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“Remember to vote!”

How do people respond to social media influencers promoting political participation?

Abstract: Besides promoting consumer brands, many social media influencers have started to discuss political topics and campaign for political causes. At the same time, actors such as journalists and politicians have adopted communication strategies similar to those of social media influencers to advocate for political participation. To study how influencers might affect people’s participation in politics, we conducted an online survey with a representative sample of the Finnish population (N = 501). Our study produced two results. First, social media influencers are comparable to other actors in advocating for voting and can be even more effective if the message is framed correctly. Second, people who follow influencers are more likely to vote and be aware of their democratic rights than those who do not follow influencers. These results indicate that social media influencers have become part of the current media landscape and can cater for people’s informational needs concerning societal issues.

Keywords: political participation, voting, influencer endorsements, experiment

1 Introduction

The part played by influencers as social and political commentators, agenda-setters, and role models has started to become recognised around the world. The legacy media have reported how influencers have participated in political debates (Citarella, 2021), supported political campaigns (Lai, 2022) and promoted sustainable lifestyles (Townsend, 2022), while academics have discussed the possible effects of political influencer content and endorsements on followers’ behaviours (Cheng et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Many who are concerned about the decline of political and civic participation, especially among young people (e.g. Putnam, 2020; Renström et al., 2021), see a glimmer of hope in this development. Younger generations have been seen to find new interest in political and civic engagement thanks to these venerated, yet relatable individuals known as social media influencers.

A social media influencer can be defined as a person who, through personal branding and regular interactions with social media, has gathered a significant

following and is able to monetise that following by, for example, creating content sponsored by consumer brands (Abidin, 2016; Suuronen et al., 2022). Various kinds of influencer marketing practices are the primary source of income for professional social media influencers, which sets them apart from other groups also present on social media, such as political activists (Riedl et al., 2023). The intimate and interactive relationships that influencers have with their followers are a key reason for their popularity and for the effectiveness of their endorsements (Pöyry et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Engaged followers tend to pursue similar lifestyles to those of their favourite influencers; for instance, by purchasing the same products and brands (Lueck, 2015). Therefore, influencer marketing has become a profitable way to affect consumer behaviour (Hugh et al., 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2020).

However, the effects of political influencer content still seem somewhat indistinct. On the one hand, influencers' social and political discussions have been found to increase the receptibility of political advocacy (Cheng et al., 2023) and possibly even motivate political participation among young people (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2023). On the other hand, the simplified manner in which social media influencers sometimes present political issues might create cynicism towards politics (Schmuck et al., 2022). This means that the relationship between the consumption of social and political content created by influencers and a person's political behaviour is complicated. Hence, there is a need for more research on how people react to influencers' political appeals. This effect is especially intriguing when compared to that of other actors who have begun to adopt the styles of social media influencers to persuade their audiences, including politicians (Abidin, 2017) and journalists (Frig & Penttilä, 2023).

In this chapter, we examine two phenomena. First, we look at how social media influencers' promotion of a specific type of political behaviour – voting – affects citizens and how the effectiveness of this promotion differs from that of the appeals made by other actors. Second, we analyse how following social media influencers and political participation relate in general. We present the results of an online survey and experiment conducted with a Finnish consumer panel. Data collection took place in connection with the Finnish municipal elections of June 2021.

2 The role of social media influencers in consumer behaviour

Scholars often approach social media influencers as commercial actors due to their sponsored-content collaborations, influencer marketing activities, and en-

dorsement deals with consumer brands. These practices are popular because followers are often eager to imitate influencers’ lifestyles, purchase the same products and services that influencers use, and resort to the advice and recommendations that influencers give (e.g. Munnukka et al., 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019). As a result, influencers have been construed as “socialization agents” because they are able to transfer ideas, opinions, and attitudes to their young followers, thereby affecting their behaviours (Tuominen et al., 2023).

Many marketing and business studies have investigated the effectiveness of influencers’ advice and appeals and the mechanisms by which influencer content transmits attitudes and behaviours. For example, scholars have looked for associations between source characteristics (e.g. influencer credibility, trustworthiness, and similarity) and outcomes such as brand attitude and purchase intention (Hugh et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). Parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships, understood as one-sided, illusionary experiences of interaction and relationship building with media personas (Horton & Wohl, 1956), have also been shown to affect behaviours when it comes to the endorsements of social media influencers (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Comparative studies have found that influencers appear more effective in driving purchase intention than traditional celebrities due to the aura of authenticity and relatability that surrounds them (Piehler et al., 2022; Pöyry et al., 2019). Still, how their power of influence compares to other kinds of actors and endorsers remains largely unstudied.

Another stream of the influencer marketing literature has explored the “content strategies” (Hudders et al., 2021) that influencers adopt when seeking to appeal to their followers. Typically, these strategies are based not only on images and visual appeal (Argyris et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019) but also on the frequency and tone of the commercial messages (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2022), as well as on the balancing act between “product-only posts” (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019) and posts that display or depict certain inspirational lifestyles (Vrontis et al., 2021). However, the effects of different rhetorical strategies by social media influencers remain understudied. Effective ways of speaking and writing are believed to differ among actors on social media. For instance, researchers have found that non-profit influencers tend to use normative rhetorical cues more often than for-profit influencers (Salte, 2022) and that political YouTubers sometimes adopt an intensely populist style borrowed from broadcast media (Finlayson, 2020). Some scholars (Ge & Gretzel, 2018) have even argued that influencers’ use of emojis can also serve strategic goals, which suggests a subtle yet purposeful deployment of words and other rhetorical cues in influencer content.

3 The politicisation of social media influencers

Until recently, the consumer approach largely dominated both practical and academic studies of social media influencers. However, our understanding of these actors and their attributes has started to expand. For example, influencers' role in political campaigning is becoming more prominent (Goodwin et al., 2023). In the US, the Democratic Party and the Rock the Vote initiative have recruited social media influencers to promote voting among young people (Levine, 2022; Racker, 2022). Influencers have also joined election campaigns in Argentina (Brigida & Grimberg, 2023), India (Jaswal, 2023), and Germany (Breuer, 2021). In the US, the Biden administration has even held briefings specifically for TikTok influencers in order to reach young audiences and introduce them to issues such as the passing of the Inflation Reduction Act (Sprunt, 2022) and the war in Ukraine (Rai, 2022).

These examples suggest that the social role of influencers is starting to change and that their reach is seen as extending beyond consumer behaviour. Suuronen et al. (2022) believe that in addition to being “fashionable friends” (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011) to whom followers turn for questions regarding beauty, fashion, and lifestyle, social media influencers may also be viewed as “political friends” because they often bring up topics such as elections, political parties, and individual candidates in their content. Furthermore, Arnesson (2023) refers to influencers as “ideological intermediaries” because they tend to promote lifestyles that are not only “aspirational and inspirational” but also “deeply ideological” (p. 540). This shows how politics is slowly making its way into influencer content and merging with other types of information.

The politicisation of social media influencers has led researchers to investigate whether influencer-led socialisation could also drive political behaviour (Naderer, 2023) or contribute to social change (Kapoor et al., 2023). Scholars have assumed that influencer appeals work in the same way regardless of whether the domain is consumption; hence, they have studied the effects of influencers' commercial and political appeals by applying mostly the same methodologies. For instance, Cheng et al. (2023) found a connection between source characteristics (expertise, similarity, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and interactivity), parasocial relationships between followers and influencers, the perceived quality of the information provided by influencers, and followers' receptivity to influencers' political advocacy. Relatedly, Naderer (2023) discovered that perceived similarity with social media influencers predicted individuals' intention to take political action and that it activated even those who did not show an interest in politics. Dekoninck and Schmuck (2023) found that following influencers who address environmental topics was positively related to certain politically oriented behaviours, such as signing

petitions and attending protests, but not to others, including contacting a politician. They also found no interaction effect for parasocial relationships, though they had hypothesised this.

These results suggest that the credibility that social media influencers have gained among their followers might make them effective in promoting political ideas and beliefs, possibly even among those who can be considered politically passive or apathetic. However, whether influencers are “the silver bullet” when it comes to urging political participation is still unclear. For example, how do influencers compare to experts, journalists, and politicians – people who have traditionally possessed considerable expertise and knowledge on political and social issues and who are now also active on social media? Another question regards causality: do influencers really incite their followers to participate politically, or do politically minded people start following influencers whose content aligns with their ideology but who would, for example, vote regardless of this? Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022) have suggested “a spiral effect” whereby following political influencers and online political participation (e.g. signing an online petition or participating in political discussions on social media) are intertwined. The two authors have also argued that individuals who follow influencers who post about political issues are also inclined to politics and thus more likely to engage in them (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). Thus, studying the effectiveness of influencers’ political appeals and the political participation of people who follow them *ex ante* can advance our knowledge of their political influence.

4 Social media influencers and political participation: methods and results

To better understand the role of social media influencers in promoting political participation compared to other types of sources, we conducted an experiment with a Finnish commercial consumer panel in the beginning of June 2021. This experiment showed Instagram posts by an influencer, a politician, and a popular media figure who endorsed voting in the upcoming municipal elections. While the elections were a real and topical matter at the time, the posts were entirely fictional. As far as we know, influencers were not commissioned to advertise voting for the municipal elections in question. The timing and context of the elections were exceptional. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the elections were postponed from April to June 2021, and voter turnout was exceptionally low (55%; Åkman, 2021).

Our study produced 501 responses. The participants were aged between 18 and 65 years. In terms of gender, age, and place of residence, the distribution of the respondents mostly accurately represents the Finnish people between 18 and 65 years. Upon responding to the survey, the participants were randomly assigned to different experimental conditions (74–78 respondents to each condition). No identifiable personal information was collected, and the respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to refuse or suspend participation.

The respondents were shown one of six possible treatments, which depicted a fictitious Instagram post. The photo showed two cups of coffee at a market-square coffee table. The name and profile picture of the person who had posted the photo as well as the caption were manipulated. All the posts had the following caption: “In spring, the municipal elections were postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The new election day is Sunday, 13 June”. This text was followed by either an interactive or a normative appeal. The persons shown as having posted the photos were real and widely known in Finland. These individuals were chosen based on a separate pretest that indicated they were perceived as trustworthy and likeable.

The following 3×2 between-subjects design was used:

- Source: media personality, political figure, social media influencer
- Type of influence: interactive (“Are you going to vote? Are there any good reasons not to vote?”), normative (“Remember to vote; it’s a civic duty!”)

We measured the respondents’ likelihood of voting in the municipal elections on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to “I will definitely not vote” and 7 indicating “I will definitely vote”. The results concerning the declared likelihood of voting were as follows: media personality, interactive influence $M = 5.67$, $SD = 2.00$; media personality, normative influence $M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.97$; political figure, interactive influence $M = 5.43$, $SD = 2.00$; political figure, normative influence $M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.79$; social media influencer, interactive influence $M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.71$; and social media influencer, normative influence $M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.91$. The means of the treatment groups are illustrated in Figure 1.

A general linear model was created on SPSS to analyse the effect of the independent variables (source and type of influence) on the dependent variable (likelihood of voting). The following covariates were added to the model:

- Age group (18–29: 24%; 30–39: 20%; 40–49: 20%; 50–65: 36%)
- Gender (male: 48%; female: 52%)
- Education (lower than college: 64%; college or higher: 36%)
- Having voted in the previous election (2019 parliamentary election) (yes: 86%; no: 14%)

- Instagram use (yes: 71%; no: 29%)
- Following social media influencers (any channel) (yes: 71 %; no: 29 %)

According to the model (Table 1), previous voting history had a significant and positive effect on likelihood of voting ($F = 255.63$, $p < .001$), as was expected. None of the other covariates had an effect on likelihood of voting. Neither one of the two main effects – message source (media personality vs political figure vs social media influencer) or type of influence (interactive vs normative) – had a significant effect on likelihood of voting, but their interaction effect did ($F = 3.58$, $p < .05$).

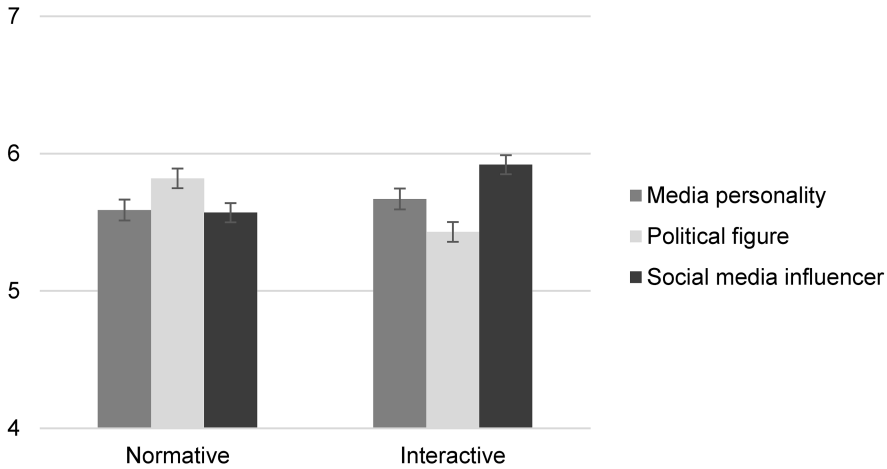


Figure 1: Likelihood of voting (scale 1–7). Means and standard errors of the likelihood of voting per treatment group (the scale has been zoomed in)

Table 1: Parameter estimates of the general linear model

DV = Likelihood of voting	df	F	P value
Age	1	3.255	.072
Gender	1	1.197	.275
Education	1	2.911	.089
Voted previously	1	255.629	.000
Instagram use	1	2.911	.089
Influencer following	1	.008	.930
Source	2	.104	.901
Type of influence	1	.044	.834
Source × Type of influence	2	3.578	.029
Adjusted $R^2 = .394$, $p < .001$			

This suggests that a participant's reported likelihood of voting was dependent on both the source of the message and the type of influence used in it. Normative influence was more effective when used by the political figure, while interactive influence was more efficacious when deployed by the social media influencer.

To further understand the relationship between voting and following social media influencers, we performed additional analyses. By conducting a cross-tabulation of whether the respondents followed influencers on social media (yes/no), how old the respondent was (under 40/over 40), and whether they had voted in the 2019 parliamentary election (yes/no), we were able to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the occurrences of these categories. Overall, younger people followed influencers more often than older people. Interestingly, following social media influencers was more common among those who had voted than those who had not voted both among younger and older individuals (Pearson $\chi^2 = 20.615$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Figure 2 shows the shares of respondents based on their voting decision, age, and influencer-follower status.

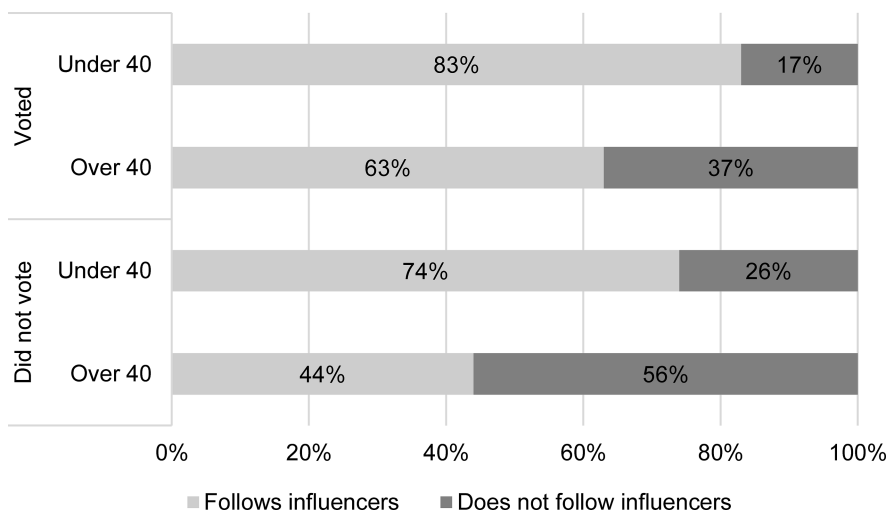


Figure 2: Shares of respondents based on their voting decision in the Finnish parliamentary election in 2019 and influencer following per age group

Following influencers was fairly common among the respondents; 71 per cent of the respondents indicated that they followed at least one person on some social media platform whom they did not know personally and who could be described as a social media influencer. The most common platforms for following influencers were Instagram (46%), Facebook (44%), YouTube (41%), TikTok (14%), and blogs (13%). To more thoroughly understand the socio-political characteristics of the peo-

ple who follow influencers on social media, we conducted a logistic regression analysis. The dependent variable was binary, with not following influencers as the first category and following influencers as the second one. Once more, the analysis showed that younger age was a significant determinant of influencer following ($B = -.052$, Wald = 31.871, $p < .000$), as was female gender ($B = .878$, Wald = 12.395, $p < .000$). Education or income were not related to influencer following. However, being certain of the party one typically votes for ($B = .169$, Wald = 4.944, $p < .05$) and a person’s belief in democracy ($B = .560$, Wald = 4.936, $p < .05$) were positively related to influencer following. Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regression.

5 Discussion

Our findings suggest that the effectiveness of the appeals for political participation made by social media influencers is comparable to that of the appeals by other, more established, and commendable actors. Well-formulated pleas by influencers may be even more effective than those made by other actors. Indeed, the experimental evidence shows that a single post by an influencer encouraging people to vote can heighten the audience’s intention to vote. However, the data indicates that those who follow social media influencers are, on average, politically more active and aware of their democratic rights than those who do not follow them. This suggests that influencers have become part of today’s modern media landscape and that they represent an important source of information among the many existing media outlets and operators.

Our experiment showed that none of the studied actors (media personality, political figure, and social media influencer) was more effective than the others when making an endorsement to vote. Rather, the way the endorsement was framed created differences between the three actors. For the political figure – an individual representing the establishment – the normative influence was most effective. For the social media influencer, the interactive influence was most effective. The influencer’s interactive post was also the most effective message overall. This finding underlines the interactive nature of influencer–follower relationships (Abidin, 2016) and possibly parasocial relationships as the defining factor behind influencers’ persuasiveness (Cheng et al., 2023; Munnukka et al., 2019).

Therefore, interactivity appears to be a fitting strategy for social media influencers to make appeals, which is in line with the notion that followers with parasocial experiences are keen to interact with influencers and eagerly answer their calls for interaction (Reinikainen et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that parasocial relationships do not necessarily explain influencers’ effect on fol-

Table 2: Logistic regression results

DV = Following of social media influencers							95% C.I. for Exp(B)	
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
Age	-.052	.009	31.871	1	.000	.949	.932	.966
Gender ^a	.878	.249	12.395	1	.000	2.406	1.476	3.922
Education ^b	-.038	.262	.022	1	.883	.962	.576	1.606
Income	.006	.090	.004	1	.951	1.006	.843	1.199
Party certainty ^c	.169	.076	4.944	1	.026	1.184	1.020	1.375
Belief in democracy ^d	.560	.252	4.936	1	.026	1.750	1.068	2.868
Constant	1.608	.574	7.851	1	.005	4.994		

^a Male vs female
^b Lower vs higher degree level
^c Changes which party votes/does not know which party to vote vs defines which party typically votes
^d Four-item construct, scale 1–7: “Voting in municipal election is a civic duty”, “The election outcome has an effect on my life”, “By voting I can influence things in my municipality”, “Voting is important so that the will of the citizens will be fulfilled”

lowers’ political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). Our results give reason to argue that the expectation of parasocial interaction (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) makes interactive appeals accepted and effective for social media influencers. These actors are known to have conversations with their followers and cherish follower relationships; thus, addressing audience members with their views and responses in mind can be considered suitable. The results also indicate that other actors, who are perceived differently and assessed on different terms, cannot simply replicate influencers’ way of addressing audiences and expect the same effect. Interactivity seems to be an effective rhetorical strategy if there is a credible possibility of a parasocial relationship with one’s social media followers, while normative influence is better suited to someone in a position of authority.

Furthermore, according to our findings, following influencers is common among people who vote, both younger and older ones; also, following influencers is related to higher democratic beliefs and party certainty. These results appear in line with those of Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022), who found a spiral effect between following influencers who talk about politics and participation in politics, which implies that political behaviour and following influencers might be intertwined and even reinforce each other. In contrast, Hasell and Chinn (2023) found that aspirational social media use, such as following lifestyle influencers, is positively associated with anti-intellectualism, unlike informational social media use. Our findings highlight the need to acknowledge that social media influencers are versatile and that following influencers may entail more than just craving something “aspirational”. The desire to stay up to date with current discussion topics might explain why politically active, informed citizens follow social media influencers. Based on our results, we also argue that, in general, influencers have become part of the media landscape by covering both aspirational and informational issues. This means that treating influencers at large as actors who are easily able to reach non-voters or politically uninformed people (cf. Reinikainen et al., 2023) is too simplistic and incorrect a depiction of followers.

It is important to acknowledge that our study was conducted in Finland with Finnish respondents. Compared to citizens in other EU countries, Finnish people show significantly higher degrees of trust towards the media (Reunanen et al., 2023). Therefore, the differences between journalists, politicians, and social media influencers highlighted here might change if examined in other countries. Moreover, most of the respondents in our survey did not follow the personalities chosen for this study on Instagram, so the results do not account for the effect that deliberately following someone on social media has on a person’s attitudes and intentions. As influencers are known for creating long-lasting, intimate relationships with their followers, our research setup with single fictional Instagram posts cannot fully portray the influence social media influencers have on their followers.

For example, an influencer who often discusses political topics will most likely accumulate authority and trust among their followers (Pöyry, 2023). Moreover, as some politicians, journalists, and other experts have started to imitate the practices of influencers (Abidin, 2016; Frig & Penttilä, 2023; Laaksonen et al., 2022), one can assume that, over time, these individuals will be evaluated differently compared to actors who remain within their usual roles.

6 Conclusion

Currently, there is growing concern about citizens' declining political participation, including voting (Renström et al., 2021). At the same time, the consumption of news via traditional media outlets (e.g. newspapers and TV) is decreasing. More and more often, audiences learn about social and political issues through social media (Reunanen et al., 2023). However, reliable information provision is challenged because of various actors who create and share misinformation and disinformation, which undermines the credibility of public institutions and people's sense of civic duty. In this chapter, we scrutinised appeals made on social media to vote in an election and the relationship between following influencers and citizens' political participation.

Social media influencers are often thought of as a quick fix for declining levels of political participation. These actors can speak to hard-to-reach audiences, and they can lend their credibility to good causes, for which they can be commissioned to create compelling content (Reinikainen et al., 2023). This chapter provides a deeper understanding of how people respond to reminders to vote by influencers and other actors on social media as well as of the general socio-political characteristics of those who follow influencers. We showed that social media posts by known individuals can positively affect people's intention to vote, but who the individuals are and how they address their audiences matter. In the case of social media influencers, the expectation of parasocial interaction seems to be the key. However, other established and trusted professionals are also encouraged to endorse political participation on social media. Actors who organise campaigns to support and increase such participation should keep in mind that many of those who follow influencers are generally politically minded and aware of current affairs.

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