lariscy et al., 2011). High user engagement may amplify emotional responses to SMI content, producing negative emotions such as anger or anxiety (e.g., Hasell et al., 2024). These heightened negative emotions, in turn, can foster political cynicism, as users become more critical of political processes and institutions. This framework highlights how SMI

mobilization, moderated by user engagement, can influence the emotional response (e.g., negative emotions) and shape young adult's cynicism in politics.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted in collaboration with researchers from several participating institutions internationally. A quantitative comparative survey was employed in early 2024 using online questionnaires facilitated by a professional survey company. Questionnaires were translated and back-translated between English and local languages: German (Austria), Chinese (Hong Kong), Indonesian (Indonesia), and Serbian (Serbia). Data processing and manuscript preparation were conducted from early to mid-2025. Statistical analyses were performed in R using packages including *lavaan* and *interaction*.

3.1 Sample and Procedure

The survey employed stratified sampling to ensure diversity and balance across respondents' identities, and this was conducted by a professional polling company and used comparative survey research (e.g., Bethlehem, 2009; Cohen et al., 2003). Multiple regression analysis was used to examine relationships among dependent and independent variables, controlling for potential confounding variables (e.g., Keith, 2019; Allison, 1999; Rubinfeld, 2011).

3.2 Measurement

3.2.1 Social Media Influencer Mobilization.

To measure this variable, we adopted items from Koc-Michalska and Lilleker (2017). In the questionnaire, respondents were asked how often they had experienced the following situations in the past two weeks. Responses were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "very often." The measurement consisted of four statements, including: 1) Influencer called for participating in a political event, 2) Influencer posted opportunities to change something in politics (e.g., petition), 3) Influencer encourages others to become politically active, 4) Influencer asked to support a political cause ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 2.02$, $\alpha = 0.91$)

3.2.2 User Engagement.

To measure this variable, we adopted items from Knupfer et al. (2023). As in the previous measure, respondents were asked to rate how often they engaged in the following

activities on social media over the past two weeks. Responses were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “never” to “very often.” The measurement consisted of eight statements, including: 5) I “liked” posts about politics by influencers, 6) I shared posts about politics by influencers, 7) I commented on posts about politics by influencers, 8) I interacted with posts about politics by influencers ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 2.04$, $\alpha = 0.91$).

3.2.3 Negative Emotions.

To measure this variable, we adopted items from Valentino et al. (2009). Again, respondents were asked to indicate what emotions they had experienced in the past two weeks after viewing political posts by influencers. Responses were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “never” to “very often.” The list of emotions is as follows: 1) Angry, 2) Disgusted, 3) Outraged ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.84$, $\alpha = 0.89$).

3.2.4 Political Cynicism.

To measure this variable, we adopted items from Pinkleton et al. (2012). It was measured using four statements and rated on a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The statements are as follows: 1) Candidates for office are interested only in people’s votes, not in their opinions, 2) Politicians put their own interests ahead of the public interest, 3) It seems like politicians only care about themselves or special interests, 4) Politicians lose touch quickly with the public after they are elected ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.95$, $\alpha = 0.85$).

4. Results

4.1 Hypothesis 1: SMI Mobilization → Negative Emotions

Based on the analysis for H1, we found a significant positive relationship between SMI mobilization and negative emotions among young adults in all four countries. In Austria, SMI mobilization was positively associated with negative emotions ($b = 0.39$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$), while in Hong Kong the effect was stronger ($b = 0.52$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$), indicating particularly pronounced negative emotional responses in this context. In Indonesia, the association was weaker but still significant ($b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$), and in Serbia, a moderate positive relationship was observed ($b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$). These results consistently support H1, suggesting that SMI mobilization contributes to increased negative emotions among young adults across diverse cultural contexts, although the strength of the relationship varies between countries.

4.2 Hypothesis 2: SMI Mobilization → Political Cynicism

For H2, we found a significant positive association between SMI mobilization and political cynicism in three countries: Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia. Specifically, in Hong Kong, SMI mobilization was positively associated with political cynicism ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$), and similar significant effects were observed in Indonesia ($b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$) and Serbia ($b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of SMI mobilization corresponded to greater political cynicism in these contexts. In Austria, the relationship was positive but not statistically significant ($b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.08$), suggesting that SMI mobilization did not have a meaningful impact on political cynicism among Austrian young adults. These findings suggest that SMI mobilization contributes to increased political cynicism in most contexts, though the strength and significance of the effect vary across countries.

4.3 Hypothesis 3: User Engagement × SMI Mobilization → Negative Emotions

Regarding H3, there was no evidence that user engagement significantly strengthened the positive relationship between SMI mobilization and negative emotions in any of the countries, indicating that user engagement does not act as a positive moderator in this relationship. However, in Austria and Serbia, a significant negative association was observed (Austria: $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.01$; Serbia: $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.03$), suggesting that higher user engagement actually weakens the relationship between SMI mobilization and negative emotions in these contexts. In contrast, the associations in Hong Kong ($b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.61$) and Indonesia ($b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.88$) were not significant, indicating no moderating effect of user engagement in these countries. These findings suggest that user engagement does not consistently strengthen the impact of SMI mobilization on negative emotions and may even weaken it in certain national contexts.

4.4 Hypothesis 4: User Engagement × SMI Mobilization → Political Cynicism

For H4, we found that user engagement significantly strengthened the relationship between SMI mobilization and political cynicism only in Hong Kong ($b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.01$), indicating that higher user engagement amplifies the effect of SMI mobilization on political cynicism among young adults in this context. In contrast, no significant moderating effects were observed in Austria ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.26$), Indonesia ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.12$), or Serbia ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.52$), suggesting that user engagement

does not influence the relationship between SMI mobilization and political cynicism in these countries. The overall analysis results can be seen in Table 2.

4.5 Research Question (RQ1)

To answer the research question, we can find that across Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, SMI mobilization was positively associated with negative emotions among young adults, though the strength varied across contexts. In Austria and Serbia, influencer-driven content contributed to heightened negative emotions, reflecting concern over political developments. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, the association was particularly pronounced due to the region's politically sensitive environment, where influencer-driven content can amplify feelings of frustration and anger. In Indonesia, the effect was weaker, suggesting that while SMIs engage youth politically, the intensity of negative emotional responses is moderated by broader exposure to political content. For a clearer overview of the comparison of SMI mobilization effects across countries, please refer to Table 1.

Regarding political cynicism, SMI mobilization was positively linked to distrust and disillusionment toward political institutions in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, indicating that exposure to political content from SMIs can reinforce skepticism toward governance. In Austria, the relationship was positive but weaker, suggesting that influencer mobilization does not necessarily translate into broader cynicism, potentially due to more stable institutional trust or lower polarization in political discourse. User engagement moderated these effects in nuanced ways: it weakened the link between mobilization and negative emotions in Austria and Serbia but had no effect in Hong Kong or Indonesia, while it amplified the effect on political cynicism only in Hong Kong.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to the growing literature on the political role of SMIs by examining how their mobilization efforts relate to young adults' negative emotions and political cynicism across four different political contexts: Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia. Consistent with previous research emphasizing the emotional impact of political communication (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011; Degerman, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022), our findings demonstrate that SMI mobilization is significantly associated with heightened negative emotions in all countries. However, the intensity of these effects varies: Hong Kong exhibits the strongest association, likely due to the politically repressive environment in which SMIs operate (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025; Harff &

Schmuck, 2023), while Indonesia shows weaker associations, suggesting that the widespread presence of SMIs in politics may normalize political content and reduce emotional intensity (e.g., Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Goodwin et al., 2023). Similarly, SMI mobilization is positively linked to political cynicism in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, but not in Austria, where institutional trust and comparatively stable democratic norms may buffer the effects of influencer-driven mobilization (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Miller & Listhaug, 1990).

User engagement plays a more complex and context-dependent role than expected. Contrary to our hypotheses, engagement does not consistently amplify negative emotional responses. In Austria and Serbia, engagement appears to weaken the relationship between SMI mobilization and negative emotions, indicating that active participation with SMI's content may allow young adults to process political information in ways that mitigate emotional intensity (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2021; Wang & Sundar, 2022). In contrast, engagement significantly amplifies political cynicism in Hong Kong, pointing to the risk of disappointment in highly contentious and repressive political contexts (e.g., Hasell et al., 2024). These findings suggest that user engagement is not a universally amplifying mechanism but rather a conditional factor whose effects depend on national political and communicative environments (e.g., DeVerna et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2018).

The results also highlight the importance of SMI's voices in shaping political outcomes. This influence can be potentially dangerous when SMIs engage in political misinformation (e.g., Dubois et al., 2020; Goodwin et al., 2023) or use persuasive strategies to benefit political actors or the government (e.g., Wijayanto et al., 2024). Such activity can evoke negative emotions among social media users, particularly young adults, leading them to act cynically toward politics (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2022; University of Michigan, 2024). For instance, during elections, SMIs may spread false news about presidential candidates, attempting to divide the electorate to favor a candidate they support (e.g., DeVerna et al., 2022; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). They may also produce political content in support of one party to gain seats in parliament (e.g., Shao et al., 2018; Harff & Schmuck, 2023). These actions contribute to skepticism among social media users toward both SMIs and political institutions (e.g., Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004).

Even when SMI provides accurate political information, revealing the truth about political actors or a country's situation, they can still mobilize negative emotions and political

cynicism (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2022; Bartosiak et al., 2025). This effect is amplified when political systems benefit elites rather than citizens (e.g., Bachrach, 2017; Gilens & Page, 2014). For instance, widespread dissatisfaction and negative emotions among citizens in Indonesia in August 2025 contributed to massive demonstrations, including the destruction of various parliamentary buildings as a form of protest (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025; Naderer, 2023).

Overall, our study underscores the pivotal role of SMIs in shaping political attitudes and behaviors among young adults. The significant associations between SMI mobilization and heightened negative emotions and political cynicism across diverse political contexts highlight the complex interplay between SMIs and political engagement (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Schmuck et al., 2022; Dubois et al., 2020; Harff & Schmuck, 2023). However, the variability of these effects across countries suggests that political and communicative environments significantly shape outcomes, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches to mitigate potential negative impacts on democratic processes (e.g., Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Parmelee & Roman, 2019; Venus et al., 2025). Future research should explore the mechanisms through which SMI influences political attitudes, considering factors such as media literacy, platform algorithms, and the role of misinformation in shaping public opinion (e.g., DeVerna et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2018; Hasell et al., 2024).

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. *First*, the study relies on survey data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias and recall limitations, particularly given rapidly changing political contexts. Combining surveys with interviews or focus groups could provide a more nuanced understanding of user behavior. *Second*, although the cross-country design offers comparative insights, only four countries were included, limiting generalizability. Future research could expand to additional political and cultural contexts, including both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, to test the robustness of observed patterns. *Third*, the study focused primarily on negative emotions (anger, disgust, outrage) and did not account for positive emotions, such as hope or solidarity, which may also be mobilized. A more holistic emotional framework is recommended for future research to capture the full spectrum of political communication via SMIs.

5.2 Implications

This study offers both theoretical and practical insights. Theoretically, it extends UGT into political communication by showing that SMI mobilization satisfies informational and participatory needs while also generating affective and attitudinal outcomes, such as negative emotions and political cynicism. It highlights the importance of considering both universal patterns and context-specific dynamics when applying UGT across cultures.

Practically, the findings alert policymakers, educators, and civil society actors to the potential of SMI mobilization to heighten distrust and negative emotions, particularly in politically sensitive environments like Hong Kong. At the same time, evidence that user engagement can mitigate negative emotional responses (as seen in Austria and Serbia) underscores the value of promoting constructive digital participation, for instance, through critical media literacy initiatives. In Indonesia, recent events illustrate the significant role of SMIs in shaping public sentiment and mobilizing youth. The ongoing protests, sparked by the death of a motorcycle taxi driver during a police crackdown, have been amplified on social media, with SMIs playing a key role in organizing and sustaining demonstrations. This emphasizes the need for strategies that foster responsible digital engagement to mitigate harmful effects. For SMIs, the findings highlight an ethical responsibility to encourage political discourse that informs and engages, rather than simply amplifying frustration or cynicism.

6. Conclusion

The findings reveal that SMI mobilization impacts the negative emotions of young adults across all countries (e.g., Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia) and also influences political cynicism in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, but not in Austria. They highlight both universal dynamics—such as the consistent association between mobilization and negative emotions—and important contextual variations shaped by user engagement patterns. By extending UGT into the realm of SMI-driven political communication, the study underscores the powerful voice of SMIs as both mobilizers and potential amplifiers of disappointment, particularly contributing to young adults' political cynicism in Hong Kong. The results carry practical implications for policymakers, educators, and SMIs. At the same time, the effects of SMIs on negative emotions, moderated by user engagement, were weakened in Austria and Serbia, suggesting that higher engagement may buffer against adverse emotional responses and promote more critical, reflective interaction with political

content in these countries. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate how the mobilizing power of SMIs can profoundly shape young adults' psychological responses to politics, intensifying negative emotions and fostering political cynicism across diverse contexts.

Ethics Statement

This study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Vienna. All participants provided their informed consent prior to taking part in the online survey.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions related to participant confidentiality. The dataset is accessible only to the co-authors of this study and may be shared with qualified researchers upon reasonable request and with permission from the corresponding author.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix for Study III

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

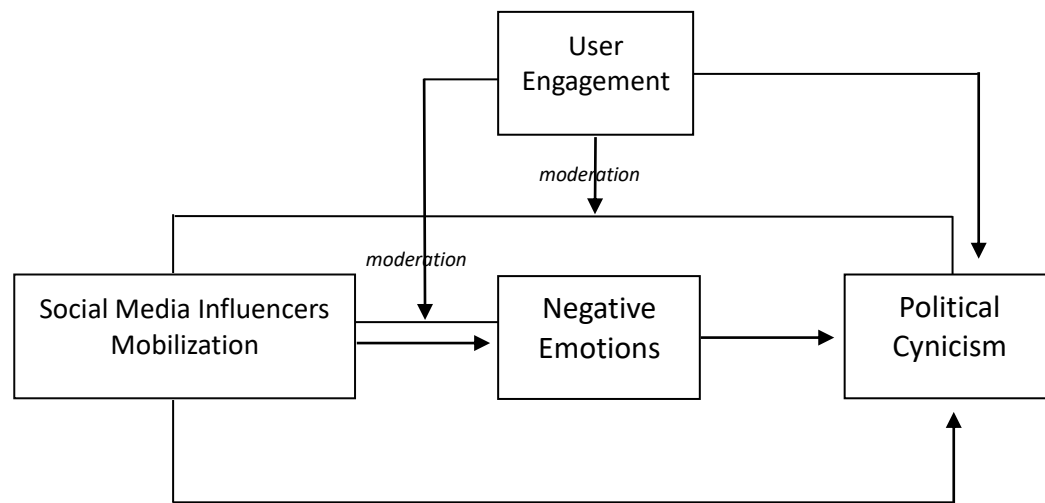


Table 1. Comparison of SMI Mobilization Effects Across Countries

Hypotheses (Effects)	Austria	Hong Kong	Indonesia	Serbia
(H1) SMI Mobilization → Negative Emotions	↑ Strengthens	↑ Strengthens	↑ Strengthens	↑ Strengthens
(H2) SMI Mobilization → Political Cynicism	x None	↑ Strengthens	↑ Strengthens	↑ Strengthens
(H3) Engagement Moderation on Negative Emotions	↓ Weakens	x No effect	x No effect	↓ Weakens
(H4) Engagement Moderation on Political Cynicism	x No effect	↑ Strengthens	x No effect	x No effect

Table 2. Comparative Overview of SMI Mobilization, User Engagement, Negative Emotion, and Cynicism Across Four Countries

	Austria		Hong Kong		Indonesia		Serbia	
	Negative Emotions	Political Cynicism	Negative Emotions	Political Cynicism	Negative Emotions	Political Cynicism	Negative Emotions	Political Cynicism
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)
SMI Mobilization	0.395(0.060)**	0.108(0.064)	0.526(0.056)**	0.310(0.065)**	0.206(0.048)**	0.302(0.050)**	0.333(0.060)**	0.221(0.057)**
User Engagement	0.251(0.064)**	-0.126(0.059)*	-0.110(0.057)	-0.041(0.068)	0.143(0.044)**	0.002(0.048)	0.168(0.072)*	-0.065(0.071)
SMI Mobilization x User Engagement (moderator)	-0.077(0.032)*	0.038(0.034)	-0.011(0.021)	0.051(0.021)*	0.003(0.023)	-0.034(0.022)	-0.079(0.038)*	0.021(0.033)
Negative Emotion	-	0.099(0.057)	-	0.093(0.045)*	-	0.109(0.043)**	-	0.147(0.052)**
Traditional Media Use	0.139 (0.052)*	0.149(0.061)**	0.160(0.058)**	0.090(0.072)	-0.032(0.049)	0.055(0.051)	0.130(0.047)**	0.095(0.054)
Age	0.016 (0.024)	0.111(0.028)**	-0.111(0.027)**	-0.034(0.028)	0.014(0.030)	-0.008(0.030)	0.020(0.034)	0.060(0.042)
Female Gender ¹	-0.042(0.111)	0.001(0.124)	-0.053(0.115)	0.276(0.115)	0.025(0.124)	-0.098(0.126)	-0.101(0.144)	0.020(0.166)
High Education ²	-0.001(0.243)	-0.086(0.261)	1.376(0.201)**	2.175(0.211)	-0.233(0.303)	0.517(0.259)	-0.175(0.282)	0.575(0.310)
Medium Education ³	0.002(0.150)	0.158(0.171)	0.761(0.146)**	1.891(0.161)	-0.136(0.246)	0.378(0.228)	-0.254(0.231)	0.539(0.251)*
Political Ideology	0.099(0.046)*	0.006(0.051)	-	-	0.160(0.046)	0.061(0.045)	-0.016(0.046)	0.069(0.050)
<i>R-Square</i>	0.355	0.098	0.376	0.297	0.163	0.216	0.187	0.123

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. Reference category: Male; ¹Reference category: Low education.

8. Key Findings

This section presents the key findings emerging from the three interlinked studies that form the foundation of this dissertation. Taken together, these studies provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influencers (SMIs) and political social media influencers (PSMIs) shape young people's political interest, efficacy, and participation across different national contexts. The three studies are connected through a conceptual arc: the first study explores how SMI's political criticism can spark political interest ("**Sparking Political Interest**"); the second examines how explicitly PSMIs can transform that interest into a sense of efficacy and action ("**From Sparks to Action**"); and the third analyzes how the dynamics of SMI's power in mobilization and audience engagement interact to negative emotions and political cynicism ("**Powerful Voices of Influencers**").

8.1 SMIs Can Spark Political Interest Through Criticism

The first key result demonstrates that SMIs are capable of shaping young people's political interest through the tone and style of their communication. This effect was particularly visible in the first study, "*Sparking Political Interest*", which focused on the consequences of political criticism by SMIs. While constructive criticism did not necessarily foster disengagement, destructive criticism consistently increased political apathy across different national contexts. This indicates that not only the content but also the tone of political messages matters greatly in shaping how young audiences perceive politics.

Furthermore, the presence of parasocial relationships (PSRs) amplified these effects. Young people who felt emotionally connected to SMIs were more susceptible to experiencing heightened apathy when exposed to destructive criticism. These findings emphasize the persuasive power of SMIs who have cultivated loyal and emotionally invested followings. Importantly, this dynamic was not limited to a single political or cultural environment but was consistent across all four countries, highlighting the transnational character of SMI influence.

8.2 From Political Interest to Political Efficacy and Engagement

Building on these findings, the second key result reveals that SMIs can shape not only political interest but also perceptions of political efficacy and willingness to participate. In the second study, "*From Sparks to Action*", the focus shifted from general SMIs to PSMIs—

SMIs who consistently and explicitly engage in political issues. Unlike general SMIs, PSMIs aim to shape political opinions, stimulate critical reflection, and encourage participation.

The findings demonstrate that PSMIs can act as a counterforce to the political apathy that may be triggered by destructive political communication from general SMIs. By explicitly addressing political topics and positioning themselves as political actors, PSMIs enhanced young people's sense of political efficacy—their belief in their capacity to understand and influence political processes. This was particularly pronounced in contexts where political trust was relatively low, such as Hong Kong and Serbia, where PSMIs appeared to provide alternative spaces for political dialogue and empowerment.

This shift from political criticism to explicit political engagement underscores the theoretical and empirical significance of distinguishing between SMIs and PSMIs. While both can shape political attitudes, their mechanisms and outcomes differ substantially. Moving from “Sparking Political Interest” to “From Sparks to Action” captures how SMI communication can evolve from triggering curiosity and awareness to encouraging active political participation.

8.3 SMI Mobilization Triggers Emotional Responses and Political Cynicism

The third key result shows that SMI-driven mobilization efforts can generate strong emotional responses, often characterized by negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or disappointment. In the third study, *“Powerful Voices of Influencers”*, SMI mobilization was found to be significantly associated with heightened negative emotions in all four political contexts examined (e.g., Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia). However, the intensity of these emotional effects varied cross-nationally. Hong Kong showed the strongest associations, likely reflecting its repressive political environment, while Indonesia exhibited weaker effects, possibly due to the normalization of political content in everyday digital life.

SMI mobilization was also positively linked to political cynicism in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, but not in Austria, where stable democratic norms appeared to buffer these effects. These findings indicate that the emotional impact of SMI political activity is highly context-dependent, shaped by broader political and communicative environments. Importantly, negative emotions and cynicism are not mere byproducts of SMI activity—they can reshape political attitudes and behaviors, influencing whether young people withdraw from politics or channel their emotions into activism.

8.4 User Engagement as a Core Driver of SMI Political Mobilization

A particularly important contribution of this dissertation lies in identifying user engagement as a central mechanism that amplifies the political influence of SMIs. Rather than being passive recipients, young audiences actively like, share, comment on, and reframe SMI's political content. This participatory engagement boosts the visibility, legitimacy, and emotional resonance of political messages. High engagement signals algorithmic relevance, leading platforms to prioritize such content and expand its reach beyond the SMI's immediate follower base.

The form of engagement varied across contexts: in Indonesia and Hong Kong, engagement tended to be more collective and performative, such as through mass reposting campaigns and coordinated hashtag use. In Austria and Serbia, engagement was more discursive, involving longer comment threads and critical discussions. These patterns reflect not only differences in political culture but also in how young people perceive and enact their roles within online political spaces.

Crucially, engagement also shaped perceptions of message credibility: posts with higher engagement were more likely to be perceived as trustworthy, thereby reinforcing further interaction. This feedback loop between SMIs and their audiences created a self-reinforcing cycle of political mobilization, demonstrating that the power of SMIs is inseparable from the active participation of their followers.

8.5 Theoretical Integration: The VIBE Working Model

Additionally, these findings culminate in the development of the Viral Influence & Behavioral Effect (VIBE) Working Model, which integrates the key insights from Parasocial Relationship Theory, Eudaimonic Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory. The VIBE Model conceptualizes SMI-mediated political communication as a four-stage process involving: (1) SMI activities, (2) follower engagement and user activities, (3) psychological processing, and (4) behavioral outcomes.

The empirical results across the three studies illustrate how SMI messages spark political interest, how explicit political engagement fosters political efficacy, and how emotional responses and user engagement shape collective mobilization. This multi-layered process is not linear but dynamic and recursive, where engagement and emotional feedback loops continuously reinforce the influence of SMIs. By capturing these interdependent mechanisms, the VIBE Working Model offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for

understanding how SMI's communication translates into political behavior among young people across different political and cultural contexts.

8.6 Cross-National Variation and the Role of Context

Across all three studies, results consistently revealed meaningful cross-national variation in how young people respond to SMI political communication. In contexts such as Hong Kong, where political repression shapes public discourse, SMI messages tended to elicit stronger negative emotions and higher cynicism, but also intense collective engagement. In contrast, in countries like Austria, characterized by greater political stability and trust, the emotional impact of SMI mobilization was less pronounced, and engagement was more deliberative.

These findings underscore that SMI influence cannot be understood in isolation from the political environment. National political systems, civic culture, and media infrastructures shape both how SMI messages are produced and how they are received and circulated. This comparative approach allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the political impact of SMIs across regions.

In sum, the key results of this dissertation provide empirical evidence for a dynamic and multi-layered model of SMI-mediated political communication, whether these actors function as general SMIs or explicitly PSMIs. SMIs can spark political interest, foster a sense of political efficacy, and mobilize collective action—but these effects emerge only through complex interactions between their online messages, audience perceptions, emotional connections, and active user engagement. Taken together, these findings enrich theoretical understandings of political communication in the digital era and offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and civic actors seeking to better understand or strategically leverage SMI power within democratic processes.

9. Discussion

9.1 Introduction to the Discussion

The findings of this dissertation collectively demonstrate the relationship between SMIs and the political outcomes of young people in the digital era. Across countries and platforms, this study demonstrates that SMIs have evolved from mere content creators or micro-celebrities into key actors within the contemporary political communication ecosystem. They operate at the intersection of authenticity, affect, and shaping how political information is received, interpreted, and acted upon by increasingly networked publics. The VIBE Working Model proposed in this research captures this process by conceptualizing four interconnected stages: SMIs' activities, social media users' activities, psychological processing, and behavioral outcomes.

This dissertation contributes to growing scholarly recognition that political influence in real life is no longer the exclusive domain of traditional elites, journalists, or party communicators (e.g., Casero-Ripollés, 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2025). Instead, influence is now dispersed across an ecology of digital actors who derive authority from visibility, relatability, and perceived authenticity (e.g., Arnesson, 2023; Naderer, 2023), and are often called SMIs. The results indicate that SMIs' communicative strategies—whether through humor, emotional storytelling, or symbolic acts of advocacy—carry substantial implications for how political issues are framed, how citizens experience politics affectively, and how they decide to engage (or disengage) politically.

What emerges most strongly from this research is the dual nature of SMI-driven political communication. On the one hand, SMIs or specific PSMIS can mobilize political participation, stimulate political interest, and enhance political efficacy, especially among young citizens who often feel alienated from formal politics (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Reinikainen et al., 2025). On the other hand, the same communicative affordances that foster empowerment also risk producing negative emotions, political apathy, political cynicism, and misinformation-driven disengagement (e.g., Hasell et al., 2024; Demertzis, 2013). This tension—between affective connection and affective fatigue, between participation and polarization—lies at the heart of the VIBE Working Model framework. It underscores the need to theorize digital political communication not as a linear process of persuasion, but as an emotionally charged, trust, and identity that continuously circulate.

In this light, the discussion chapter aims to integrate empirical findings with theoretical and normative insights across the multiple layers of analysis conducted in this research: Parasocial Relationships Theory, Eudaimonic Theory, and Uses and Gratification Theory. Taken together, these strands form the conceptual backbone of the VIBE Working Model, which advances existing frameworks in political communication by explicitly linking media structures (SMIs) with psychological processes and political outcomes of young people.

From a broader disciplinary standpoint, this study aligns with recent work that challenges the normative binaries of mobilization (e.g., Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020) by demonstrating that social media influence operates across a continuum of affective consequences. Further, political communication through SMIs cannot be simply categorized as empowering or manipulative, participatory or cynical—it is instead a hybrid communicative form that fuses personal branding logics (e.g., Khamis et al., 2017) with civic appeals, creating new affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) whose engagement is emotional, performative, and relational. This chapter thus moves beyond the descriptive mapping of results to engage critically with the implications of SMI-driven political culture. It argues that the emotional and relational dimensions of political communication are, in fact, central to the functioning of digital democracy.

For the discussion part in this dissertation, I will proceed as follows. The next sections revisit the core research questions (Section 9.2), situating each within its theoretical and empirical context. Section 9.3 examines SMI activities on political communication in the influencer age. Section 9.4 explores misinformation, trust, and the limits of influence. Section 9.5 will discuss the limitations and directions for future research, as well as articulate the practical implications of these findings for scholars, policymakers, and digital practitioners. Finally, Section 9.6 will present the overall conclusions of this dissertation.

Ultimately, this discussion positions SMIs in politics as both a symptom and a driver of broader transformations in political communication. The shift from institutional to interpersonal authority, from ideological persuasion to emotional connection, signals not the decline but the reconfiguration of the political public sphere. The challenge for researchers and societies alike is to understand how this transformation can be harnessed toward inclusive, critical, and emotionally intelligent political engagement of young people—the

very ethos encapsulated in the “Positive Vibes” and “Negative Vibes” dimension of the VIBE Working Model.

9.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

The central aim of this dissertation was to investigate how SMIs and PSMIs shape young people’s political interest, political efficacy, political apathy, political cynicism, and political participation, as well as negative emotions across different countries. This broad aim was structured around several interlinked research questions that guided the three core studies. Revisiting these questions in light of the results allows us to clarify the contribution of this research, identify cross-cutting patterns, and situate these insights within the broader landscape of the political communication field.

The research questions were as follows:

- 1) RQ1: How do the political communication practices of SMIs (e.g., political criticism and mobilization) influence young people’s political interest and perceptions of politics?
- 2) RQ2: How do user engagement behaviors with SMI content (e.g., following, liking, commenting, sharing) shape the impact of SMI communication on young audiences?
- 3) RQ3: How do psychological mechanisms—particularly parasocial relationships, eudaimonic engagement, and uses and gratifications—moderate the relationship between SMI activities and political outcomes?
- 4) RQ4: How do these processes translate into behavioral outcomes, both empowering (“Positive Vibes”: political interest, political efficacy, political participation) and disillusioning (“Negative Vibes”: political apathy, negative emotions, political cynicism)?
- 5) RQ5: How do national political and cultural factors in each country shape these dynamics?

Revisiting RQ1: The Political Communication Practices of SMIs

The first research question sought to understand how SMIs’ communication strategies—particularly criticism and mobilization—affect political interest and perception. Across all four countries, the findings revealed that the framing of SMI’s messages mattered profoundly. Constructive criticism tended to stimulate political curiosity, encouraging

followers to view politics as a space open to reflection, problem-solving, and dialogue. In contrast, destructive criticism—particularly when delivered in sarcastic, dismissive, or emotionally charged tones—amplified political apathy and feelings of distance from formal politics.

This finding aligns with research emphasizing the affective dimension of political communication, where tone often carries more persuasive weight than the specific content of messages (e.g., Aalberg & Strömbäck, 2011; Demertzis, 2013). In the SMIs context, however, the affective weight is intensified by the relational proximity between SMIs and their followers. Unlike journalists or politicians, SMIs communicate in personal, everyday language and often perform authenticity through self-disclosure, humor, and informality. This enables their political criticism to resonate affectively and shape young people's political perceptions not as distant spectators but as emotionally engaged interlocutors.

Another key insight relates to mobilization efforts. When SMIs explicitly called for action—such as attending protests, signing petitions, or participating in hashtag campaigns—these messages triggered stronger emotional responses than other forms of political communication. These affective spikes were not uniform, however; they varied depending on national political contexts, with stronger mobilization effects in unstable democratic countries and more moderate effects in stable democratic countries (e.g., Austria). This demonstrates that SMIs in political communication are not politically neutral but interact with local political opportunity structures. Taken together, these findings confirm that SMIs do more than merely transmit political information—they perform political meaning-making through tone, framing, and performative engagement. Their communicative practices set the emotional and cognitive stage upon which political interest is sparked.

Revisiting RQ2: User Engagement as an Amplifier

The second research question focused on user engagement activities—such as following, liking, commenting, and sharing—and their role in shaping the effects of SMI communication. Empirically, the data revealed that engagement acts as a powerful amplifier, both algorithmically and psychologically (e.g., Tang et al., 2025). Posts with high engagement were more likely to be prioritized by social media platforms, thereby reaching broader audiences beyond the SMI's immediate followers. This reinforces previous research on engagement-driven visibility logics (e.g., Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2014), but extends it to show how political messages gain legitimacy through visible engagement.

More importantly, engagement was not only a technical or algorithmic process but also a psychological signal to other users. Young people perceived posts with high engagement as more credible, trustworthy, and socially validated, increasing the likelihood of further interaction. This feedback loop between SMI's communication and user engagement generated self-reinforcing cycles of political visibility and participation.

Interestingly, the forms of engagement differed across national contexts. In Hong Kong and Indonesia, engagement was more collective and performative, characterized by coordinated reposting, mass hashtag campaigns, and visible displays of solidarity. In Austria and Serbia, engagement tended to be more discursive, involving long comment threads and critical discussions. These differences reflect varied political cultures, where political expression in some contexts manifests as public performance, in others as deliberative conversation. Both sides, however, act as engagement infrastructures that amplify SMIs in political communication.

Revisiting RQ3: Psychological Mechanisms as Mediators

The third research question asked how psychological mechanisms—particularly parasocial relationships, eudaimonic theory, and uses and gratifications—moderate the impact of SMI's communication. The findings offer strong evidence that these mechanisms are crucial bridges between what SMIs say and how audiences respond.

Parasocial Relationships (PSRs): Emotional bonds with SMIs magnify the impact of political messages. When followers feel they “know” the SMIs, their trust in the SMI's political stance increases, leading to stronger attitudinal and emotional responses. Destructive criticism from trusted SMIs was therefore more likely to trigger political apathy or political interest, whereas mobilizing calls from trusted PSMIs were more likely to activate participation.

Eudaimonic Engagement: Many users engaged politically through SMIs in ways that resonated with their values and sense of purpose. Political content that evoked reflection, empathy, or moral considerations was linked to higher levels of political efficacy. This dimension reveals that SMIs in political communication can be more than just “snackable” content; they can also serve as a space for moral and civic reflection.

Uses and Gratifications: Young followers often actively seek political content from SMIs to satisfy informational, emotional, or social needs. Unlike traditional political

information seeking through news outlets, SMI's engagement often blends politics with lifestyle, humor, or identity work, making it more approachable. This finding supports previous studies highlighting how young people use social media to personalize and contextualize politics (e.g., Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

These psychological mechanisms are therefore not passive filters but active interpretive processes that shape the direction and strength of SMI's effects.

Revisiting RQ4: Behavioral Outcomes—Positive Vibes and Negative Vibes

The fourth research question addressed how these processes translate into behavioral outcomes in politics. The findings revealed a dual pathway of effects from the point of view of the VIBE Working Model: 1) Positive Vibes (e.g., political interest, political efficacy, and political participation), 2) Negative Vibes (e.g., negative emotions, political apathy, and political cynicism).

On the positive side, SMIs or PSMIs in particular enhanced followers' sense of political efficacy, especially in contexts of low institutional trust (e.g., Hong Kong, Indonesia, Serbia). They served as alternative sources of political communication, providing affective entry points into politics for young people who might otherwise remain disengaged. Many followers reported feeling empowered to act—through petitions, protests, or online advocacy—after consuming mobilizing SMI's content.

On the negative side, destructive criticism, emotional overload, and exposure to contentious political debates triggered political apathy among segments of the audience. This dynamic resonates with earlier mobilization debates (e.g., Newton, 1999; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020) but adds nuance by showing how the same SMIs can trigger both mobilization and demobilization, depending on the emotional tone and context of their messaging. These dual outcomes underscore the need to view SMI's effects not as unidirectional persuasion, but as ambivalent, affectively mediated processes that can simultaneously empower some and alienate others.

Revisiting RQ5: Cross-National Contexts

Finally, the fifth research question addressed how national political and cultural contexts shape these dynamics. The cross-national comparative design of this dissertation revealed clear patterns:

In Austria, a stable democratic context, SMI's effects were less emotionally intense and more deliberative in tone. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, characterized by political repression and limited formal avenues for expression, SMI's mobilization triggered intense negative emotions but also strong collective engagement. Further, in Indonesia, where political content is highly normalized on social media, SMI's communication blended seamlessly into everyday digital life, producing moderate emotional but widespread engagement effects. And in Serbia, where political trust is low, SMIs served as alternative political communicators, enhancing efficacy but also amplifying cynicism.

These differences show that SMIs in political communication are deeply embedded in political opportunity structures. SMIs do not operate in a vacuum—they amplify, reflect, and sometimes challenge the political environments in which they are situated.

9.3 SMI Activities: Political Communication in the Influencer Age

SMIs began as figures of lifestyle, fashion, gaming, or entertainment; however, over the past decade, they have become central actors in digital political communication. The findings from this study demonstrate that this shift is not simply a matter of topical expansion but represents a qualitative transformation of how politics is articulated, aestheticized, and emotionally transmitted online.

Across the four national contexts studied—Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia—SMIs were observed to blur the line between personal storytelling and political messaging, embedding political discourse in everyday narratives of identity, humor, consumption, and self-expression. This aligns with the broader argument made by Woolley (2022) and Riedl et al. (2023) that social media has given rise to “political influencers” (PSMIs), individuals who consciously integrate civic or ideological content into their digital personas.

What distinguishes PSMIs from traditional political actors is not necessarily what they say, but how they say it—the affective style, emotional resonance, and relational proximity they maintain with followers. As this research shows, SMIs in political communication is performative rather than declarative, relying on tone, affect, and intimacy to construct meaning. Through vlogs, stories, live interactions, and memes, SMIs translate abstract political issues into relatable, affectively charged experiences.

Further, a central finding of this dissertation concerns the way of political communication by SMIs. SMIs who adopted constructive—used arguments, cited facts, explained the reasons well, and with arguments and facts were not found to increase political apathy. These SMIs often framed politics as a collective, improvable project. Their polite way invited participation by reducing the psychological distance between the political sphere and the personal experiences of followers. This echoes earlier work by Brader (2006) and Valentino et al. (2011), who argue that positive emotional appeals stimulate engagement by activating hope, curiosity, and enthusiasm.

In contrast, SMIs whose criticism was destructive—disrespectful, used foul language, in an uncivil manner, and turned to insults and obscene language—tended to fuel political apathy. Also, the findings reveal that while parasocial relationships (PSR) did not moderate the link between constructive criticism by SMIs and young people’s political apathy in Austria, Serbia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong, a significant moderation effect emerged for destructive criticism. Specifically, strong PSRs amplified the impact of destructive criticism, leading to greater political apathy among young followers. This aligns with prior research suggesting that emotional closeness and trust toward SMIs can heighten the influence of their messages (e.g., Cheng et al., 2024). Thus, destructive criticism from a trusted SMI may carry more weight than similar messages from less connected figures, highlighting the persuasive power of SMIs who cultivate strong relational bonds with their audiences.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the mobilizing power of SMIs operates differently across political contexts. SMI mobilization is positively associated with political cynicism in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, but not in Austria, where stronger institutional trust and stable democratic norms may buffer such effects (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Miller & Listhaug, 1990). Moreover, user engagement appears to be a context-dependent factor rather than a universal amplifier of negative emotions. In Austria and Serbia, active engagement with SMI content seems to mitigate emotional intensity, indicating that participation can foster more reflective information processing (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2021; Wang & Sundar, 2022). In contrast, engagement amplifies political cynicism in Hong Kong, reflecting the heightened sensitivity and disillusionment characteristic of restrictive political environments (e.g., Hasell et al., 2024). Overall, these results underscore that the persuasive and mobilizing “voice power” of SMIs is conditional, shaped by varying levels of political trust and communicative freedom across national contexts (e.g., DeVerna et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2018).

One of the most consistent patterns across the dataset was the centrality of authenticity performance. SMIs rarely presented politics through formal analysis or ideological argumentation; instead, they embedded political opinions within personal stories, daily routines, and lived experiences. This aligns with Lehto (2021), who highlights “affective authenticity” as a defining feature of SMIs' labor—an ongoing performance of realness that creates trust and intimacy.

The findings indicate that authenticity functions as a rhetorical and relational strategy: it legitimizes political talk from nontraditional actors. Followers perceive SMIs as “one of us,” allowing their political opinions to be received as relatable perspectives rather than authoritative statements. In this sense, authenticity acts as a gateway to political communication, lowering the cognitive and emotional thresholds for political engagement.

Furthermore, authenticity was not simply about honesty; it was a stylistic and emotional register. SMIs used humor, vulnerability, and even imperfection to reinforce their credibility. In Austria, for example, SMIs discussing environmental issues often interweave confessions of personal inconsistency. This strategy aligns with the broader trend toward “vernacular politics” (Highfield, 2016), where political discourse emerges from the everyday and is expressed through colloquial, emotionally resonant language.

Authenticity also operated differently across contexts. In Hong Kong, authenticity took on political risk, as SMIs subtly embedded dissent into apolitical narratives—an act of coded resistance. In Indonesia, it carried moral undertones, as SMIs invoked religious or communal values to frame civic responsibility. In Serbia, authenticity often manifested as cynical humor, a cultural mode of political critique historically rooted in distrust toward elites (Miller & Linstead, 1990). Thus, authenticity is not a universal aesthetic but a culturally inflected political performance.

A further insight emerging from the data is that SMIs act as emotional entrepreneurs—curating, amplifying, and monetizing affective experiences around politics. They translate complex political realities into digestible affective signals—anger, hope, frustration, solidarity—packaged in shareable forms. This process is not incidental; it constitutes a new affective economy of politics.

SMI's political posts often followed the logic of emotional dramaturgy: beginning with personal disclosure, followed by a turning point, and ending with a call to feeling. This narrative arc mirrors what Izard (1991) and Lazarus (1991) describe as emotion–cognition

cycles, where feelings not only express but also structure meaning. In many cases, SMIs leveraged their emotional storytelling for political mobilization. For instance, in Austria, environmental “greenfluencers” framed climate activism as a moral and emotional journey—“caring for the planet” as a form of collective self-care—thus connecting personal well-being with civic virtue (Knupfer et al., 2023). Conversely, in Serbia, SMIs employed satirical affect to critique corruption, allowing followers to experience catharsis without overtly confronting the regime (Antonović, 2025).

Beyond emotion, SMIs often serve as informal educators. Several cases demonstrated that SMIs explain complex issues in simple, accessible formats—short videos, infographics, or story slides—bridging the gap between political elites and ordinary citizens. This pattern aligns with research by Sehl and Schützeneder (2023) and Schmuck et al. (2022), who found that SMIs can simplify political discourse without trivializing it, making civic knowledge more approachable to younger audiences.

This study extends that argument by emphasizing the affective dimension of political learning. SMIs do not merely transmit information—they frame it within moral and emotional narratives. For instance, during elections or protests, PSMIs would contextualize news events through personal stakes—transforming cognitive understanding into emotional resonance.

Importantly, this affective pedagogy is bidirectional. Followers frequently comment, question, or challenge SMIs, producing interactive knowledge exchanges that resemble deliberative micro-forums. In Austria and Indonesia, for instance, comment threads often evolved into sustained political discussions moderated by SMIs themselves. This highlights how SMIs can foster micro publics of political deliberation—spaces of everyday citizenship that complement formal political institutions.

While SMIs democratize political communication, their activities also introduce new tensions between authenticity and monetization. Political content often coexists with sponsored posts, raising questions about the instrumentalization of political sentiment. Some followers expressed skepticism toward SMIs who appeared to leverage political issues for visibility or profit—what has been described as “performative activism” (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2018). The findings show that followers/social media users are not passive consumers; they actively assess whether an SMI’s activism feels genuine or opportunistic. When political messages were perceived as self-serving, engagement dropped and cynicism increased.

Conversely, SMIs who maintained transparent boundaries between commercial and political communication were able to preserve credibility. This ambivalence underscores the broader commodification of civic affect in digital capitalism: even sincerity becomes part of the SMI's brand identity. However, the data also indicate that commercialization does not necessarily invalidate political impact. Many followers viewed sponsorships as a pragmatic necessity, so long as the SMI's moral stance remained consistent. Hence, the SMI's economy constitutes a hybrid moral economy, where authenticity, profit, and political commitment continually negotiate legitimacy.

Although these communicative dynamics appeared across all countries, their manifestation was shaped by local political ecologies. For instance, in Austria, political actors tended to adopt informational and deliberative tones, focusing on education and civic literacy rather than emotional mobilization. In Hong Kong, SMIs adopted coded, metaphorical language to navigate censorship. Political critique often took the form of aesthetic resistance—art, poetry, or lifestyle symbolism. In Indonesia, SMIs integrated civic themes into lifestyle genres (e.g., environmentalism, education, religious values), rendering politics culturally embedded in everyday moral discourse. In Serbia, SMIs deployed humor and satire as survival strategies, using irony to critique corruption without direct confrontation. These variations affirm that SMIs in political communication are contextually adaptive, molding themselves to fit the constraints and affordances of each political environment. In this light, SMIs can be conceptualized as affective brokers of politics—actors who mediate between the structural domain of institutions and the experiential domain of everyday emotion. They translate macro-political processes into micro-emotional realities, effectively humanizing politics while simultaneously reconfiguring its emotional landscape.

9.4 Misinformation, Trust, and the Limits of Influence

The influence of SMIs unfolds within a highly dynamic and imperfect information environment. While SMIs have the potential to enhance political participation and foster a sense of efficacy, the digital ecosystem in which they operate is far from neutral. Social media platforms are characterized by low barriers to entry, rapid content dissemination, and algorithmic amplification, creating ideal conditions for misinformation, disinformation, and selective exposure. Within this landscape, SMIs occupy a dual role: they act as information intermediaries, providing simplified and accessible political knowledge, but they can also function as vectors of disinformation, intentionally or unintentionally amplifying inaccurate content. Their persuasive power and parasocial authority give them the capacity to shape

public opinion and political behavior in ways that can both support and undermine democratic discourse (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2022; von Sikorski et al., 2025; Hasell & Chinn, 2025).

Misinformation—false or misleading information shared without malicious intent—and disinformation—deliberately deceptive content—pose central challenges to contemporary information environments. Compounding this issue are echo chambers and filter bubbles, where algorithmic curation and audience self-selection reinforce pre-existing beliefs and reduce exposure to diverse perspectives. SMIs, because of their reach and the trust they command, can either disrupt or deepen these dynamics (e.g., DeVerna et al., 2022; Dubois et al., 2020). Several mechanisms explain how SMIs amplify disinformation. Parasocial authority leads followers to trust SMIs more than traditional media, increasing their susceptibility to unverified claims. Platform affordances, such as likes, shares, and algorithmic promotion, heighten content visibility regardless of accuracy. Emotional resonance also plays a crucial role: highly emotional content, especially messages invoking fear or anger, spreads more quickly and widely. This creates a paradox in which SMIs can enhance civic engagement while simultaneously enabling the propagation of misleading content (e.g., Atypon et al., 2023; Hasell & Chinn, 2025).

Trust emerges as a central mediator of SMI influence, determining whether their impact contributes to informed political engagement or susceptibility to misinformation. Trust is shaped by perceptions of authenticity, expertise, and relational connection. Authenticity is based on perceived consistency, transparency, and sincerity, while expertise emerges when SMIs demonstrate credible domain knowledge, such as science communicators or “edu-influencers” (e.g., Sun et al., 2025; Chinn et al., 2023; Hasell & Chinn, 2025). Parasocial bonds create a sense of closeness that increases audience receptivity to political messaging (e.g., Balaban et al., 2022; Park & Hoffner, 2024). However, this high trust can produce a double-edged effect: it enhances mobilization potential but can also make audiences more vulnerable to false claims. Empirical studies indicate that followers frequently rely on perceived credibility cues rather than engaging in independent verification. Opinion leaders and opinion seekers display distinct verification behaviors: opinion seekers actively cross-check content, while followers relying on relational trust may accept claims at face value. Furthermore, trust interacts with platform mediation; highly trusted SMI’s content is often algorithmically amplified, potentially reinforcing false narratives (e.g., Dubois et al., 2020; DeVerna et al., 2022; Hasell & Chinn, 2025; Harff & Schmuck, 2024).

Emotional appeals and persuasive strategies further shape SMI influence. SMIs often leverage humor, outrage, or empathy to emotionally engage audiences, enhancing attention and political participation. Yet, these strategies carry inherent risks. Moralized content propagates rapidly, anger increases sharing and engagement, and fear heightens susceptibility to misleading claims. Emotional engagement can override cognitive scrutiny, particularly among younger audiences with strong parasocial attachments (e.g., Park & Hoffner, 2024). While such affective strategies foster participation and mobilization, they also make audiences more susceptible to uncritical acceptance of misinformation and disinformation (e.g., Atypon et al., 2023).

Mitigating these risks requires interventions at multiple levels. At the platform level, algorithmic demotion of low-credibility content, fact-checking labels, and promotion of diverse perspectives can limit disinformation while maintaining engagement. At the SMIs level, transparency in sponsorships and intentions increases perceived authenticity, while digital literacy among followers equips audiences to critically evaluate claims. Ethical content curation by SMIs can further support the dissemination of accurate information (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2025; Arnesson, 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024a). At the audience level, encouraging active rather than passive engagement fosters critical evaluation. Promoting eudaimonic gratifications, such as moral reflection and learning, can reduce susceptibility to emotionally manipulative content. Peer discussion within networks further counteracts echo chambers and encourages exposure to diverse perspectives (e.g., Dubois et al., 2020; DeVerna et al., 2022).

Ultimately, SMI influence is significant but bounded. It is conditional on perceived credibility, as persuasive SMIs may have a limited impact if trust is absent. SMIs are mediated by audience knowledge and literacy, with more critical consumers resisting misleading information. Additionally, influence varies across political and cultural contexts, platform affordances, and societal polarization. Mobilization driven by SMIs may inadvertently increase exposure to disinformation, intensify partisanship, or deepen political cynicism (e.g., von Sikorski et al., 2022; von Sikorski et al., 2025).

Balancing engagement with accuracy is therefore essential. High-trust SMIs can be effective agents of political mobilization and civic participation, but their influence must align with factual accuracy to avoid unintended consequences. Parasocial relationships amplify influence but reduce audience skepticism, emphasizing the need for ethical

communication and digital literacy. Emotional content drives engagement but also facilitates the spread of misleading narratives. Platform interventions, SMI's responsibility, and informed audiences working together are critical to preserving the democratic benefits of SMI-mediated engagement (e.g., Atypon et al., 2023; Hasell & Chinn, 2025; von Sikorski et al., 2025).

In sum, SMIs operate in an information ecosystem prone to disinformation. Trust and parasocial relationships serve as critical mediators, shaping both positive and negative outcomes of political communication. Emotional appeals enhance engagement but increase susceptibility to misinformation. Multi-level interventions, coupled with audience education, are essential to mitigate risks. The bounded nature of SMI influence highlights that while their power is substantial, it is context-dependent and influenced by trust, audience literacy, and platform characteristics.

9.5 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides significant insights into the role of SMIs in political engagement, several limitations must be acknowledged. Recognizing these constraints is essential for contextualizing the findings and guiding future research directions. First, all three studies utilized the same methodological approach, specifically a multiple regression analysis. For future research, it would be beneficial to apply more complex multilevel modeling techniques in comparative survey contexts. An important methodological consideration involves the use of **multilevel modeling** for comparative survey research. In this study, multilevel techniques were not applied due to limited time and resources. However, multilevel models would allow for more nuanced analysis by accounting for the hierarchical structure of comparative data, for instance, individuals nested within countries, regions, or online communities. This approach can better capture both individual-level and contextual-level variations, providing more robust and generalizable findings (e.g., Hox et al., 2017). Although this study was unable to implement such techniques, future research—including my own planned work for Paper 4—could greatly benefit from incorporating multilevel modeling. Doing so would strengthen analytical rigor, offer deeper cross-contextual insights, and contribute to more advanced methodological standards for studies on SMIs and political engagement.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While this research identifies correlations between following SMIs and PSMIs,

parasocial relationships, emotional engagement, and political outcomes, it cannot definitively establish the directionality of these effects. For instance, it remains uncertain whether individuals with higher political interest are more likely to follow PSMIs or whether following such SMIs actively increases political interest and efficacy over time. To address this limitation, longitudinal designs and **content analysis** are recommended in future research, allowing scholars to observe changes in political attitudes and participation across multiple time points. Experimental designs, including randomized controlled trials, could also be employed to test causal mechanisms and isolate the effects of influencer-driven content from other media or socialization influences.

Third, another important limitation relates to eudaimonic motivations, as further research also needs to explain how **hedonic motivations**—such as seeking entertainment, enjoyment, or mood regulation—may shape how individuals engage with SMI’s content, sometimes prioritizing affective gratification over political deliberation (e.g., Anderson et al., 2025; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Vorderer et al., 2004). Such motivations can amplify the reach and resonance of SMI’s messages, but may also contribute to more superficial processing or selective exposure to agreeable content (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Future studies should systematically examine how these affective and cognitive processes interact with SMI’s communication to produce divergent outcomes, including both empowerment and disengagement.

Fourth, while this study incorporated a strong theoretical grounding in parasocial relationships theory, eudaimonic theory, and uses & gratifications theory, there remains an opportunity to integrate additional theoretical frameworks. For instance, network theory, agenda-setting, and political communication models could help elucidate how SMIs act as intermediaries in broader political ecosystems, bridging traditional media, grassroots movements, and digitally native audiences. Similarly, integrating **misinformation studies** could clarify the dual role of SMIs as both facilitators of informed engagement and potential vectors of low-credibility content. Future research should therefore adopt interdisciplinary approaches, combining political psychology, media studies, and computational methods to comprehensively map the influence pathways of SMIs.

In addition, fifth, future research should consider the growing presence of **AI-generated influencers** within political communication environments. As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly capable of producing persuasive, human-like personas, the

boundaries between authentic and synthetic influence are becoming blurred. AI influencers—whether fully virtual or hybrid human–AI accounts—pose new challenges for public trust, transparency, and information integrity. Their potential to disseminate political messages at scale, coupled with algorithmic amplification, raises significant concerns about misinformation, manipulation, and the erosion of accountability in digital political discourse (e.g., Edwards et al., 2023; Wessel et al., 2025). In this evolving landscape, the continued relevance of *authentic human SMIs* becomes even more critical. Their capacity to project real emotion, social presence, and moral accountability enables them to maintain public trust in ways that artificial agents cannot easily replicate. Recent studies highlight that the ease of generating realistic political content with AI—notably deepfakes, synthetic identities, and bot networks—poses a serious threat to the credibility of digital political discourse (e.g., Sedova et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2025). In this context, human SMIs become even more important, as their perceived authenticity helps anchor trust and counter the potential confusion wrought by AI influencers (e.g., Su, 2025). Therefore, future studies should investigate how SMIs can sustain authenticity, ethical responsibility, and transparency in a digital ecosystem increasingly populated by AI-generated entities, ensuring that SMIs-based communication continues to serve as a trustworthy and democratic force in society.

In sum, while this dissertation advances understanding of the role of SMIs in shaping political engagement, it is constrained by methodological, demographic, conceptual, and platform-related limitations. Addressing these gaps in future research is essential for generating more precise, generalizable, and causally robust insights. Content analysis, cross-platform comparisons, diverse samples, and integrative theoretical frameworks can collectively provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of SMIs in contemporary democratic processes. By acknowledging these limitations and charting avenues for future inquiry, future researchers can continue to refine the conceptualization, measurement, and practical implications in the field of political communication.

9.6 Conclusion

This dissertation examined the multifaceted role of SMIs in shaping political engagement among young people across Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia. Drawing on the VIBE Working Model framework, the research conceptualized the process as a progression from SMI activities to user engagement, psychological processing, and political outcomes (e.g., Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017; Bond, 2016). Across three interconnected

studies, the findings reveal that SMIs and PSIMs function not merely as content creators or entertainers but as influential intermediaries, capable of shaping attitudes, mobilizing participation, and bridging the gap between traditional political actors and digitally native audiences (e.g., Arnesson, 2023; Goodwin et al., 2023; Peter & Muth, 2023).

Study I: Sparking Political Interest highlighted the dual potential of SMIs to influence political interest and apathy. The findings show that destructive criticism from SMIs can heighten political apathy among young people, particularly in Austria and Serbia, while constructive criticism generally avoids such disengagement (e.g., Balaban et al., 2022; Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Importantly, parasocial relationships intensified these effects: emotionally connected followers were more sensitive to negative messaging, underlining the weight of SMIs' communication in shaping youth political attitudes (e.g., Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). This study underscores that the tone, framing, and credibility of influencer discourse are critical factors in fostering—or undermining—democratic participation (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023).

Study II: From Sparks to Action demonstrated that PSIMs exert stronger influence on young adults' political outcomes than general SMIs. Specifically, PSIMs positively affected political efficacy in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia, whereas SMIs who rarely engaged in political content had limited impact (e.g., Pöyry & Reinikainen, 2024; Khamis et al., 2017). These results highlight the importance of context and audience: national political and media environments shape the degree to which influencers can catalyze civic engagement (e.g., Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Understanding the role of PSIMs within these specific settings is crucial for explaining how young adults interact with democratic processes in the digital age.

Study III: Powerful Voices of Influencers examined the mobilization mechanisms employed by SMIs and their emotional and attitudinal consequences. The findings reveal that SMI-driven mobilization can foster both engagement and negative affect, including political cynicism, depending on contextual factors and user engagement patterns (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Hasell et al., 2024). SMIs' capacity to drive online and offline political participation—through calls to action, petitions, and campaigns—is strongest when they are perceived as authentic, relatable, and consistent in messaging (e.g., Arnesson, 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2025; Woolley, 2022). These results highlight SMIs as relational mobilizers who amplify the visibility and perceived legitimacy of political content, exerting cascading

influence across peer networks while also carrying the risk of reinforcing cynicism if messaging is misaligned or polarizing (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2023; Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017).

Across these studies, three overarching insights emerge. First, parasocial relationships are a central mechanism through which influencers shape political attitudes, underscoring the emotional and psychological dimensions of digital political engagement (e.g., Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Second, PSIMs and politically engaged SMIs serve as powerful catalysts for both cognitive and affective engagement, translating digital attention into offline participation and political efficacy (e.g., Bond, 2016; Pöyry & Reinikainen, 2024). Third, the influence of SMIs is contextually contingent, shaped by cultural, political, and media environments, as well as the tone, framing, and authenticity of their messaging (e.g., Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Harff & Schmuck, 2023). Collectively, these findings reinforce the conceptualization of SMIs as hybrid actors—part entertainer, part opinion leader, and part mobilizer—who occupy a unique position in contemporary political communication ecosystems (e.g., Khamis et al., 2017; Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

The theoretical contributions of this dissertation are threefold. By integrating parasocial relationships theory, eudaimonic theory, and uses & gratifications perspectives, the research demonstrates how cognitive, affective, and social needs interact to drive engagement with political content (e.g., Oliver & Raney, 2011; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Vorderer et al., 2004). Furthermore, the findings extend prior research on political efficacy and relational mobilization, showing that SMIs and PSIMs can enhance followers' sense of agency and knowledge when their messages are authentic and emotionally resonant (e.g., Beaumont, 2010; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). Finally, the work highlights the dual potential of influencer activity to empower or disengage young citizens, depending on message tone, credibility, and contextual alignment (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Arnesson, 2023).

From a practical standpoint, these insights have significant implications. Political organizations, educators, and civil society actors can leverage the mobilizing potential of SMIs to engage youth, foster digital literacy, and counter misinformation (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2023; Pöyry & Reinikainen, 2024). Simultaneously, attention to ethical practices, transparency, and authenticity is essential to ensure that influencer-driven engagement contributes positively to democratic life (e.g., Stoldt et al., 2019; Hasell & Chinn, 2025). In an era where AI-generated influencers are emerging, the human authenticity of SMIs

becomes even more critical in maintaining public trust and credible political discourse (e.g., Edwards et al., 2023; Su, 2025).

In conclusion, this dissertation demonstrates that SMIs can act as both facilitators of engagement and intermediaries of political knowledge, leveraging parasocial relationships, emotional resonance, and platform-specific affordances to shape attitudes, mobilize participation, and influence democratic processes. While challenges related to misinformation, simplification, and audience heterogeneity remain, the findings provide a compelling argument that SMIs and PSMIs represent a significant, emerging actor in the digital public sphere, capable of transforming how young citizens experience, interpret, and act upon political information. Ultimately, the study advances both scholarly understanding and practical awareness of the authentic and transformative potential of SMIs in shaping the future of political communication.

10. References

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11. Abstract

11.1 Abstract in English

In an era in which social media increasingly shapes political communication, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as powerful intermediaries between political discourse and young audiences. Young people, whose political information consumption and engagement increasingly take place online, are particularly susceptible to the influence of SMIs. This dissertation systematically investigates how SMIs affect young people's political interest, political apathy, perceived political efficacy, political participation, cynicism, and negative emotions across diverse political and cultural contexts. Drawing on cross-national survey data from Austria, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, and Serbia, the research provides robust empirical evidence for the psychological and behavioral mechanisms underlying these effects.

The dissertation is structured around three closely interrelated studies, each addressing a different aspect of SMIs' political influence. The first study, "Sparking Political Interest", examines how political criticism by SMIs—constructive versus destructive—shapes political apathy and interest. The findings reveal that destructive criticism consistently increases political apathy, whereas constructive criticism does not significantly heighten disengagement. Parasocial relationships are particularly influential: followers who have developed strong emotional bonds with SMIs are more sensitive to destructive criticism. These results underscore the persuasive power of SMIs who cultivate emotional proximity with their audiences, demonstrating how personal attachment can shape political attitudes and reactions.

Building on these insights, the second study, "From Sparks to Action", focuses on political social media influencers (PSMIs) who actively engage with political topics and mobilize their followers. This study demonstrates that exposure to PSMIs is positively associated with political efficacy and political participation, indicating that SMIs can act as catalysts for democratic engagement. The findings further highlight the critical role of emotional connection and perceived credibility in translating political interest into concrete political action, suggesting that the strength of affective bonds between SMIs and followers is central to political mobilization processes.

The third study, "Powerful Voices of Influencers", extends the analysis by examining the relationship between SMI mobilization, negative emotions, and political cynicism across

four political contexts. The results show that mobilization efforts can heighten negative emotions and political cynicism, particularly in politically repressive environments. At the same time, active engagement by followers can mitigate these effects. In some countries, active participation reduces the emotional intensity of responses, indicating that young audiences are not passive recipients of political content but active participants in online political discourse.

Taken together, the three studies make a significant theoretical contribution by integrating Parasocial Relationships Theory, Eudaimonic Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory into a comprehensive conceptual framework: the Viral Influence & Behavioral Effect (VIBE) Working Model. This model conceptualizes SMI-mediated political communication as a dynamic, multi-layered process encompassing influencer activities, follower engagement, psychological processing, and subsequent behavioral outcomes. It explains how SMIs not only spark political interest but also foster political efficacy and mobilize political action through both emotional and cognitive pathways.

This theoretical advancement is complemented by robust empirical evidence from multiple countries, providing nuanced insights into the global role of SMIs in shaping political engagement. The findings carry important implications for policymakers, educators, and civil society actors, highlighting both the opportunities and the potential risks of SMI-driven political communication. By elucidating the mechanisms through which SMIs influence young people's political outcomes, this dissertation lays the foundation for strategies that foster constructive political engagement, strengthen democratic participation, and mitigate the risk of cynicism and polarization within the digital public sphere.

11.2 Abstract in German

In einer Ära, in der soziale Medien zunehmend die politische Kommunikation prägen, haben sich Social-Media-Influencer*innen (SMIs) als einflussreiche Vermittler*innen zwischen politischem Diskurs und jungen Zielgruppen etabliert. Insbesondere junge Menschen, deren politische Informationsaufnahme und -interaktion immer stärker online stattfindet, werden von SMIs in vielfacher Hinsicht beeinflusst. Diese Dissertation untersucht systematisch, wie SMIs das politische Interesse, die politische Apathie, die Wirksamkeitserwartung, die politische Partizipation, den Zynismus sowie negative Emotionen junger Menschen in unterschiedlichen politischen und kulturellen Kontexten prägen. Durch die Analyse länderübergreifender Umfragedaten aus Österreich, Hongkong (China), Indonesien und Serbien liefert die Arbeit belastbare empirische Evidenz für die psychologischen und verhaltensbezogenen Mechanismen, die diesen Effekten zugrunde liegen.

Die Dissertation ist in drei eng miteinander verknüpfte Studien gegliedert, die unterschiedliche Aspekte der politischen Wirkung von SMIs beleuchten. Die erste Studie, „Sparkling Political Interest“, widmet sich der Frage, wie politische Kritik durch SMIs – konstruktiv versus destruktiv – politische Apathie und politisches Interesse beeinflusst. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass destruktive Kritik konsistent zu einer Erhöhung politischer Apathie führt, während konstruktive Kritik keine signifikante Zunahme politischer Entfremdung bewirkt. Besonders relevant ist hierbei der Einfluss parasozialer Beziehungen: Follower*innen, die starke emotionale Bindungen zu SMIs aufgebaut haben, reagieren besonders sensibel auf destruktive Kritik. Diese Befunde verdeutlichen die persuasive Kraft von SMIs, die über emotionale Nähe politische Einstellungen und Reaktionen junger Menschen prägen können.

Aufbauend auf diesen Erkenntnissen untersucht die zweite Studie, „From Sparks to Action“, politische Social-Media-Influencer*innen (PSMIs), die aktiv politische Themen adressieren und ihre Follower*innen zu politischem Handeln motivieren. Die Analyse zeigt, dass die Rezeption von PSMIs positiv mit der Wahrnehmung politischer Selbstwirksamkeit sowie mit politischer Partizipation zusammenhängt. Dies deutet darauf hin, dass SMIs als Katalysatoren demokratischer Beteiligung wirken können. Besonders hervorzuheben ist die Rolle emotionaler Bindung und wahrgenommener Glaubwürdigkeit der Influencer*innen, die

entscheidend dafür sind, dass politisches Interesse in konkrete Handlungsmotivation umgesetzt wird.

Die dritte Studie, „Powerful Voices of Influencers“, erweitert die Perspektive, indem sie den Zusammenhang zwischen SMI-Mobilisierung, negativen Emotionen und politischem Zynismus in vier unterschiedlichen politischen Kontexten analysiert. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Mobilisierungsbemühungen negative Emotionen und Zynismus verstärken können – vor allem in politisch restriktiven Umgebungen. Gleichzeitig zeigt sich, dass aktives Engagement der Follower*innen diese Effekte abmildern kann. In bestimmten Ländern verringert aktives Mitwirken die emotionale Intensität, was verdeutlicht, dass junge Menschen keine passiven Rezipient*innen sind, sondern aktive Teilnehmer*innen des politischen Diskurses.

Gemeinsam leisten die drei Studien einen bedeutenden theoretischen Beitrag, indem sie die Theorie parasozialer Beziehungen, die eudaimonische Theorie sowie die Uses-and-Gratifications-Theorie in einem umfassenden konzeptionellen Rahmen integrieren: dem Viral Influence & Behavioral Effect (VIBE) Working Model. Dieses Modell versteht von SMIs vermittelte politische Kommunikation als dynamischen, mehrschichtigen Prozess, der die Aktivitäten der Influencer*innen, das Engagement der Follower*innen, psychologische Verarbeitungsprozesse und daraus resultierende Verhaltensweisen miteinander verknüpft. Es zeigt, wie SMIs nicht nur politisches Interesse wecken, sondern auch politische Selbstwirksamkeit fördern und politische Handlungsmotivation über emotionale und kognitive Mechanismen mobilisieren.

Die theoretische Leistung wird durch solide empirische Evidenz aus unterschiedlichen Ländern gestützt und bietet differenzierte Einblicke in die globale Rolle von SMIs für demokratische Partizipation. Die Ergebnisse haben weitreichende Implikationen für politische Entscheidungsträger*innen, Pädagog*innen und zivilgesellschaftliche Akteur*innen, da sie sowohl Chancen als auch Risiken SMI-getriebener politischer Kommunikation aufzeigen. Durch das detaillierte Verständnis der Mechanismen, über die SMIs politische Einstellungen und Verhaltensweisen junger Menschen beeinflussen, legt diese Dissertation die Grundlage für Strategien, die konstruktives Engagement fördern, demokratische Teilhabe stärken und das Risiko von Zynismus sowie Polarisierung im digitalen öffentlichen Raum reduzieren.

12. Appendix

12.1 Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools

During the preparation of this dissertation, Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, specifically **ChatGPT**, were employed under the author's supervision to support writing and editing tasks. These tools assisted with grammar correction, sentence restructuring, and language refinement to improve readability and consistency across chapters.

The tools were **not used to generate research content, conduct data analysis, develop theoretical models, or interpret results**. All intellectual and analytical contributions—including the design of the research framework, idea of each section, writing style, development of models, execution of analyses, and formulation of interpretations—were entirely the author's original work.

All AI-assisted outputs were carefully reviewed, verified, and edited by the author to ensure accuracy, integrity, and compliance with academic and ethical standards.

12.2 Co-Author's Informed Consents

With this letter, I, Jörg Matthes, declare my consent for the use of the following contributions for the dissertation of Atika Aisyyarahmi Munzir:

Paper 1

Title: Sparking Political Interest in Young People? Exposure to Constructive and Destructive Political Criticism of SMIs, Political Apathy, and Political Interest in Four Countries

Authors: Atika Aisyyarahmi Munzir, Ariadne Neureiter, Jörg Matthes, Michael Chan

Paper 2

Title: From Sparks to Action: The Role of Political Influencers for Young Adults' Political Efficacy and Political Participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

Authors: Atika Aisyyarahmi Munzir, Ariadne Neureiter, Jörg Matthes, Michael Chan, Ljubisa Bojic

Paper 3

Title: Powerful Voices of Influencers: Mobilization, User Engagement, Emotions, and Political Cynicism among Young Adults in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

Authors: Atika Aisyyarahmi Munzir, Jörg Matthes, Michael Chan, Ljubisa Bojic

Place, Date:

Vienna, October 21, 2025

Signature

[Signature redacted for data protection reasons]

Jörg Matthes

With this letter, I, Ariadne Neureiter, declare my consent for the use of the following contributions for the dissertation of Atika Aisarahmi Munzir:

Paper 1

Title: Sparking Political Interest in Young People? Exposure to Constructive and Destructive Political Criticism of SMIs, Political Apathy, and Political Interest in Four Countries

Authors: Atika Aisarahmi Munzir, Ariadne Neureiter, Jörg Matthes, Michael Chan

Paper 2

Title: From Sparks to Action: The Role of Political Influencers for Young Adults' Political Efficacy and Political Participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

Authors: Atika Aisarahmi Munzir, Ariadne Neureiter, Jörg Matthes, Michael Chan, Ljubisa Bojic

Place, Date:

Vienna, 22.10.2025

Signature:

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Ariadne Neureiter

With this letter, I, Michael Chan, declare my consent for the use of the following contributions for the dissertation of Atika Aisyyarahmi Munzir:

Paper 1

Title: Sparking Political Interest in Young People? Exposure to Constructive and Destructive Political Criticism of SMIs, Political Apathy, and Political Interest in Four Countries

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Paper 2

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Authors: Atika Aisyyarahmi Munzir, Ariadne Neureiter, Jörg Matthes, Michael Chan, Ljubisa Bojic

Paper 3

Title: Powerful Voices of Influencers: Mobilization, User Engagement, Emotions, and Political Cynicism among Young Adults in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

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Michael Chan

With this letter, I, Ljubisa Bojic, declare my consent for the use of the following contributions for the dissertation of Atika Aisjarahmi Munzir:

Paper 2

Title: From Sparks to Action: The Role of Political Influencers for Young Adults' Political Efficacy and Political Participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

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Paper 3

Title: Powerful Voices of Influencers: Mobilization, User Engagement, Emotions, and Political Cynicism among Young Adults in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

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Kragujevac, 20/10/2025

Signature:

[Signature redacted for data protection reasons]

Ljubisa Bojic

12.3 Contribution to Co-Authored Papers

Noted:

A = primary contribution (100%–70%)

B = main contribution (70%–30%)

C = minor contribution (30%–1%)

D = no contribution (0%)

Paper 1

Title: Sparking Political Interest in Young People? Exposure to Constructive and Destructive Political Criticism of SMIs, Political Apathy, and Political Interest in Four Countries

Authors: Atika Aisyarahmi Munzir, Ariadne Neureiter, Jörg Matthes, Michael Chan

Doctoral Candidate's personal contribution to co-authored papers		%
CONCEPT	The idea for the research or article, framing the research question or hypothesis	70
DESIGN	Planning the methods to generate results	70
SUPERVISION	Oversight and responsibility for the organization and course of the project and the manuscript	80
DATA COLLECTION/PROCESSING	Responsibility for gathering empirical material, organizing and reporting data	80
ANALYSIS/INTERPRETATION	Responsibility for making sense of and presenting the results	90
LITERATURE SEARCH	Responsibility for this necessary function	100
WRITING	Responsibility for creating all or a substantive part of the manuscript	90
CRITICAL REVIEW	Reworking the manuscript for intellectual content before submission, not just spelling and grammar checking	80
OTHER	For novel contribution	80

Paper 2

Title: From Sparks to Action: The Role of Political Influencers for Young Adults' Political Efficacy and Political Participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

Authors: Atika Aisarahmi Munzir, Ariadne Neureiter, Jörg Matthes, Michael Chan, Ljubisa Bojic

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SUPERVISION	Oversight and responsibility for the organization and course of the project and the manuscript	80
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ANALYSIS/INTERPRETATION	Responsibility for making sense of and presenting the results	100
LITERATURE SEARCH	Responsibility for this necessary function	100
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CRITICAL REVIEW	Reworking the manuscript for intellectual content before submission, not just spelling and grammar checking	100
OTHER	For novel contribution	100