Political Content From Virtual 'Friends': How Influencers Arouse Young Women's Political Interest via Parasocial Relationships

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Influencers have been at the center point of many studies in the past few years, which have investigated how they draw followers' attention to products and brands. However, despite influencers' growing communication of political topics, literature on their political impact is scarce. Using the concept of parasocial relationships, this study explores to what extent imaginary bonds held with influencers facilitate arousal of followers' political interest. For this purpose, a cross-sectional online survey of $N = 1312$ female participants was conducted. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the relationships between the latent variables. Results showed that source similarity and trustworthiness predicted parasocial relationships, which were in turn positively related with arousal of political interest. Moreover, source similarity emerged as an important determinant of arousal of political interest. These findings indicate that influencers may raise interest for topics beyond lifestyle and entertainment, explained by followers' perceived similarity to influencers and close bonds held with them.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, influencers, political interest, young adults, source trust worthiness, source similarity

Although in some cases their audiences even surpass the 100 million mark (Jokic, 2020), recipients still feel closely connected to them: Influencers. Commonly understood as regular social media users who create content on these platforms and thereby gain considerable following (Schouten et al., 2020), influencers are seen as siblings or friends by their followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Reinikainen et al., 2020). With a focus on self-disclosure and self-branding (Khamis et al., 2017), influencers manage to come across as relatable and authentic. These qualities make influencers ideal ambassadors and promoters for brands and products (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). As the textbook testimonials, they can convince their fans to develop trust in companies or positively affect their purchase intentions (Reinikainen et

al., 2020). These effects have prominently been linked with the intimate relationships that followers forge with influencers (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Lou & Kim, 2019).

Besides producing entertaining content, influencers have repeatedly raised awareness for political issues (e.g., Allgaier, 2020). On social media such as Instagram or Snapchat, they have been named the most important source of news by users (Newman et al., 2021). Even though influencers reach large audiences with their political messages and close bonds held with them make followers receptive to their content (Reinikainen et al., 2020), research on effects of influencers' political communication is limited. Influencers' political messages may especially have a considerable effect on young followers, as they develop trust in their advice (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). By communicating political issues, influencers may be able to efficiently spark political interest among young adults, an age group which has disengaged from politics (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). A particularly prominent part may be played by social media celebrities whose communication of political topics is infrequent and event-driven. Since political content is only occasionally featured on their channels, users' motivation to follow them may stem from shared interests in non-political subjects. As a result, the incidental exposure to political issues may draw young followers, who might otherwise not have actively searched for political information, to these topics (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). Although existing research has begun to investigate the consequences of social media influencers' political communication (e.g., Allgaier, 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2022), there are still numerous research gaps to be filled. In particular, it has remained unclear whether influencers can instigate young followers' political interest by covering political issues. In doing so, influencers may contribute to countering low youth political engagement. In addition, the main mechanisms which have been found to determine influencers' effects on followers' behavior and attitudes in marketing have not yet been applied to influencers' political communication. Most notably, parasocial relationships has been used as a concept to explain influencers' impact on followers' consumption behavior (e.g., Reinikainen et al., 2020), but it has been neglected in the context of influencers' political information.

To address these research gaps, this study explores to what extent parasocial relationships with influencers and underlying processes facilitate arousal of young

women's political interest. Expectedly, influencers who occasionally discuss political topics and are deemed virtual friends (Berryman & Kavka, 2017), with high perceived similarity as well as high trustworthiness, can get their fans interested in political issues. For this study, a cross-sectional survey with $N = 1312$ female followers of two sustainability influencers was conducted. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the relationships between parasocial relationship, its anticipated predictors source similarity and source trustworthiness, and arousal of political interest. The study results have implications for strategic political communication and media education.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Parasocial Relationships and Influencers

The term parasocial interaction was coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956. The researchers defined it, along the lines of symbolic interactionism, as a "simulacrum of conversational give and take" between TV personalities and their audiences (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Despite the effective "lack of reciprocity", they argued, TV hosts and presenters would create a personal, intimate setting that invited viewers to respond to them, primarily in the form of role-taking (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). This encouraged mode of reception is driven by what appears to be ordinary interaction. Repeated parasocial interaction may eventually develop into a parasocial relationship, whereby the recipient increasingly forges an intimate bond with the persona (Giles, 2002). The two concepts were initially used as frameworks in mass communication research, but have since been applied in various other academic fields, including marketing and political communication research.

With the emergence of social networking sites, offers of (audio-)visual media to users have become abundant. In contrast to traditional media, these sites enable interactivity and reciprocity between communicators and recipients. Users are at the center point of digital media: They are empowered to not only share and like, but they can also operate as producers of content. While the same personae who have previously appeared on TV may also feature on social media, it is regular people, with a "perceived amateur status", who have made a mark and gained celebrity-status on these platforms (Ferchaud et al., 2018, p. 89). In this light, the role of the so-called 'influencers' on social

media has become a subject of interest in academic research. Influencers—sometimes also called social media influencers or simply SMI—can be described as online content creators who develop significant reach and can thus become seminal figures to large numbers of Internet users (Lou & Kim, 2019). Exploiting the affordances of social media, which enable seemingly interpersonal communication between physically distant parties, influencers act as mediatized opinion leaders (Katz, 2015). On social media, they inform their followers about given topics and provide them with advice on certain issues, thereby making an impact on youth in particular (e.g., Casaló et al., 2020). As Berryman and Kavka (2017, p. 308) remarked, influencers' distinguishing trait is that they are professionals at "melding influence and intimacy". In addition to employing common methods such as the "mode of direct address" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), they have found innovative ways of expressing awareness of their audience and involving viewers in their productions (Allgaier, 2020). On social media, popular content creators are thus able to initiate chains of action and reaction, which are typically deficient in parasocial relationships (Giles, 2002). They may therefore be able to make the bonds with their viewers appear more tangible and genuine and, as study results indicate, augment the intensity of followers' parasocial relationship experience (Rihl & Wegener, 2019). Self-disclosure further makes them appear approachable to followers and contributes to their perceived authenticity (Ferchaud et al., 2018). It may even positively affect their credibility. Schouten and colleagues (2020) found that in comparison to traditional celebrities, social media influencers were deemed more reliable by study participants. In addition, they observed that users "feel more similar to the influencers and identify more with them than celebrities" (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 276).

Predictors of Parasocial Relationships with Influencers

Research has not only derived that followers experience similarity to influencers, but also found that it feeds into the parasocial relationships developed with them. Source similarity has shown to be a determinant of parasocial relationships (e.g., Lou & Kim, 2019). Source similarity is described by Lou and Kim (2019, p. 3) as "the followers' perceived resemblance between influencers and themselves." While source similarity has specifically been applied in research on parasocial relationships with influencers, other related constructs have been used in the past to explain how media users forge ties with

celebrities. Most notably, social or attitude homophily has been connected to parasocial relationships with TV personalities (Turner, 1993). Schiappa et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of drivers of parasocial relationships and concluded that homophily was a significant predictor. Rubin and McHugh's findings (1987) implied that social attraction was decisive to the development of parasocial relationships with characters on TV. Appealing character traits thus seem to increase the likelihood of high parasocial relationship intensity, which is enhanced when these traits are shared by recipients. In line with the literature, the first hypothesis therefore states:

H1: Perceived source similarity positively relates to parasocial relationship intensity experienced with the influencer.

Similarly, research suggests that trustworthiness is linked with parasocial relationships (e.g., Lou & Kim, 2019). Trustworthiness is considered a dimension of source credibility, which further consists of perceived expertise (e.g., McGinnies & Ward, 1980). However, trustworthiness, defined as "the apparent honesty and integrity of the source" (McGinnies & Ward, 1980, p. 467), has shown to be more defining to source credibility than expertise (Lui & Standing, 1989). Expectedly, influencers also primarily rely on their perceived trustworthiness. They do not necessarily need to be experts on the topics they discuss to be deemed credible by their followers, but more importantly warrant that their communication comes across as "honest and transparent" (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021, p. 75). Rather than sharing an in-depth knowledge about products or political topics, most influencers may instead convey their personal experiences with such issues to their followers. In studies on the impact of influencers' messages on followers' purchasing behaviors (e.g., Lou & Kim, 2019; Chung & Cho, 2017), trustworthiness was associated with parasocial relationships. Literature implies that trust in personae precedes experiences of close bonds with them. Whereas the development of parasocial relationships is time-intensive (Giles, 2002), trustworthiness is more instantaneously built, based on simple sociometric cues (Tong et al., 2008). Therefore, I postulate that parasocial relationship intensity is greater when followers trust the influencer, which leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: Perceived source trustworthiness positively relates to parasocial relationship intensity experienced with the influencer.

Parasocial Relationships with Influencers and Youth Political Engagement

In marketing, the notion that followers form close bonds with influencers has been recognized as an opportunity to engage popular content creators to navigate followers' interest in brands and products (Rasmussen, 2018). In a 2016 study (Lee & Watkins, p. 5758), parasocial interaction with a vlogger, who had recommended a product in a video, was linked to an increase in perceived "luxury brand value, brand-user-imagery fit, and purchase intentions." Similar observations were made by other researchers (Lou & Kim, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020), who discovered that parasocial relationships with influencers determined followers' purchase intentions. The concepts of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships have been applied to political communication, too, considering that, via social media, politicians can create the same sense of intimacy that influencers successfully have (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). However, politicians are not the only actors who, by forming bonds with their audiences, can have an influence on voters' political participation and views. Celebrities, whether on TV or on social media, have been encouraging their fans to vote or have publicly endorsed candidates in elections. Celebrity endorsements were studied by Centeno (2010), who found that fans were inclined to vote for the candidate which their favorite celebrity, to whom they had developed a parasocial relationship, was supporting. Celebrities, for instance famous athletes, "are … perceived as clean of political dealings" (Centeno, 2010, p. 901). Because of this, when they become politically active, their advice may seem more personal to their audiences.

The recent years have seen instances of political information distributed by influencers (e.g., Allgaier, 2020). Some researchers have even assumed a trend towards more 'serious' content in influencers' communication (Riedl et al., 2022). Indeed, politics may have become more personally relevant to influencers, as they have come of age. Although political interest increases with age (Prior, 2018), the continuous decline in youth voter turnout has been described as worrisome (Andersen et al., 2021)—not least because political involvement during youth is deemed a prerequisite for making democratic citizens (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Consequently, low youth political engagement has become the center point of many studies in the field of political communication. Instead of showing interest in institutionalized politics, young people appear to have resorted to alternative forms of political participation, e.g., boycotting or

protesting (Soler-i-Marti, 2015). In this context, the Internet and social media are seen as channels through which youth can pursue "political causes of their interest" (Soler-i-Martí, 2015, p. 401). Social media such as YouTube or Instagram have also become a vital source of information for young people, specifically for 18- to 29-year-olds (Shearer, 2021). It is possible that influencers, as some of the central actors on these platforms (Newman et al., 2021), can shape their followers' relationship to politics. While some influencers mainly focus on politics in their communication, others may only occasionally cover politics, e.g., ahead of an election. People who follow such influencers may thus not expect to be subjected to political content, but their political interest may be aroused nonetheless. While incidental exposure to politics on social media has been found to increase young adults' political interest (Heiss & Matthes, 2019), and social media use is generally recognized as a means to raise interest among youth (e.g., Holt et al., 2013), influencers' role in this context is unclear. However, there is reason to believe that influencers' infrequent political content may be especially effective in raising young adults' political interest. The political issues that influencers address may be perceived by followers to be of special concern to them, as this content deviates from their regular communication. In a similar vein, influencers have the advantage that they can talk about politics from the perspective of an ordinary citizen, which may be considered inherently more genuine than when other sources raise political issues (Manning et al., 2017). For instance, politicians may be perceived as opportunistic by young people —in the sense of aiming to gather political support—when they discuss political topics on social media (Manning et al., 2017), while journalists may be seen as biased (Newman et al., 2022).

Therefore, incidental exposure to influencers' political content may lead to followers' increased political interest. Yet, this relationship may still be dependent on preexisting bonds between both parties, since these may outweigh followers' potential disinterest with or aversion to politics, that would typically turn them away from political content. Following this logic, young people pay attention to influencers' political communication not because of their own avid involvement with politics, but due to the pseudo-intimacy formed with the source. Further, studies suggest that parasocial relationships play an important role in the context of political communication by politicians or celebrities (Centeno, 2010; Cohen & Holbert, 2021), explaining, for instance, voters' candidate

support. Moreover, in marketing research, parasocial relationships have been shown to determine outcomes such as brand liking (e.g., Lee & Watkins, 2016). Thus, I expect that close ties forged with influencers who occasionally report on political issues are decisive when it comes to arousal of followers' political interest.

H3: Parasocial relationship intensity with an influencer, who occasionally posts political content, positively relates to the arousal of followers' political interest.

Whilst social media are generally considered a promising means of getting the youth more interested and involved in politics (e.g., Winchester et al., 2014), researchers have specified that online spaces where young people can pursue non-political interests have a potential to lead to increased political interest. Kahne and Bowyer (2018, p. 485) contended that both friendship-driven and non-political interest-driven activities online foster political participation offline. In support of this notion, Cohen and colleagues (2012, p. 16) remarked that people who engage in interest-driven activities online are five times as likely to engage in participatory politics than people who are not. Attention to political issues may also be brought to young people by their favorite influencers, who are followed by young Internet users because of an interest in the 'domain' (e.g., gaming) that these social media celebrities are most active in. A shared interest in non-political topics may thus be an antecedent of arousal of political interest, when followers are exposed to influencers' sporadic political content. Attitudinal congruence with influencers may further motivate young people to turn to their political content and be inspired by it. However, this anticipated outcome may also be attributed to parasocial relationships, which develop as a consequence of the similarity that followers perceive between themselves and influencers. Therefore, I pose two hypotheses:

H4a: There is an indirect effect of perceived source similarity on arousal of followers' political interest mediated by parasocial relationship.

H4b: Perceived source similarity directly relates to the arousal of followers' political interest.

Moreover, it is conceivable that followers' interest in political issues is more likely to be affected when trust in the influencer is high. Jackson and Darrow (2005, p. 82) correspondingly noted that "the perceived 'trustworthiness' of a source of information" makes people receptive to it. According to extant research (e.g., Reinikainen et al., 2018),

perceived credibility contributes to the efficacy of influencer endorsements. Comparably, Martensen and colleagues (2018) discovered that the persuasiveness of 'citizen influencers' was mainly derived from their perceived trustworthiness. This finding is in line with literature that identified perceived trustworthiness as a trait of 'generalized opinion leaders' (Batinic et al., 2016). In turn, arousal of interest has been described as one of opinion leaders' functions (Katz, 2015; Stehr et al., 2015). Therefore, I expect that source trustworthiness would also determine whether influencers' political content raises followers' political interest. Yet, it is possible that parasocial relationships functions as an intermediary between the two constructs, which is why two hypotheses are investigated:

H5a: There is an indirect effect of perceived source trustworthiness on arousal of followers' political interest mediated by parasocial relationship.

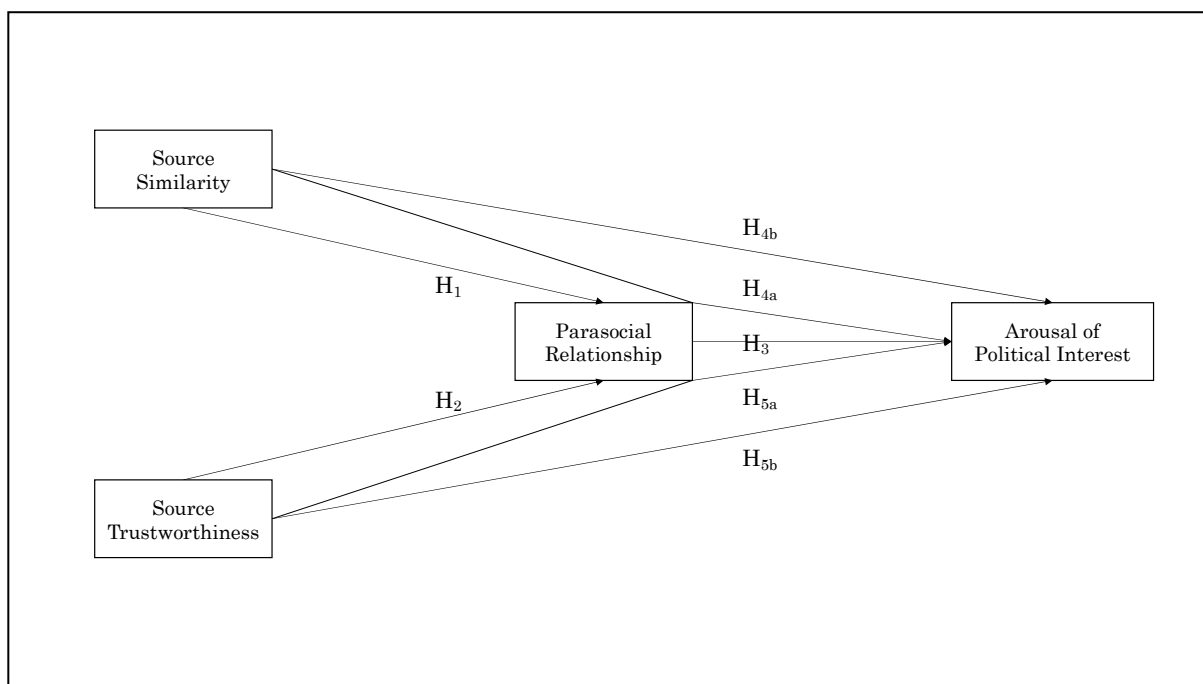**H5b**: Perceived source trustworthiness directly relates to the arousal of followers' political interest.

Figure 1. Research Model with Hypotheses.

METHODS
Procedure

To test the hypotheses (see also Figure 1), a cross-sectional survey was conducted in Germany. German influencers were contacted and asked whether they would assist in

recruiting participants for the study. A group of female Instagram influencers, who had worked together on a post about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, emerged as fitting candidates. Two of those influencers gave positive responses to the inquiry. Both influencers' content is focused on non-political topics surrounding their lifestyle (e.g., cooking, family time, university life, traveling). Some of their content is imbued with ethical values (such as fair clothing). Apart from the post on the situation in Yemen, both influencers had made statements about racism and the Black Lives Matter movement and also tended to infrequently comment on political issues in their stories, e.g., state elections, the environmental crisis or the conflagration in the refugee camp Moria. Therefore, these influencers discuss politics in relation to specific events, rather than as a consistent part of their communication on their channels.

In summary, political content is clearly outnumbered by non-political content in both cases, but political issues are occasionally addressed. Due to this content focus, there is potential for incidental exposure via their content, which is why the two influencers were deemed suitable for this study. Influencer 1 has around 179.000 followers on Instagram (end of October, 2022) and is at the end of her twenties. Influencer 2 has around 39.000 followers on Instagram (end of October, 2022) and is at the start of her twenties. Both influencers had agreed to promote the online survey in their stories. The sample was self-selected; the influencers' followers were free to choose to participate in the survey. Participants were recruited directly via the influencers. The two women had made their fans aware of the survey via their Instagram channels. Anybody who had access to the link to the survey, upon seeing it in the influencers' stories, could participate. The survey was constructed in German. Two 20€ vouchers were raffled among respondents.

Sample

A large majority of the participants were female (97.9%). Thus, the twenty male and six diverse subjects were excluded from the data set. After additionally removing multivariate outliers and straightliners, N = 1312 valid cases remained. More than 80% of individuals in the sample were 18- to 29-year-olds. Most of the participants in the sample had a high school degree, 27.5% had a Bachelor's or a similar degree. There were almost as many people with a Master's or a similar degree as with a completed apprenticeship (11.3% and 13.2%). 5.8% of the participants reported an intermediate certificate as their

highest formal education and 1.3% of the respondents had an education level lower than an intermediate certificate. Participants who did not (yet) obtain a high school degree were classified as having lower formal education (7.2%), subjects with a high school degree or apprenticeship as having a medium education level (53.9%) and with a university degree as having high formal education (38.9%).

Measures

Items of the four latent constructs in this study were measured on 5-point Likert scales, with the lower end representing disagreement with a statement. Table 1 shows an overview of the constructs and items used in this study. The five items to measure parasocial relationship were based on Rubin et al. (1985) as well as modifications by Lou and Kim (2019) and Lee and Watkins (2016), who used the scale to measure parasocial relationships with influencers. The scale (M = 3.45, SD = .59, $α$ = .79) features items such as "The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends". The instrument used to measure source similarity was inspired by Kim and Kim (2021) as well as Lou and Kim (2019). The scale (M = 3.72, SD = .70, $α$ = .77) contained items such as "I can easily identify with the influencer". The scale measuring source trustworthiness (M = 4.24, SD = .61, $α$ = .78) was based on Ohanian (1990) and Stehr et al. (2014). It included items such as "The influencer is honest". The scale for arousal of political interest was based on Stehr et al. (2014) and consisted of four indicators. It evaluated whether respondents felt that influencers could get them interested in politics and motivated them to become more politically active. The scale (M = 3.58, SD = .85, $α$ = .86) includes items such as "The influencer's posts make me aware of the relevance of political issues that I previously did not consider to be as important".

Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed in SPSS Amos. First, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess convergent and discriminant validity. Second, the structural equations model was estimated. Structural equation modeling was chosen in the context of this study, because it allows capturing measurement error. After following modification indices, which suggested to link some of the indicators' measurement errors, the estimates were again calculated. Modification indices were only taken into account, if the M.I. was above 10 and suggested to correlate measurement errors between indicators

of the same construct. Bootstrapping (5000 samples, 95% confidence intervals) was used to determine indirect effects. The data can be found on OSF: https://osf.io/zpjt7/?view_only=a1a88653aeed4eb481d449c7d4042ede.

RESULTS
Convergent and Discriminant Validity

The AVE was greater than .50 for all latent variables except parasocial relationship. However, as Malhotra (2010, p. 734) pointed out, based on "CR alone, the researcher may conclude that the convergent validity of the construct is adequate, even though more than 50 percent of the variance is due to error". In this case, the low AVE of .43 for parasocial relationship was accepted due to a comparably high CR of .79. The threshold for CR of .70 was surpassed by all other latent variables, too (Table 1).

Table 1 *CFA Results*

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	Alpha	CR	AVE
Parasocial Relationship	PSR1	.69	.79	.79	.43
	PSR2	.62			
	PSR3	.57			
	PSR4	.72			
	PSR5	.67			
Source Similarity	SoSi1	.62	.76	.75	.50
	SoSi2	.85			
	SoSi3	.64			
Source Trustworthiness	SoTr1	.78	.77	.78	.55
	SoTr2	.64			
	SoTr3	.79			
Arousal of Political Interest	PoIn1	.76	.86	.85	.59
	PoIn2	.74			
	PoIn3	.85			
	PoIn4	.73			

Notes. Alpha = Cronbach's alpha, CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted.

The requirement for discriminant validity, i.e. that the square root of the AVE of each construct is greater than correlations with other constructs, was also fulfilled (Table 2).

Table 2

Assessment of Discriminant Validity

Constructs	1	2	3	4
1. Parasocial Relationship	**.66**			
2. Source Similarity	.63	**.71**		
3. Source Trustworthiness	.63	.46	**.74**	
4. Arousal of Political Interest	.46	.49	.40	**.77**

Note. Numbers in bold are the square root of the AVE, the others indicate correlations between constructs.

Model Fit

The measurement model exhibited acceptable fit (CMIN/df = 4.96, GFI = .96, AGFI = .94, NFI = .95, CFI = .96, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.05, .06]). As expected, the p-value for CMIN/df was 0.00. Like the comparably high CMIN/df value itself, this number is likely explained by the large sample size.

Structural Equation Model

The data fit the main structural model well (CMIN/df = 2.98, GFI = .97, AGFI = .96, NFI = .96, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .04, 90% CI [.03, .04]), for which the individual influencers (Influencer 1 or Influencer 2) and levels of education were added as control variables. Age was discarded from the model, as its deletion did not yield a model fit decrease. Maximum likelihood estimation was used to estimate the effects of the independent on the dependent variables. Both source trustworthiness (B = 0.65, SE = 0.06, $p < .001$) and source similarity (B = 0.46, SE = 0.04, $p < .001$) emerged as determinants of parasocial relationship intensity. These constructs accounted for 55% of the variance in parasocial relationships. The first and second hypotheses were therefore supported.

Table 3

Regression Coefficients

Predictor	Parasocial Relationship (PSR)			Arousal of Political Interest		
	b	*ß*	*SE*	*b*	*ß*	*SE*
Source Similarity	.46***	.44	.04	.32***	.32	.05
Source Trustworthiness	.65***	.41	.06	.21***	.14	.07
Low Education[1]	.28**	.09	.09	.12	.04	.09
Medium Education[2]	.06	.03	.05	.06	.04	.05
Influencer	.03	.02	.04	.16***	.10	.04
Parasocial Relationship	-	-	-	.14**	.15	.05
Mediated by PSR				*B*	*ß*	*SE*
Source Similarity	-	-	-	.07**	.07	.04
Source Trustworthiness	-	-	-	.09**	.06	.02
Low Education	-	-	-	.04**	.01	.01
Medium Education	-	-	-	.01	.00	.02
Influencer	-	-	-	.00	.00	.01
R²		.55			.31	

Note. Significance-testing for indirect effects via bootstrapping (5,000 samples), 95% bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. [1,2] High education was used as a reference category.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

H3 stated that the impact of influencers on young adults' political interest and intention to politically participate was likely determined by parasocial relationships with the influencers. This hypothesis was supported, as there was a relatively small, but significant effect of parasocial relationship on arousal of political interest ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .01$). There were also significant indirect effects of source similarity ($B = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [.01, .12]) and source trustworthiness ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.02, .17]) on arousal of political interest, mediated by parasocial relationship. Thus, H4a and H5a were also confirmed. Source similarity and source trustworthiness predicted arousal of political interest among followers, confirming H4b and H5b. Source trustworthiness ($B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$) had a less substantial influence on arousal of political interest than source similarity ($B = .32$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$). Source similarity was also more strongly associated with arousal of political interest than parasocial

relationship and emerged as the main determinant of the dependent variable (see also Figure 2). The three latent independent variables accounted for a substantial part of the variance (31%) in arousal of political interest.
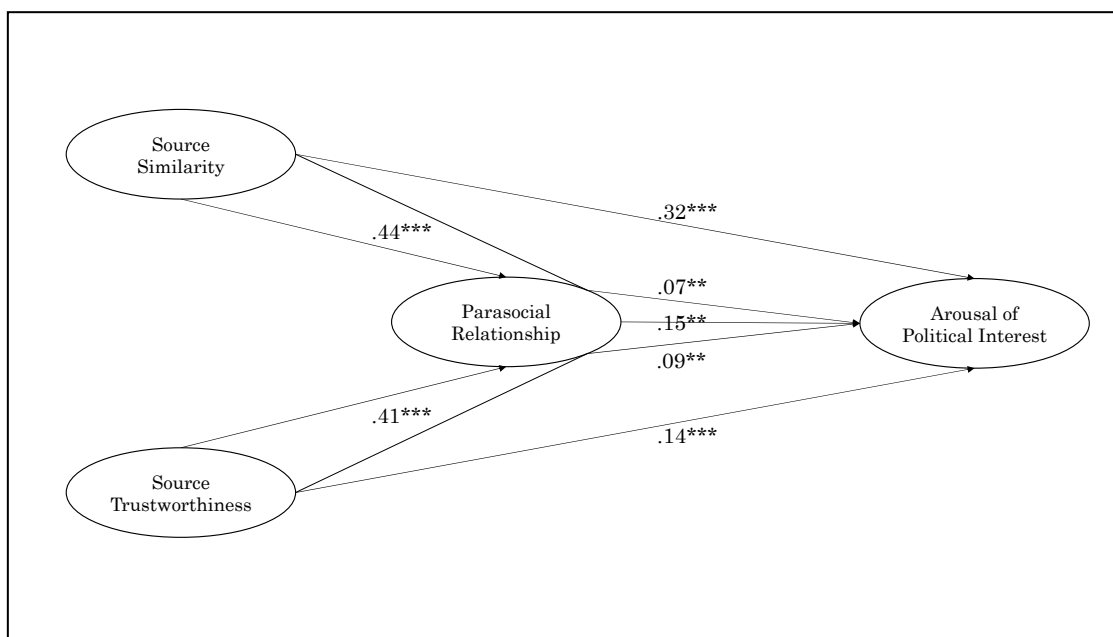

Figure 2. Structural Model Including Path Coefficients.
Latent variables are represented as ovals, regression coefficients are standardized. Significance-testing for indirect effects via bootstrapping (5,000 samples), 95% bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals.
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Among the covariates, findings showed that people with lower formal education were more likely to experience parasocial relationships with influencers than participants with high formal education (Table 3). In addition, there was a slight indirect effect of low education on arousal of political interest (Table 3). There was no significant difference in parasocial relationship intensity experienced by followers of Influencer 1 and followers of Influencer 2. However, there was a significant effect of the dichotomous variable 'influencer' on arousal of political interest, demonstrating that Influencer 2 was more successful in drawing attention to political issues than Influencer 1 (Table 3). As an exploratory analysis, multi-group analysis was conducted to investigate differences in effects between followers of Influencer 1 and followers of Influencer 2. Results showed that only in the case of Influencer 1, source trustworthiness determined arousal of political interest (see Appendix B for a more detailed report).

DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate whether influencers can raise followers' political interest and which mechanisms determine this potential impact. Findings of a cross-sectional survey with female followers of two German influencers revealed that influencers can have a bearing on followers' political interest, and that parasocial relationships partly account for this influence. However, the involvement of source similarity proved to be even more defining.

In this study, both source trustworthiness and source similarity determined parasocial relationship intensity with influencers who cover political issues. This finding matches with study results from marketing research (e.g., Lee & Watkins, 2016; Lou & Kim, 2019). In addition, participants with lower education level experienced higher parasocial relationship intensity, which was an unexpected finding. In recent research (Centeno, 2010; Cohen & Holbert, 2021; Lou & Kim, 2019), education had no effect on parasocial relationship intensity with influencers. It is possible that, in the present study, people with a lower education level were more often exposed to influencers' content, which would explain differences in parasocial relationship intensity.

Findings indicated that parasocial relationship intensity determines the impact of influencers' political content on young women's political interest, which supported the proposed third hypothesis. Parasocial relationship also significantly mediated the effect of both its predictor variables on arousal of followers' political interest. Parasocial relationships thus appear to be an indicator of influencers' impact on young people, both in the realm of marketing (e.g., Lou & Kim, 2019) and—as this study suggests—political communication. Moreover, parasocial relationships may be a reason why young people engage with political content from influencers Thus, when they encounter political content incidentally, the close bonds they experience with influencers may motivate them to appraise the content as relevant (Nanz & Matthes, 2022).

Yet, a large portion of the variance in arousal of political interest was explained by source similarity, which implies that a high degree of homogeneity with regard to values and interests, allowing for identification with the influencer, may be a more important facilitator of influence on followers' political interest than parasocial relationship intensity. This finding is supported by previous literature which conceptualizes homophily

as a driver of influence (McGuire, 1985). Source similarity implies that recipients believe that there is a thematic and ethical congruence with influencers, which could make it easier for the latter to draw followers' attention to political causes that are already somewhat attuned to their audiences' worldviews. In consequence, this study also raises concerns about the role of influencers in further fostering selective exposure (Parmalee & Roman, 2020). Influencers' political information positively affected followers' political interest, mainly because of prevalent homophily. Users on social media such as Instagram may primarily follow influencers who are similar to them, and it seems likely that political views will be equivalent, too. They may even follow them because of their congruence with influencers' political attitudes, calling into question whether most followers are indeed incidentally exposed to influencers' political messages or choose them because of this connection. The study's main, yet in its magnitude unanticipated finding opens a new avenue for research that emphasizes source similarity or homophily as a central predictor of influencers' political impact.

Source trustworthiness also emerged as a determinant of arousal of followers' political interest, at least when considering Group 1. The more credible Influencer 1 was perceived to be, the more her advice on certain political issues seemed to be trusted, which aligns with theoretical reflections made by Allgaier (2020). However, considering estimates in the second group, source trustworthiness seems to not always play a part in predicting arousal of followers' political interest. This difference in effects between groups indicates that mechanisms behind arousal of followers' political interest may also depend on the type of influencer and his or her individual traits.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that influencers seem to be able to make their followers curious about political issues. In combination with encouraging users to inform themselves about these subjects and to politically participate, this is indicative of their role as "arousers of interest", which is seen as a complementary function of 'opinion leaders' (Stehr et al., 2015). Further, this study suggests that influencers may not only have an impact on followers' political interest, but also their motivation to politically participate. In line with literature on traditional opinion leadership (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006), their influence may even extend beyond political interest and behavior and concern political attitudes. Governments have realized the persuasive potential of

influencer and cooperated with them during the COVID-19 pandemic, hoping that their audiences would follow the influencers' example and abide by the rules and guidelines to tackle the spread of the virus (Abidin et al., 2021). Yet, at the same time, Abidin and colleagues (2021) identified them as a potential source of misinformation in this context. Recent findings in relation to the 2020 United States Presidential Election hinted that influencers were partially responsible for the circulation of false claims (Seitz, 2020). Whilst they may not necessarily be the producers of fake news, some at least appear to help spread them (Treen et al., 2020). Misinformation flourishes in clusters of like-minded individuals and when the source of a claim is deemed reliable (Wittenberg & Berinsky, 2020)—source similarity and source trustworthiness, which were derived in this study as facilitators of influencers' political impact, may thus further elevate the effects of misinformation on followers' attitudes and beliefs.

To summarize, this study has shown that influencers can raise their fans' political interest, although the differences between groups suggested that some may be more successful at it than others. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that influencers can be employed as instruments in countering low youth political engagement, especially when they are perceived as similar by followers. Parasocial relationships with influencers seem to be a defining, but not the central determinant of the impact of influencers' political information on young women's political interest. Instead, source similarity stood out as the main facilitator of arousal of young women's political interest, which is the central finding of this study.

Limitations and Future Research

This study used cross-sectional data. In future research, the relationships investigated here should be analyzed based on data assessed in two- or three-wave panels, so that solid inferences about the direction and temporal order of the relationships can be made. Because participants in this study were recruited with the help of influencers, this study was not representative with regard to age and education. Moreover, the study only focused on young women and did not take into account male followers, who were barely represented in the female influencers' communities. Future studies could thus investigate whether the impact of male influencers on followers' political interest is also driven by the same mechanisms. In addition, self-selection biases might have occurred, as the people

who filled out this survey might generally experience stronger parasocial relationships with the influencers than individuals who did not click on the link, which may have also led the former to participate in the study in the first place. Furthermore, although I refer to followers in reference to individuals in the sample, some participants in this study might not have been 'following' the influencer in the sense of being subscribed to their channels. Future studies should therefore also take into account how frequently followers are exposed to the influencers and their non-political and political content, which would also help to ascertain who is incidentally exposed to their political communication.

The low AVE of the scale for parasocial relationships might be due to a potential lack of applicability to measure parasocial relationships with influencers, which are to some degree different from those formed with media personalities on TV. In comparison, influencers may be perceived as more down-to-earth and thus 'relatable' (Schouten et al., 2020), while reciprocity between communicator and recipient on social media renders parasocial interaction with influencers approximate to 'real' interaction. The PSI scale may not entirely account for these particularities. On the basis of a revised scale for parasocial relationship, similar studies should be conducted, investigating effects of parasocial relationships with influencers on young adults' political opinion formation. Media use should also be included as a potential moderator of the link between low education and parasocial relationship. Future research should also take into account the type of influencer content—to see whether ephemeral content like stories have stronger or weaker effects than posts—and investigate whether the affordances of different social media platforms affect the parasocial relationship intensity and subsequent effects on arousal of political interest. Research should also examine whether the effects depend on prior levels of political interest or knowledge. In this study, political predispositions of followers were not taken into account, thus also making it difficult to draw clear conclusions about the role of incidental exposure in this context. It is possible that young people followed the two influencers because of their preexisting interest in political issues, leading to intentional exposure to influencers' political posts.

Furthermore, in this study, the items used to measure arousal of political interest assessed respondents' perceptions of changes in political interest elicited by the influencers. Their presumed impact may differ from their actual influence (Tal-Or et al.,

2008). Therefore, follow-up experimental studies should be conducted to investigate whether parasocial relationships, source similarity and trustworthiness indeed increase levels of political interest in a controlled setting. The noteworthy part source similarity may play in negotiating influencers' political impact, which was proposed in this study, presents another intriguing research focus. Based on this framework, the role of influencers in fostering selective exposure and in the spread of political misinformation should be explored.

Implications

These limitations notwithstanding, this study has some important practical implications. The findings suggest that influencers can be attractive partners for political parties, politicians and other stakeholders in the political sector. The close-knit relationships which social media influencers develop with their young followers make them potentially powerful moderators of political issues—and possibly also institutionalized politics. Via influencers, political actors may be able to address target groups more easily, such as disengaged youth (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). In addition, influencers are professionals in self-presentation on social media (Berryman & Kavka, 2017), which might have implications for politicians and other communicators trying to reach a younger audience. Political communication strategists should pay close attention to the ways in which influencers sustain bonds with their followers on these platforms through direct address, interactive modes of communication and revelations of aspects of their personal lives. Some of these methods have also proven to work for politicians, who are perceived as more trustworthy, when their online communication is "personalized and interactive" (Kruikemeier et al., 2013, p. 60).

In media education, the role of influencers as sources of political information needs to be thoroughly examined. The present study has demonstrated that influencers are perceived as similar and trustworthy by followers. These traits seem to explain the persuasiveness of influencers' political information. High levels of source similarity and source trustworthiness may also make followers less critical of the information provided by influencers. Therefore, media literacy education in schools should explicitly tackle the impact of influencers in political contexts on social media platforms.

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