

Social Media Influencers as a Catalyst for Political Activism in Pakistan: An Analysis of Trust and Opinion Building Functions

Fakhta Zeib¹

Sobia Shahzad

Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan

Abstract

This study explores the connection between following social media influencers (SMIs) and their followers' trust in them for opinion building. SMIs obtain popularity from their social media appearances as brand endorsers. Many political agents have adopted social media tools to address youths. Political circumstances in Pakistan, including interruptions to the transition of democratic regimes and the array of sanctions faced by the traditional media, have encouraged SMIs to discuss political issues on social media. The study investigates the potential for political and non-political SMIs to shape political opinion. To measure the significance of SMIs, qualitative and quantitative methodologies, comprising two focus group discussions with a total of 16 participants and a cross-sectional survey of ($N = 353$) university students aged 20 to 26 years, were employed. Furthermore, explanations for news and information seeking behavior among SMIs' followers are also explored. The findings reveal that a majority of the students prefer to access Internet sources for news and information. In addition, we also identify a strong association between trust in political and non-political SMIs and opinion building, and a significant correlation ($\beta = .58$) between use of political SMIs and opinion building of the followers. Overall, the study provides a significant theoretical and empirical contribution to advance understanding of SMIs' potential to influence opinion in the context of media freedom in Pakistan.

Keywords: social media influencers, political influencers, non-political influencers, political opinion building, trust in SMIs, opinion leadership, Pakistan

¹All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fakhta Zeib at Government College University Faisalabad, Kotwali Rd, Gurunanakpura, Faisalabad, 38000, Pakistan or by email at fakhtazeib@gcuf.edu.pk.

Due to the capacity to affect their followers' purchasing decisions and brand attitudes, social media influencers (SMIs) have mostly been investigated from a marketing communications perspective (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Naderer, 2023). SMIs usually market certain products, making effective use of online applications, primarily to reach and communicate with their followers, often promoting idealized beauty standards (Wang & Lee, 2021) and focusing on health and other social problems (Powell & Pring, 2024). Additionally, SMIs have contributed to social causes, for example, raising awareness about COVID-19, promoting strategies to manage psychological issues related to the pandemic, and publicizing issues linked to women, transgender rights, child abuse.

There are approximately 4.89 billion people using social media around the world (Statista, 2023). In Pakistan, there were 71.70 million social media users in 2024, accounting for 29.5% of the total population of Pakistan. Among these, 54.38 million were adults (DataReportal, 2024). At present, the number of social media users from every age group is increasing, hence the dependency on social media and SMIs as sources of diverse information and opinions is also increasing (Donhauser & Beck, 2020).

For some time now, academics have been interested in the topic of SMIs, viewing them from the perspective of agents of political socialization (Harff & Schmuck, 2023). In Pakistan, for example, public figures such as Prof. Dr. Javed Iqbal, Dr. Affan Qaiser, Syed Ali Haider, Siddique Jan, Orya Maqbool Jan, etc., have gained significant visibility on social media particularly in social and political domains to form public opinion, making them relevant subjects for such research. Political activists and analysts in Pakistan have turned away from mainstream information channels and toward social media venues, especially in recent years, as mainstream private news channels and journalists no longer enjoy freedom of expression (Mir et al., 2022). Many non-political SMIs who have established fan bases also occasionally discuss political issues and seek to persuade their followers to adopt certain opinions. Previously, much discussion and research has focused on the potential of non-political public spheres, in which liberal debate on political issues takes place, to mold the political behaviors of users (Staab & Thiel, 2022). However, this is very novel to explore the potential of SMIs for political opinion building.

Given the restrictions on mainstream media channels and journalists working in Pakistan, the role of SMIs has significant ramifications for political behavior prediction; however, this is an underexplored issue in Pakistan to date. Therefore, this study contributes to expanding understanding by measuring and comparing the scale of political and non-political influencers' impact on opinion building among young adults. In addition, the findings may assist political parties with devising youth-oriented campaigning strategies. While most existing studies provide insights into cross-sectional data, to get deeper insights, we also used qualitative data to attempt to discover the impact and

perceptions of SMIs according to follower's category, i.e., so-called low information-interest and comprehensive information-interest followers, and fills this methodological gap. Another critical gap is the lack of investigation into the relationship between trust in SMIs and opinion building, which this study addresses. Followers may be influenced differently based on their level of trust in SMIs, which previous research has failed to explain.

The theoretical component of the study explores why and how often young people come across political information disseminated by SMIs. The empirical part investigates the level of young people's trust in the information they receive from political and non-political SMIs and their perceptions of the opinion-building function of SMIs. The study findings arise from two focus group discussions and a cross-sectional survey involving a larger set of university students.

Literature Review

SMIs access their followers via online applications that include Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok for various purposes, e.g., to provide information to their followers on various subjects, to advertise products in collaboration with businesses, and to persuade followers to make a positive purchase decision. Followers may also voluntarily choose to follow SMIs on their social media channels, such as blogs and vlogs and subscribe to their YouTube channels. As a result, the audience of each SMI is interested in what they have to say and is actively present with the intent to listen to them.

In Pakistan, 29% of the population is aged between 15 and 29, and 64% of the population is under 30 (defined as youth). Pakistan has the world's second largest youth population, after Yemen, which has significantly shaped country's political dynamics (Ittefaq & Iqbal, 2018). The majority of the young adults in Pakistan use social media platforms to access the news and information on current affairs (Zulqarnain & Hassan, 2018). Previously, Shahzad and Omar (2021) showed that the majority of young people use social media for news and political expression, and that this enhances their political participation. However, many studies have raised concerns about the quality and accuracy of social media information disseminated via such channels (Meel & Vishwakarma, 2020).

Social Media Influencers as Opinion Leaders

Many social media users behave passively, e.g., searching through others' profiles without interacting with them, or with some minor actions, e.g., commenting on content posted by others (Van Tran et al., 2023). A more active class of social media users, classified

as communicators, has arisen, and they are referred to as social media influencers. Influencers are particularly successful because of their broad reach, perceived familiarity and trustworthiness, which has led businesses to collaborate with them for marketing purposes (Chopra et al., 2021). SMIs are recognized as “third-party endorsers who shape audience opinions, as a credible source, through various platforms” (Freberg et al., 2011), they seek to influence the decisions of others in particular domains; e.g. lifestyle, house decor, health, social issues, politics, and many more (Shmalenko et al., 2021).

Traits associated with SMIs have the capacity to alter the perspectives of followers, aligning with Lazarsfeld et al.'s (1944) conceptualization of "opinion leaders." As semi-professional communicators who fall halfway between friends and role models, followers can be prone to believe the advice of SMIs (Freberg et al., 2011). Thus far, the research has demonstrated that influencers have the power to change brand perceptions and consumers' intent. It is still unknown if these effects extend to political knowledge and consequently also to opinion building.

Chopra et al. (2021) recognized individuals' ability to shape and change their followers' behaviors. SMIs who begin engaging in political discussions accrue benefits from their reach and believability, assisting them to highlight or intensify conversations around significant issues. Moreover, political influencers appear accessible making it simple to communicate with followers, potentially developing interest in politics and boosting political involvement (Riedl et al., 2021). In contrast, Rose and Rohlinger (2024) reveal that the echo chamber effect of social media communication can hamper the unbiased opinion-building function of political SMIs. They further conclude that mainstream media sources are more influential than social media sources, due to the polarization of audiences, thereby questioning the significance of SMIs as opinion builders.

Aside from political influencers, a broad spectrum of SMIs, whose principal sphere of influence is not related to politics, are classified as non-political influencers (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). For instance, an independent influencer, who started from nothing and gained the respect and confidence of their fan base with no political background, could nevertheless influence public opinion with regard to politics and political parties. When influencers interact in the political sphere they can be seen as taking a major step toward online political socialization and are contributing to the digital mobilization of young people in many cases (Harff & Schmuck, 2023). Moreover, Tang (2023) suggests that non-political influencers can successfully steer a divided network of people, even on a platform with growing suppression, when political influencers are not present. Suuronen et al. (2022) showed that political issues were frequently discussed online by influencers from the travel, fashion, and health sectors. Thus, influencers play crucial roles in the communication network by creating and sharing content and supporting activist causes.

Political and non-political influencers are also frequently involved in disseminating political information and mobilizing fans for political causes (Ma & Zhang, 2022). Hasebrink et al. (2021) discovered that influencers and other non-journalistic sources are marginally more significant as a source of teenagers' informational media consumption than journalistic sources. Elsewhere, a shift in news consumption patterns was observed from 2017 to 2021 among Ukrainian users, resulting in a favoring of social media over other news sources (Shmalenko et al., 2021). In conclusion, both political and non-political influencers are likely to exert an influence, however, their approaches differ.

Followers' Trust as a Predictor of Political Opinion Building

SIMs can be viewed as "opinion leaders," able to exert a powerful influence on the thoughts of their followers because of their authority in a particular field, their charismatic personalities, communication skills, and their followers' trust. If followers' prior orientation confirms an influencer's thoughts, they are more likely to trust influencers and demonstrate feelings of trustworthiness towards them. Influencers that are more credible tend to influence their followers' opinions. They exploit the trust of their followers by setting political and social agendas and ultimately changing public opinion. Additionally, they more often share their views regarding political issues on social media. However, political influencers with their established reputations and respect from within their field are considered more credible as shapers of political opinion (Shmalenko et al., 2021). Uwalaka et al. (2024) also observed that building trust and intimate relationships with followers is useful when social media influencers are in a position to disseminate political content to politicians.

Social Media Engagement in the Context of Pakistan

Pakistan's political conditions are likewise quite opaque and complex. The deliberate creation of public ambiguity by many state and non-state players poses significant obstacles to effective social science research. Moreover, there is a widespread belief, and some evidence, that the army can skew the political landscape in favor of the party or parties it supports (Shah, 2014). Due to the current situation with regard to media sanctions in Pakistan, the mainstream media show a one-sided state-aligned narrative. Due to the complex political structure of Pakistan, the undermining of political positions held on mainstream media involves the generation of critiques of favored political actors and the establishment, leading the audience to often turn to social media and SIMs to challenge the status quo. SIMs counter the narratives built by the national or international establishment and disseminated via the mainstream media in Pakistan (Mir et al., 2022).

Given the younger population is typically more engaged on social media, as they have grown up in the digital age, it has now become an important arena for opinion

manipulation. As noted, Pakistan has a high proportion of young adults, and young people's political views can be greatly influenced by charismatic Internet influencers. The objectives of this research can be fulfilled by investigating the potential of social media political communications, through the lens of SMIs and followers' networks. The study attempts to answer the following research questions.

RQ1: What are the major sources of political and non-political information for youth?

RQ2: How do SMIs influence the opinions of low and comprehensive information-interest followers?

RQ3: How does the trust in SMIs influence the political opinions of their followers?

The quantitative part of the study was investigated by posing the following hypotheses.

H1: There is a correlation between the use of (a) political and (b) non-political SMIs and the opinion building of followers.

H2: There is a correlation between trust in SMIs and the opinion building of followers.

Methods and Measures

To approach the interplay between young people's interest in the news, consumption of news, opinion building, and level of information, a mixed-methods design, consisting of qualitative and quantitative elements, was chosen. To acquire preliminary information about all variables, a survey was employed. Additionally, to attain comprehensive insights into how young people perceived political information spread by SMIs, a qualitative method was adopted.

Qualitative

The qualitative methodology, consisting of two focus group discussions with a group of eight participants each, was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the above-mentioned variables. Systematic categories were formulated to guarantee the connectivity of the main themes in the study during the research process. The category system was divided into the following sections: (i) media usage in general, (ii) media use for political news and information, (iii) SMIs definition and following, (iv) trust in SMIs, and (v) the perceived impact of SMIs in opinion building.

Reflexivity and response bias in the qualitative portion of the study were dealt with carefully by giving appropriate time and complete liberty to the focus group participants to express themselves truthfully. To mitigate reflexivity bias, an experienced moderator was recruited. Session modalities were discussed beforehand. A deliberate selection process was adopted to recruit the participants while also adhering to theoretical standards for age and gender. We selected students from the Department of Mass Communication at Government College University Faisalabad, aged between 20 and 26 ($M = 23.6$, $SD = 1.2$) including both male ($n = 9$) and female ($n = 7$) students. We directly contacted students in our classes and confirmed that they follow social media influencers. However, we did not create a predefined list of influencers; instead, we relied on students' self-reported following of influencers. The selection was based on students' willingness and relevance to the study topic. Communication was primarily conducted through in-class announcements and follow-up messages through messaging platforms. Finally, the students who had been following SMIs were contacted as potential candidates for the focus-group discussions. The participants who had been posting comments on the SMIs' posts had developed a very clear understanding of the role of SMIs, which made this recruitment strategy relatively effective.

The participants were completely aware of the study's objectives and methodology. Focus group discussions were conducted between September 18 and October 12, 2023, and continued for approximately 90 minutes each. This duration was deemed adequate as diverse perspectives and recurring themes emerged in the data.

For analysis, categories were coded based on a coding frame. This helped ensure the systematic analysis and presentation of all categories. After the data was summarized, each category was used to assess each group's susceptibility to influencer-driven political opinion building.

Quantitative

For the quantitative analysis, a questionnaire was developed based on the categories used for the focus-group discussion. According to the available data of Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF, n.d.), there are a total of 25,789 enrolled students, out of which 9,237 are from the Faculty of Social and Management Sciences. We selected a sample of 353 students by random sampling from the Faculty of Social and Management Sciences. However, the random selection was applied only after identifying eligible students through a pre-screening process. To identify participants who follow SMIs, we used a self-reported approach through a pre-screening process. This was done using a short pre-screening questionnaire where students confirmed that they follow SMIs and provided examples of influencers they engage with. The data was collected between

October 23, 2023, and November 17, 2023. This time frame was important because the classes resumed after the summer break and students were available. However, the response time was slow, due to their busy class schedule. The sample was structurally homogeneous concerning educational and income levels. The participants selected for the survey were between the age of 20 and 26 ($M = 22.2$, $SD = 1.3$) including males ($n = 172$) and females ($n = 181$) from BS and MS programs. The median monthly family income of the participants was Rs 70,000-Rs 90,000 (250-320 USD).

Measures

Some categories for the focus group discussions and the questionnaire items were adapted from Hasebrink et al. (2021) and Peter and Muth (2023). The internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was assessed separately for each variable including interest in political news and information, perceived level of being informed, use of political and non-political SMIs, trust in SMIs, opinion-building function of SMIs, information-delivery function of SMIs, comprehensive information-interest of followers, low information-interest of followers in the questionnaire. All scales demonstrated acceptable reliability within the threshold ratio $\alpha > .70$.

The questionnaire included the item "What is your preferred news source?" Other variables and their measurements are given below.

Interest in political news and information was measured by 2 items with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 = *extremely interested* and 1 = *not at all interested* by asking, "How interested are you in information about current events in the country and around the world?"

The perceived level of being informed of the followers was measured by adding 3 items. Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = *extremely well informed* and 1 = *not at all informed*) a series of question, e.g., "How well-informed do you think you are about current and political events in Pakistan?"

The term SMI was well understood by the students, so no further elaboration was needed. So, the use of political and non-political SMIs was analyzed through the following of SMIs, reading blogs, and listening and watching vlogs of SMIs, e.g. "How often do you read, listen to or watch informative blogs or vlogs from political/non-political SMIs?" Response was measured using 5-point Likert scale (5 = *Always*, 1 = *Never*).

We created an index of opinion-building function of political and non-political SMIs by adding 3 items on a five-point Likert scale (5 = *extremely important* and 1 = *not at all important*) to measure respondents' perception of opinion building by asking, "If you

would like to form your own opinion, how important are political/non-political SMIs to you?"

Trust in SMIs was measured by 3 items through respondents' perception of the trustworthiness of the political and non-political SMIs. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (5 = *extremely trusted* and 1 = *not at all trusted*).

The information-delivery function of SMIs was assessed by 2 items e.g. "To what extent do you agree that social media influencers effectively deliver accurate and timely information?" Comprehensive information-interest of followers was measured by adding 3 items, respondents; indicated their agreement with: "I actively seek comprehensive and in-depth information on a variety of topics (e.g., current events, politics, and social issues) to stay well-informed." Low Information-Interest of Followers was assessed using 3 items e.g. "I have little interest in obtaining detailed information about current events and related topics."

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, allowing us to directly compare the levels of agreement across the different constructs.

Results

Quantitative Results

Preferred News Source

The majority of the respondents reported that their main source of news and information is the Internet and social media platforms. Television continued to be the second most important source of information. Table 1 lists the results.

Table 1

Major Source of Information of Young Adults Attending University (N = 353)

Preferred Information Source	<i>n</i>	%
Internet	180	50.9
Television	113	31.8
Newspaper	26	7.3
Interpersonal	21	5.9
Other	13	3.6

Information Interest Level and SMIs

More than three quarters of the respondents (76%) say they are interested in information about current events including social, entertainment, and other non-political events; however, a significant majority say they are interested in information about current and political events. The results are presented in the Table below.

Table 2

Gender Distribution of Responses on Interest in Current and Political Information, Information Engagement and SMIs Use

Items	Male		Female		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Interest in non-political news and information	143	83.1	125	69.1	268	75.9
Interest in political news and information	126	73.3	93	51.4	219	61.8
Perceived level of information	138	80.2	102	56.4	240	68.0
Use of SMIs	139	80.8	150	82.9	289	81.9
Total	172		181		353	

Note. Participants' responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = negative, 5 = positive)

Trust in SMIs for News Seeking and Political Opinion Building

The majority of the respondents (82%) follow SMIs of any type. To know the following of non-political SMIs, participants were asked to answer the following using a 5-point scale: "Do you follow non-political SMIs?" (1 = none, 5 = more than four) and "How often do you read, listen to, or watch informative blogs or vlogs from non-political SMIs?" (1 = never, 5 = always). The mean score ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.7$) denotes a tendency toward agreement, suggesting that many participants actively follow non-political SMIs. Political SMIs are followed by some respondents ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 1.4$). Additionally, statistical inferences support both H1(a) and H1(b). The information delivered by political SMIs ($\beta = .68$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .46$) is considered more credible than the information delivered by non-political SMIs ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .20$). Additionally, the use of political SMIs has a high association with the opinion-building function of SMI ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$), and a medium association between the use of non-political SMIs with the opinion building function of SMIs ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis provides a good model fit value for both, i.e.,

$R^2 = .27$ and $R^2 = .25$ respectively. Hence, hypotheses H2a and H2b are also supported. Comparing mean values, non-political SMIs have a larger follower base than political SMIs; however, for opinion building, political SMIs are more impactful than non-political SMIs.

Comprehensive Information-Interest Followers and Use of SMIs

People with political interests are typically very interested in news and information from any source. The respondents reported that being informed about news and current events was a priority (51%, $M = 2.6$, $SD = 1.3$). Additionally, alongside multiple other sources, political SMIs afford access to information about current events and issues ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.7$). However, individuals mostly prefer to turn to political SMIs to inform their political opinions ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.7$). Meanwhile, non-political SMIs are accessed less frequently for political information ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.0$), although they are actively followed for other reasons, meaning they may have a minor impact on building political opinions.

Low Information-Interest Followers and Use of SMIs

People with less interest in politics do not frequently follow SMIs for news and information ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 1.2$). Thus, political SMIs are irrelevant in shaping their political attitudes and have no bearing on their information gathering behavior. They report that they are not well-informed (31%) and are aware of a moderate level of information (18%), corresponding to their interests and usage patterns. They typically follow non-political SMIs, although they obtain political information when these SMIs participate in political discourse. These respondents were relatively less interested in politics (28%) but were interested in non-political information. However, being well-informed remains of some importance to them. Tables 3 and 4 describe the use of political and non-political SMIs by comprehensive and low-interested information followers.

Table 3

Mean Values of Political Interest and Perceived Information Levels across SMI Use and Information Engagement Groups (N = 353)

Variables	Political SMIs Use	Non-Political SMIs Use	Comprehensive Information Interest	Low Information Interest
	Mean Values (<i>M</i>) of the Categories			
Interest in political news and information	4.1	3.2	4.5	2.8
Perceived level of being informed	3.8	2.9	4.6	2.6

Note. Participants rated each variable on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = negative, 5 = affirmative). Political Interest indicates participants' level of interest in political matters and current national and international news. The perceived level of being informed measures participants' self-reported understanding of political issues and current events. Political and non-political SMIs use reflects how often participants engage with political and non-political influencers (SMIs). comprehensive (high) and low information interest indicates a high or low level of engagement in seeking diverse and in-depth information.

Table 4

Mean Values of Trust in SMIs and Their Perceived Functions Across User Groups (N = 353)

Variables	Political SMIs Use	Non-Political SMIs Use	Comprehensive Information Interest	Low Information Interest
	Mean Values (<i>M</i>) of the Categories			
Trust in SMIs	4.6	4.2	3.8	4.1
Information-Delivery Function of SMIs	4.1	3.6	4.2	2.3
Opinion-Building Function of SMIs	4.3	3.9	4.3	2.7

Note. Participants rated each variable on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all trusted/strongly disagree/ not at all important, 5 = extremely trusted/ strongly agree/extremely important). Trust in SMIs measures: "How trustworthy do you think political/non-political SMIs are for news and information?" Information-Delivery Function of SMIs measures: "To what extent do you agree that social media influencers effectively deliver accurate and timely information?" Opinion-Building Function of SMIs measures: "If you would like to form your own opinion, how important are political/non-political SMIs to you?"

Qualitative Results

Table 5 represents the demographic details of the participants of two focus group discussions and their major interests in following SMIs.

Table 5

Focus Group Participants' Profile and Their Major Interests

Participants	Gender	Age	Major Interest in SMIs Followed
Focus Group Discussion 1			
Participant 1	Female	22	Politics, Diversion, Inspiration, Opinion
Participant 2	Female	24	Fashion, Health & Eating, Entertainment
Participant 3	Male	24	Politics, Diversion, Tips, Religion
Participant 4	Male	26	Fashion, Entertainment, Infotainment
Participant 5	Male	26	Politics, Information, Opinion, Religion
Participant 6	Female	23	Entertainment
Participant 7	Male	25	Infotainment, Politics, Tips
Participant 8	Male	24	Tips, Inspiration, Politics, Information
Focus Group Discussion 2			
Participant 9	Male	24	Inspiration, Politics, Diversion
Participant 10	Male	24	Infotainment, Fashion, Entertainment
Participant 11	Female	23	Politics, Information, Opinion
Participant 12	Female	22	Politics, Opinion, Information
Participant 13	Male	26	Politics, Opinion, Information
Participant 14	Female	21	Tips, Religion
Participant 15	Female	25	Health & Food, Inspiration, Diversion,
Participant 16	Male	26	Politics, Diversion, Opinion

Major Sources of Information and SMIs

RQ1 concerning the major sources of information and the use of SMIs was first assessed by asking, "Why do young people follow SMIs?" The reasons given for following SMIs were multiple. The respondents follow SMIs because of an interest in the subject matter, whether for information, political knowledge, opinions, or entertainment. The majority of the participants also stated that they deliberately follow SMIs who express their political opinions and are in a position to discuss socially and politically relevant subjects. Additionally, as predicted, several participants mentioned being unintentionally exposed to political viewpoints or material shared by SMIs who are not overtly political in nature.

This unintended exposure to political information demonstrates the potential to influence followers who are otherwise not especially engaged in politics.

Table 6 summarizes data obtained from the focus group participants, i.e., participants' use of political and non-political SMIs, comprehensive information-interest and low information-interest of followers, participants' perceptions about trust in SMIs, information delivery, and the opinion building function of SMIs.

Table 6

Summary of Qualitative Data from Focus Group Discussions

	Political SMIs use	Non-political SMIs use	Comprehensive information-interest	Low information-interest	Unintended use of SMIs
Participants	1, 3, 5, 11, 12, 13,16	2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 & 15	5, 8, 10, 11,12, 13, 15 & 16	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9 & 10	6 & 14
Political Interest	High	Low	Very High	Low	Medium
Level of information	Medium in politics	High in fashion and tips	Very High	Low	Medium
Frequency of political and non-political SMIs use	High to Medium frequency	Very High frequency	Very High to High for political SMIs High to medium for non-political SMIs	Medium to Low on political SMIs Medium on non-political SMIs	Low for political and non-political SMIs
Trust in SMIs	High	High	High to Medium	Medium	Medium to Low
Information-delivery function of SMIs	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	Low
Perceived opinion-building function of SMIs	High to medium	Medium to low	High to Medium	High	Low

Followers' Level of Information Interest and SMIs Influence

RQ2 was addressed by questioning the participants about their level of interest in news, so as to organize them into groups (comprehensive information-interest, general information-interest, and low information-interest), and the influence of SMIs. Several distinct forms of news orientations and informational levels were identified, even among individuals of the same age and educational level. The majority of young adults believe that keeping up to date with news and current affairs is important. However, in the case of political SMIs, relatively few young people have an intimate connection with them compared with non-political SMIs. They connect but not frequently. The following transcript from the focus-group discussions explains these findings.

I don't usually visit the channels of political influencers, but I watch and pay attention to the vlogs which my social media friends share on the network. (Participant 6)

My phone is enough for me (with loud laughter). (Participant 8)

For a few people, being able to participate in discussions and conversations with friends and family is their main motivation for staying informed. They regard this as a reason to assimilate their social surroundings in this way. Additionally, they do not trust news shared on the Internet or social media platforms. It is also evident from the discussions that those people who believe their political participation can make a difference, are more interested in accessing political information and learning about current affairs.

It is quite interesting if you already have the information about what is happening in the political sphere while discussing it with friends. So, I enjoy this feeling. (Participant 3)

When it comes to the accuracy of the news, I don't always trust social media. But on the Internet, news websites are reliable. (Participant 4)

I rely a little more on television channels and newspapers, and yes some of the journalists who run YouTube channels are also trustworthy. (Participant 9)

By contrast, non-political SMIs are only occasionally followed to obtain information, and consequently play a very limited role in building followers' opinions. There were seven participants who followed non-political SMIs. They all have low political information-interest and among them, only two have comprehensive general information-interest. According to the participants, non-political SMIs do not engage in political discourse routinely. For those who do, debating politics or discussing political issues is a unique

selling point, and helps them to engage their followers. It appears that prior interest in politics is also a potential determinant when following political or non-political SMIs. In such cases, non-political SMIs are not as effective at building political opinion as political SMIs are, due to the low information-interest of the followers. Non-political SMIs with a large number of followers do not necessarily have an impact in the political realm, although they are influential in other areas.

Trust in SMIs and their Opinion Building Function

Trust in SMIs has been another potential determinant of the influence of SMIs in opinion building among young followers (RQ3). The political opinions of SMIs are more likely to be integrated when respect and trust have been established in the political domain. For instance, the participants reported that they did not usually follow the political opinions of non-political SMIs, even when they have a huge fan base and are trusted in non-political fields for their expertise. However, some of the participants, who trust non-political SMIs, reported that they are influenced by their political opinions whenever they speak. Significantly, most of the participants reported being highly influenced by the political opinions of political SMIs, due to their trust in them.

Sometimes they do trigger my mind on political issues but less often, because they normally don't talk about political issues. (Participant 8)

I follow some non-political influencers, who do not post political content normally, but on some particular political issues, they do, and, despite having no political interest, I watch their videos. (Participant 2)

I just notice my friends' comments on Facebook sometimes about something that is currently happening. (Participant 4)

For political opinions, I don't trust those (influencers) who normally don't talk on political issues; I don't think they are reliable for political opinions. (Participant 13)

They are politically divided. Whom to trust? I do not know. (Participant 7)

The students also reported that they were able to identify when false information was being delivered by the SMIs, even when they had been following them for a couple of years. It can be inferred that followers with comprehensive information-interest deliberately and vigilantly consume whatever SMIs deliver.

Discussion

SIMs gained a lot of audience attention recently in Pakistan. Overall, the results confirm that most social media users follow SIMs that align with their particular interests. Descriptive statistics clearly delineate between the news consumption patterns of males and females. Accordingly, political opinion building varies among social media male and female users, e.g., males tend to be more interested in political news and information seeking. Previous studies do not address this variation. The survey results indicated that Internet sources are the most preferred for news seeking, which coincides with the information seeking behaviors of young adults worldwide (Hasebrink et al., 2021; Ma & Zhang, 2022). However, they consider traditional media channels to verify the information disseminated on social media platforms, which is a relatively new approach with respect to Pakistan. This may be because social media users do not consider objectivity, although traditional media outlets do. Focus group transcripts reveal that respondents who prefer traditional media sources turn to SIMs they perceive to be trustworthy as supplementary sources to understand or build their opinions on issues of interest. As such, they possess the capacity to control information flows and generate interest around particular political issues or events.

The study findings reveal a high association between the use of SIMs and opinion building. Thus, the hypothesis is supported, i.e., political SIMs play a significant role in political opinion building. However, inferences can be drawn from H1 that non-political SIMs are relatively less influential in affecting their followers' political behaviors, despite their greater numbers of followers. This is explained by the fact that, because political issues are not their primary domain of expertise, they are considered less credible on political topics, although they may be considered experts on other domains such as travel, lifestyle, or fashion. Interestingly, these findings differ from the conclusions reached in other studies. For instance, Tang (2023) suggests that non-political SIMs steer political interest and shape political opinions in the absence of political SIMs. According to our findings, non-political SIMs engage less frequently in political discourse. This may be because, as Suuronen et al. (2022) suggested, SIMs address political topics but sometimes deliberately avoid discussing political issues, possibly because they then receive aggressive comments from their followers, or because they wish to avoid becoming engaged in lengthy discussions.

Despite the above, although it emerged that political SIMs have a higher degree of influence, the qualitative findings raised further implications. First, political SIMs represent and propagate opinions from various parts of the political spectrum, potentially leading to the growth of extreme, one-dimensional, and biased political opinions (e.g. Rose & Rohlinger, 2024). Second, the majority of the participants stated that they only followed

SMIs whose overall political stance coincided with their own. In these situations, one evaluates the effect of SMIs on oneself favorably, while viewing SMIs with opposing political views unfavorably. This supports experimental results obtained by Naderer (2023) and Dash et al. (2022), who discovered that the intention to engage in political action was predicted by perceived similarity with the influencer on political issues, i.e., the objective of the SMI was to reinforce rather than alter the beliefs and actions of their audience. Nevertheless, the focus group participants agreed that SMIs may shape their political opinions and expose them to outside influences through the interactive mechanics of social networks (Shmalenko et al., 2021).

In brief, it emerged that one-quarter of the students, from the survey and focus group discussions, had no interest in news and avoided receiving news through any sources. For those who sought political news, there appeared to be casual evidence that young adults may look to political or non-political SMIs for news and also use other social media avenues such as their friends' networks on Facebook and X. Consequently, it appears that patterns of gathering information and knowledge are becoming less uniform. However, the respondents agreed that they viewed the output of political and non-political SMIs and used it to form their opinions. Despite being politicized, biased, and negative, political and non-political SMIs are popular among young people because they are perceived to represent competitive and democratic opinions. SMIs comprise part of a new generation of opinion leaders, who are a formidable force in political debate and the forging of political opinions.

The findings reported in our cross-sectional data correspond to those from the focus group discussions. However, our results contradicted those of Suuronen et al. (2022) and Tang (2023) who showed that SMIs in the travel, fashion, motivation, and health care sectors frequently discussed political events on their blogs or vlogs and are able to construct political narratives. The role of SMIs in political discourse may differ across countries due to political, social, or regulatory factors.

Limitations and Recommendations

First, qualitative data, accessed through focus group discussions, allowed us to delve deeply into students' perceptions of the political impact of SMIs. However, we were unable to capture the effect SMIs actually have on young adults. Further research should incorporate political discussions regarding SMIs. Second, cross-sectional data has unique limitations. It remained unclear whether interacting with these SMIs can boost types of political activity, or whether those who are already engaged in political activism or at least have a prior political interest are more likely to keep track of political developments. Third, this research was unable to explore the stance of political and non-political SMIs, or the

pressures they face when disseminating political views and receiving criticism from followers. For future studies, in-depth interviews could be conducted with SMIs to achieve greater understanding. Fourth, despite taking all usual measures, response bias could not be fully eroded. Some of the respondents were found to be influenced by others in the focus group discussions. Finally, the political behaviors of university students were the focus of this investigation, and the results cannot be generalized to the non-university young adult population. So, the results should be interpreted with caution when considering broader applications. However, further research should enhance the focus of the investigation as it affects the young adult population overall.

References

- Casero-Ripollés, A. (2020). Political influencers in the digital public sphere. *Communication and Society*, 33(2), 171–173. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.33.2.171-173>
- Chopra, A., Avhad, V., & Jaju, and S. (2021). Influencer marketing: An exploratory study to identify antecedents of consumer behavior of millennial. *Business Perspectives and Research*, 9(1), 77–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2278533720923486>
- Dash, S., Mishra, D., Shekhawat, G., & Pal, J. (2022). Divided we rule: Influencer polarization on Twitter during political crises in India. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 16, 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v16i1.19279>
- DataReportal. (2024). *Digital 2024: Pakistan*. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-pakistan>
- Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1–7. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009>
- Donhauser, D., & Beck, C. (2020). Pushing the Max Planck YouTube Channel with the Help of Influencers. *Frontiers in Communication*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2020.601168>
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review*, 37(1), 90–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001>
- Government College University Faisalabad. (n.d.). *University statistics*. Retrieved February 24, 2025 from <https://gcuf.edu.pk/about-statistics>

- Harff, D., & Schmuck, D. (2023). Influencers as empowering agents? Following political influencers, internal political efficacy and participation among youth. *Political Communication*, 40(2), 147–172.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2166631>
- Hasebrink, U., Hölig, S., & Wunderlich, L. (2021). #UseTheNews: Studie zur Nachrichtenkompetenz Jugendlicher und junger Erwachsener in der digitalen Medienwelt [#UseTheNews: Study on the news literacy of adolescents and young adults in the digital media world] [Arbeitspapiere des Hans-Bredow-Instituts Working paper; Working paper of the Hans Bredow Institute No. 55].
<https://doi.org/10.21241/ssoar.72822>
- Ittefaq, M., & Iqbal, A. (2018). Digitization of the health sector in Pakistan: challenges and opportunities to online health communication: A case study of MARHAM social and mobile media. *Digital health*, 4, Article 2055207618789281.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2055207618789281>
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Hazel, G. (1944). *The people's choice how the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. Columbia University Press.
- Ma, L., & Zhang, Y. (2022). Three social-mediated publics in digital activism: A network perspective of social media public segmentation. *Social Media and Society*, 8(2).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221094775>
- Meel, P., & Vishwakarma, D. K. (2020). Fake news, rumor, information pollution in social media and web: A contemporary survey of state-of-the-arts, challenges and opportunities. *Expert Systems with Applications*, 153, 112986.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2019.112986>
- Mir, A., Mitts, T., & Staniland, P. (2022). Political coalitions and social media: Evidence from Pakistan. *Perspectives on Politics*, 21(4), 1337-1356.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592722001931>
- Naderer, B. (2023). Influencers as political agents? The potential of an unlikely source to motivate political action. *Communications*, 48(1), 93-111.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0006>
- Peter, C., & Muth, L. (2023). Social media influencers' role in shaping political opinions and actions of young audiences. *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6750>
- Powell, J., & Pring, T. (2024). The impact of social media influencers on health outcomes: Systematic review. *Social Science and Medicine*, 340, 116472.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116472>
- Riedl, M., Schwemmer, C., Ziewiecki, S., & Ross, L. M. (2021). The rise of political influencers-perspectives on a trend towards meaningful content. *Frontiers in*

- Communication*, 6, Article 752656. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2021.752656>
- Rose, K., & Rohlinger, D. A. (2024). Political influencers and their social media audiences during the 2021 Arizona audit. *Socius*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231241259680>
- Shah, A. (2014). Constraining consolidation: Military politics and democracy in Pakistan (2007–2013). *Democratization*, 21(6), 1007–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.781586>
- Shahzad, S., & Omar, B. (2021). Social network matters: The influence of online social capital on youth political participation in Pakistan. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 18(4), 430–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2021.1900018>
- Shmalenko, I., Yeftieni, N., & Semenets-Orlova, I. (2021). Impact of social media influencers on public policy and political discourse. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Social Science, Psychology and Legal Regulation (SPL 2021)*, 617(Spl), 88–93. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.211218.015>
- Staab, P., & Thiel, T. (2022). Social media and the digital structural transformation of the public sphere. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 39(4), 129–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221103527>
- Statista. (2023). *Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2028*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>
- Suuronen, A., Reinikainen, H., Borchers, N. S., & Strandberg, K. (2022). When social media influencers go political: An exploratory analysis on the emergence of political topics among Finnish influencers. *Javnost*, 29(3), 301–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1983367>
- Tang, J. L. (2023). Issue communication network dynamics in connective action: The role of non-political influencers and regular users. *Social Media and Society*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177921>
- Uwalaka, T., Amadi, F., & Enyindah, S. C. (2024). Social media influencers and political influence operations: The Data Boys example in Nigeria. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 2046147X241301524. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X241301524>
- Van Tran, D., Nguyen, T., & Nguyen, D. M. (2023). Understanding how upward social comparison stimulates impulse buying on image-sharing social commerce platforms: A moderated mediation model of benign envy and self-esteem. *Current Psychology*, 42(22), 18777–18792. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03042-w>
- Wang, L., & Lee, J. H. (2021). The impact of K-beauty social media influencers, sponsorship, and product exposure on consumer acceptance of new products.

Fashion and Textiles, 8(1), Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-020-00239-0>

Zulqarnain, W., & ul Hassan, T. (2018). Media reliance and information seeking habits of Pakistani millennial. *Journal of Media Studies*, 33(1), 95–106.
<http://111.68.103.26/journals/index.php/jms/article/viewFile/1956/725>

Biographical Notes

Fakhta Zeib is an assistant professor at Government College University Faisalabad. She is engaged in teaching and multiple research activities. Her scholarly contributions include social media and political communication, youth participatory culture in challenging democracies, and information authenticity and trust in digital communication.

She can be reached at Government College University Faisalabad, Kotwali Rd, Gurunanakpura, Faisalabad, 38000, Pakistan or by email fakhtazeib@gcuf.edu.pk.

Sobia Shahzad is an assistant professor at Government College University Faisalabad. Her research interests include political communication, social media implications, journalism and media literacy.

She can be reached at Government College University Faisalabad, Kotwali Rd, Gurunanakpura, Faisalabad, 38000, Pakistan or by email at sobiashahzad@gcuf.edu.pk.

Date of Submission: 2024-04-30

Date of Acceptance: 2025-01-15