I Am an Influencer and I Approve This Message! Examining How Political Social Media Influencers Affect Political Interest, Political Trust, Political Efficacy, and Political Participation

BEN WASIKE[1]
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA

This study surveyed a random sample of social media users (N = 813) to examine how following political social media influencers (PSMIs) affects political interest and political trust. The study also examined whether political interest and political trust affect internal and external online political efficacy (OPE) and political participation. Structural equation analysis indicated that following a PSMI increased political interest and political trust, with a pronounced effect on political interest. Additionally, political interest boosted both internal and external OPE, while political trust boosted external OPE only. Mediated effects analysis indicated that political interest improved the relationship between following a PSMI and internal and external OPE, respectively, while political trust did not. However, neither type of OPE improved political participation.

Keywords: social media influencers, political social media influencers, political efficacy, political interest, political trust, political participation, structural equation modeling

Many variables affect the political process, and key among them are those related to one's attitude and perception toward this process. These include political efficacy (PE), political interest, and political trust. PE is a person's perception of having the ability to engage civically and impact the political process by bringing about social and political change (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). Political trust refers to perceptions of the fairness, transparency, and competence of government institutions (Zmerli, 2014), and political interest refers to one's attentiveness to political issues (Lupia & Philpot, 2005). These three variables manifest via political participation, which refers to the legal and voluntary activity by the public aimed at influencing the government (van Deth, 2014; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). This study examined the amalgam of these variables and how they interact among those who follow political social media influencers (PSMIs). Specifically, the study examined whether following a PSMI affects a follower's political trust and political interest, and if these then affect the follower's internal and external online PE (OPE) and political participation.

Ben Wasike: ben.wasike@utrgv.edu
Date submitted: 2022-08-07

This approach is unique for the following reasons. First, the Internet and social media uniquely impact the political process, and it is important to examine the political process in this context. Generally, the Internet makes political participation easier (Gibson & McAllister, 2013; Vicente & Novo, 2014), and it even negates the disempowering effect of low education on political participation (Sasaki, 2017). Meanwhile, social media have proven to be an effective conduit for participation via mobilization and activism as demonstrated by movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter (Anderson, 2016; Anderson & Toor, 2018; Perrin, 2020). Additionally, social media improve PE (Fierro, Aroca, & Navia, 2021; Sasaki, 2017), political interest (Caliendo, Chod, & Muck, 2016), and political trust (Arshad & Khurram, 2020). Research also shows a confluence among PE, political interest, political trust, and political participation, and I discuss these connections in later sections.

Second, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as important figures in the political process. Broadly defined, an influencer is a person who has earned opinion leadership status among a dedicated group of followers through the extensive use of social media, self-branding, and content creation (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Suuronen, Reinikainen, Borchers, & Strandberg, 2022). These influencers are reputed to have expertise in an area about which they create content and share this content with followers on social media (Geyser, 2022). Among them are PSMIs, who "distribute self-produced political content with which they reach and potentially influence a dispersed audience" (Bause, 2021, p. 296). Influencers wield considerable sway over their followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Geyser, 2022; Ruiz-Gómez, 2019), and hence the focus on them in this study. This is important because influencers are projected to play a bigger role in society. Currently, at least 29% of U.S. adults follow an influencer, more than 66% of U.S. teenagers do so, and worldwide, 43% of Internet users follow influencers (YouGov, 2021). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic saw a dramatic increase in the number of influencers and the breadth of their influence (Amra & Elma, 2020; YouGov, 2021). PSMIs also affect the political process. For instance, political candidates have used influencers for political mobilization (Heilweil, 2020; Markay, 2021). This is because engagement with PSMIs increases political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022) and political interest and reduces political apathy among young people (Zimmermann et al., 2020).

Last, this study fills gaps in research. PSMIs are understudied, and even scholars who have examined them recommend further inquiry into their role in politics (Bause, 2021; Casero-Ripollés, 2021). The study also enhances knowledge by focusing on a relatively new measure of PE. Developed by Sasaki (2016), OPE uniquely measures PE among Internet and social media users. Its main strength is that it considers how online media use affects political empowerment, an issue that critics of traditional PE measures have raised (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Indeed, the current study found unique patterns of influence. Following a PSMI increased political interest much more than it did political trust. Interest also directly increased both internal and external OPE and amplified the effect of following a PSMI on both internal and external OPE. However, neither internal nor external OPE improved participation.

SMIs and Politics

As mentioned, SMIs are people who create and share content with dedicated followers, and among them are PSMIs or those who specialize in political content (Bause, 2021; Enke & Borchers, 2019; Geyser, 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022). Because of the influence and opinion leadership that SMIs have over their

followers, brands now commonly use them as third-party endorsers of products and services (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011; Suuronen et al., 2022). Political candidates and political action committees have also courted influencers. Both candidates in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and some political action committees (PACS) used celebrities as well as SMIs to target followers (Heilweil, 2020; Markay, 2021). Such a move makes sense because in addition to mobilization, the authenticity, trust, and intimacy the SMIs built with their followers transfer to the campaign and its causes (Goodwin, Joseff, & Woolley, 2020).

Unlike traditional celebrities and endorsers, SMIs develop intimacy, authenticity, and trust with followers in ways that traditional celebrities and media elites do not (Abidin, 2015; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Rojek, 2015). SMIs may attain these attributes by disclosing mundane aspects of their private lives with their followers and opining on issues as well as sharing emotions (Abidin, 2015). Followers also perceive influencers to be genuine given that they project a being "really real" or a "just being me" persona (Cunningham & Craig, 2017, p. 73; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 4659). Not only does this improve intimacy with followers but it also improves perceptions of trustworthiness and trust among their followers, and this adds to an SMI's persuasiveness (Manchanda, Aurora, & Sethi, 2022).

Recent events demonstrate how influential SMIs are politically. Research shows that SMIs were instrumental in spreading fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. While most influencers engaged in regular electioneering and politicking (Shmargad, 2022), some were instrumental in spreading fake news (Bovet & Makse, 2019; Lima, 2021). This fake content reached millions of potential voters (Lee & Kent, 2017) and may have influenced some (Gunther, Beck, & Nisbet, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic also proved fertile ground for disinformation and misinformation campaigns in which some SMIs partook. Data indicate that most of the anti-COVID-19 vaccine misinformation originated from a handful of SMIs famously dubbed the "Disinformation Dozen" (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021). These SMIs disseminated more than 500,000 Facebook posts and 20,000 tweets to 59 million followers within two months (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021). Likewise, the "Film Your Hospital" campaign and the viral pseudo-documentary "Plandemic" were largely successful because conspiratorial SMIs promoted them (Ahmed, López, Vidal-Aiaball, & Katz, 2020; Pappas, 2020). Data show that these campaigns affected public health discourse as well as national political discourse (Aratani, 2020).

Even outside of the events discussed above, SMIs are politically impactful. For instance, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria successfully used social media for recruitment and political messaging (Helmus & Bodine-Baron, 2017), including the use of SMIs as part of its social media strategy (Koerner, 2016). SMIs have also been instrumental in online far-right radicalization (Maly, 2020; Russonello, 2021), while others have been accused of promoting and softening the images of dictatorial regimes (Arnesson, 2022). Apart from these extremist activities, PSMIs have been linked to partisan mockery (Fischer, Kolo, & Mothes, 2022), polarization (Garibay, Mantzaris, Rajabi, & Taylor, 2019), and domination of online political discourse (Hodson & Petersen, 2019).

PSMIs serve positive roles too. For one, their existence diversifies political discourse by breaking up the monopoly that traditional political actors and media elites wield over the process (Casero-Ripollés, 2021). Their role as key information brokers for their followers also means that they share the gatekeeping

role once exclusive to media and political elites (Navarro, Molleda, Khalil, & Verhoeven, 2020). PSMIs also increase the visibility of sociopolitical minorities (Beta, 2019; Hockin-Boyers & Clifford-Astbury, 2021) and are likelier than the mainstream media to draw politically apathetic young people into political discourse (Zimmermann et al., 2020). Research also shows that following PSMIs not only increases online political participation, but the effect also extends into offline political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022).

Political Efficacy

The main objective is to examine how PSMIs affect the political trust and political interest of their followers and how this in turn affects the latter's OPE and political participation. As mentioned, PE is the feeling a person has regarding their ability to engage civically and impact the political process by bringing about social and political change. In their study of political behavior during the 1954 U.S. presidential elections, Campbell and colleagues (1954) examined several factors motivating voters, and among them was a person's sense of efficacy in politics. Campbell and colleagues (1954) measured PE by asking voters questions about their opinions on the political process and governance, such as how much people felt that public officials cared about what voters thought and whether they thought that voting was the only way to impact government operations. Lane (1959) later suggested two components of PE: "The image of the self and the image of democratic government" (p. 149). The self-image refers to internal PE, and the image of government refers to external PE. Internal PE is a person's "belief that means of influence are available to him [and] 'external efficacy' is the belief that the authorities or regime are responsive to influence attempts" (Balch, 1974, p. 24).

Research has long shown that PE impacts the political process. Early studies found PE to affect a range of issues such as attitudes toward foreign policy (Hahn, 1969), political trust (Farah & Al-Salem, 1977), political socialization (Abramson, 1972; Iyengar, 1978), and political participation (Buehler, 1977). Contemporary scholarship shows that PE still plays a key role in the political process. External PE improves trust in government in both democratic and totalitarian systems (Hu, Sun, & Wu, 2015; McEvoy, 2016). This is important, given that public perceptions of the government such as its responsiveness to citizen needs (de Moor, 2016), physical proximity to government (McDonnell, 2020), contact with government (Shore & Tosun, 2019), and political inclusivity (Corcoran, Pettinicchio, & Young, 2011) affect internal and external PE as well as participation. For instance, when a local government encourages engagement in community activities such as jury duty or citizen forums, people report higher internal and external PE and are more likely to participate by voting, protesting, or joining political parties (Oh & Lim, 2017). This reflects other research showing a positive relationship between civic involvement and PE (Henderson & Han, 2021; Williamson & Scicchitano, 2015). Also, political participation among minorities improves when they support a candidate through whom they feel they may effect desired change (West, 2017) or when they perceive fairness in governance (Osborne, Yogeeswaran, & Sibley, 2015).

OPE, a subset of PE, explains the unique effect that the Internet and social media have on the political process. OPE is "how much Internet use provides the sense of political empowerment" (Sasaki, 2017, p. 1446). Criticisms of traditional PE measures include their inability to correctly predict online political participation (Sasaki, 2016) and the failure to address the context that political action occurs, such as on social media (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). This may explain why studies that have used traditional PE

measures to examine pertinent variables in online contexts report mixed results. Some of these studies found that social media use improved internal PE (Hong, 2016; Park, 2019) and affected perceptions of government (Su, Lee, & Borah, 2021). Others found the relationship among Internet use, social media use, and PE to be weak or nonexistent (Pang, 2018; Richey & Zhu, 2015) or found other factors other than social media to predict PE (Martin, Martins, & Naqvi, 2018). In other studies, PE only emerged among subjects exposed to specific messages (Heiss & Matthes, 2016)

Studies that used OPE measures have been more consistent and have found unique patterns within online contexts. For instance, Internet and social media use improved the internal and external OPE among less educated people than it did among highly educated people (Sasaki, 2017). This is unique, given that education is positively associated with traditional PE (Rasmussen & Nørgaard, 2018). Likewise, Fierro and colleagues (2021) found that Internet and social media use increased the OPE and motivation to participate politically among those located in the geographical periphery, far from the centers of power. Other research shows that both internal and external OPE interact with social media use and online political participation (Chen, Bai, & Wang, 2019). These findings are also true regarding the relationship among Internet and social media use and internal and external OPE in some authoritarian systems (Chen, Li, & Zhang, 2021).

Political Trust and Political Interest

As mentioned, research shows a confluence among PE, political interest, political trust, and political participation. Political trust is the public perception of government institutions and the policy-making process to be trustworthy, fair, competent, and transparent (Zmerli, 2014). It reflects how much people believe that government institutions, political parties, politicians, law enforcement, the legal system, and local government will do what is right and handle problems (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Zmerli, 2014). Political trust plays a fundamental role in the political process (Schraff, 2021) and has long been associated with PE (Abramson, 1972; Gamson, 1968). For instance, perceptions of government transparency increase external PE (Cicatiello, De Simone, & Gaeta, 2018). Government-driven citizen assemblies such as mini-publics also positively impact internal and external PE (Knobloch, Barthel, & Gastil, 2020). Political trust in general boosts external PE and improves the chances of participation in online activities such as boycotts and petitions (Michalski et al., 2021). Even simple actions such as providing government information on social media improve political trust and spur political participation (Arshad & Khurram, 2020).

Political interest refers to "a citizen's willingness to pay attention to political phenomena at the possible expense of other topics" (Lupia & Philpot, 2005, p. 1122). Like political trust, political interest is also a predictor of political behavior (Blais, Galais, & Bowler, 2014; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) and is associated with PE. For one, a bad experience with government may spur a person into action regarding issues of interest (Zeng, Chen, & Li, 2018). Civic education improves both PE and political interest, which then improve political participation (Maurissen, 2020). This is important, given that political participation increases both internal PE and political interest among adolescents (Šerek, Machackova, & Macek, 2017) and that awareness of the benefits of political engagement improves political interest even among those with low external PE (Robison, 2017). This is in addition to research showing that political education improves PE, political interest, and political participation (Bernklau Halvor, 2016; Caliendo et al., 2016).

Given the discussion above, I predict that following a PSMI positively affects a follower's political trust and political interest and that these two variables positively affect internal and internal OPE, respectively. I also predict that the follower's internal and external OPE improve political participation. I also query about the mediation and serial mediation effects among the variables as shown in research questions RQ1–RQ6. Because internal and external OPE were analyzed in separate structural equation models (SEM) models as in other multi-model studies (Oh & Lim, 2017; Šerek et al., 2017), the hypotheses are presented according to the SEM models shown in Figure 1.

SEM Model 1 Hypotheses

H1:   *Following a PSMI improves political interest.*

H2:   *Following a PSMI improves political trust.*

H3:   *Political interest improves internal OPE.*

H4:   *Political trust improves internal OPE.*

H5:   *Internal OPE improves political participation.*

SEM Model 2 Hypotheses

H6:   *Following a PSMI improves political interest.*

H7:   *Following a PSMI improves political trust.*

H8:   *Political interest improves external OPE.*

H9:   *Political trust improves external OPE.*

H10:   *External OPE improves political participation.*

Research Questions

RQ1:   *Does political interest mediate the relationship between following a PSMI and internal OPE?*

RQ2:   *Does political trust mediate the relationship between following a PSMI and internal OPE?*

RQ3:   *Does political interest mediate the relationship between following a PSMI and external OPE?*

RQ4:   *Does political trust mediate the relationship between following a PSMI and external OPE?*

RQ5:   *Is there a serial mediation effect among following a PSMI, political interest, internal OPE, and political participation?*

RQ6:   *Is there a serial mediation among following a PSMI, political trust, internal OPE, and political participation?*

RQ7:   *Is there a serial mediation effect among following a PSMI, political interest, external OPE, and political participation?*

RQ8:   *Is there a serial mediation effect among following a PSMI, political trust, external OPE, and political participation?*
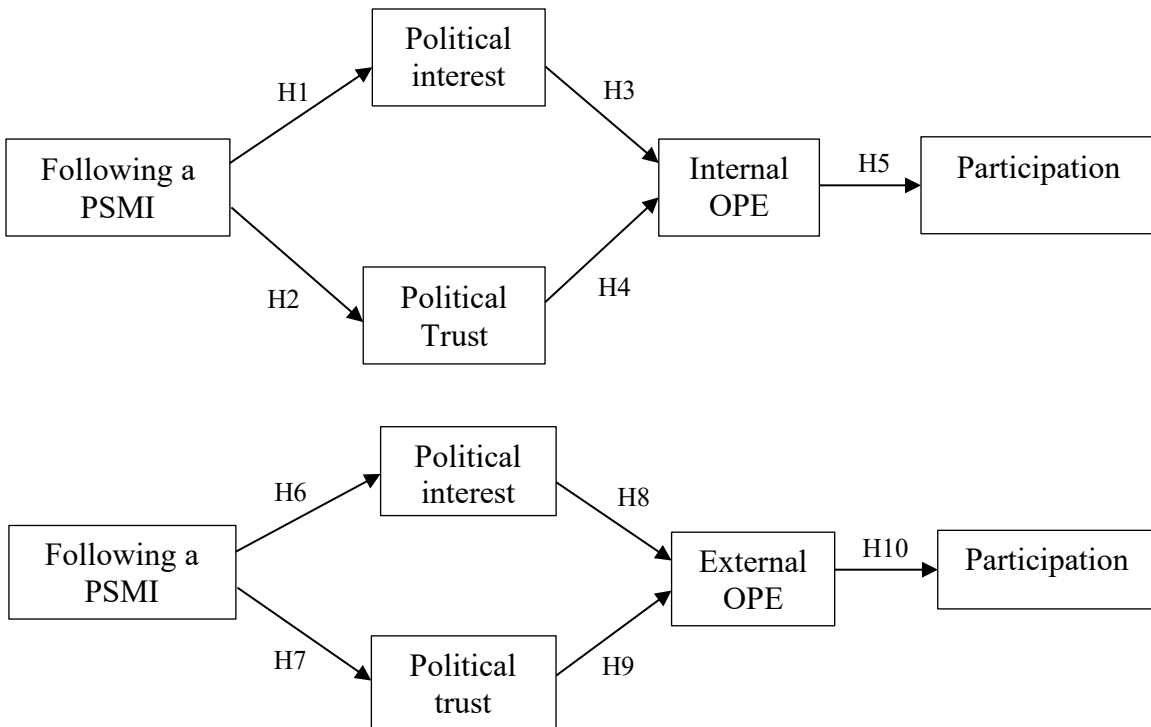
Figure 1. SEM model for internal and external OPE.

Method

This study used a Qualtrics survey to collect data. A sample of 813 respondents randomly selected from a Qualtrics panel was used. All were social media users. Qualtrics panels are a proven and widely used sampling method (Belliveau & Yakovenko, 2022; Holt & Loraas, 2019; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). The sample was drawn to closely resemble U.S. Census demographics regarding age, gender, race, and geography. Gender (female = 55%; male = 44%; nonbinary = 1%); race (White non-

Hispanic = 64%; Black non-Hispanic = 13%; Hispanic = 16%; Asian = 2%; American Indian or Alaska Native = 3.4%; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander = 0.4%; Other = 1.6%); geography (Northeast = 18%; Midwest = 21%; West = 23%; South = 38%). The average age was 45 years. Political affiliation was lean Liberal (29.8%), lean Independent (29.5%), lean Conservative (32.8%), and other (7.9%). Because Qualtrics panels account for incomplete responses, there were no missing data. To get an adequately powered sample, the G*Power analysis was run before data collection as suggested by Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, and Lang (2009) and Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, and Buchner (2007). The analysis indicated that the sample size was adequately powered for analysis (effect size = 0.15; power = .80; two-tailed alpha = .05; number of predictors = 6). An a priori sample size calculator for SEM also indicated this sample was adequate for analysis (Soper, 2023).

Because the study examines how people interact with PSMIs, the sample was exclusively composed of social media users who also follow a PSMI. Two screening questions, shown below, were asked to select these users. The first question was based on a definition of influencers from previous studies (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Geyser, 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022). The second question was based on screening questions from similar studies (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Zimmermann et al., 2020). Both questions used a dichotomous yes/no response. The study was approved by the author's institution's Institutional Review Board before data collection, and data were collected between June 21 and July 1, 2022.

> The questions below ask about your relationship with social media influencers. These are people who have a reputation for their knowledge and expertise about certain topics. They regularly create and post content about those topics on their social media accounts, and they may have many followers who pay attention to that content.
>
> Screening question 1: Do you currently follow any social media influencer or influencers?
>
> Screening question 2: Of the influencers you currently follow, do any of them regularly share political content or discuss political issues?

Variable Measurement

Following a PSMI

After screening for PSMI followers, respondents then indicated how often they consumed content on the PSMI's social media pages(s) by answering the question: "Thinking about the political social media influencer(s) you follow, how often do you read or watch their content?" This question was fashioned after the Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022) study on PSMIs. The question was measured on a 1–5 scale where 1 = rarely and 5 = very frequently. See footnote 2 for questions for all variables.[2]

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[2] https://osf.io/a5dxc?view_only=36c66cf11da647f2be912955a395769b

Political Efficacy

This study used Sasaki's (2016) OPE scale and modified it as in previous studies (Chen et al., 2019, 2021; Fierro et al., 2021; Sasaki, 2017). The modified OPE scale consisted of two sets of questions, one querying about internal OPE and the other querying about external OPE. An example of an internal OPE question was "Because of following a political SMI, people like me can understand politics more easily." An example of an external OPE question was "Because of following a political SMI, people like me can tell whether public officials care about what people like me think." All questions were measured on a 1–5 scale where 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree (Cronbach's α for internal OPE = .84; Cronbach's α for external OPE = .80).

Political Participation

This refers to voluntary action by people aimed at influencing government or expressing political intentions (van Deth, 2014; Verba et al., 1978). Such actions include traditional activities such as voting or online activities including signing online petitions about a political issue (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022) or speaking out about a political issue on social media (Michalski et al., 2021). To get a comprehensive political participation scale, various measures, both traditional and online, were modified from studies such as those mentioned above and others (de Moor, 2016; McDonnell, 2020; Šerek et al., 2017). Respondents were asked if a PSMI or their content had in the past 12 months influenced them to vote, contact politicians, sign petitions, boycott products and services to make a political statement, post political content on social media, or participate in demonstrations, among others (Cronbach's α = .80).

Political Trust

Like the other scales, the political trust measurement scale was also adapted and modified from scales used in previous studies (Craig et al., 1990; Zmerli, 2014). Respondents saw a list including the U.S. Congress, political parties, law enforcement, and local government, among others. They then indicated how much trust they had in each entity regarding the likelihood to do what is right and solve problems. The scale was measured on a 1–5 scale where 1 = no trust at all and 5 = a lot of trust (Cronbach's α = .89).

Political Interest

Based on Lupia and Philpot's (2005) method of measuring political interest as a function of viewing a specific website, this variable measured political interest as a function of following a PSMI. Additionally, respondents indicated how much following a PSMI made them more likely to keep up with political information (Šerek et al., 2017). The specific statements were about a PSMI motivating them to read about politics, watch political programs, and talk about politics with others. Responses to the three statements were measured on a 1–5 scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree (Cronbach's α = .83).

Results

Goodness of Fit

Two SEM models were run using IBM SPSS Amos, one to test for internal OPE and the other for external OPE. Both models met various goodness-of-fit tests. Model 1 (internal OPE) returned a good fit.

The statistically significant chi-square value [χ^2 = (df = 242) 707.75; p < .001] may be explained by the large sample size and degrees of freedom (McQuitty, 2004). Additionally, the reported chi-square per degrees of freedom ratio (CMIN/df = 2.93) is less than 3.0 and within the acceptable range (Kline, 2004). The comparative fit index (CFI; .94), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; .93), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; .049. p = .69) all indicated a good fit (Stein, Morris, & Nock, 2012). Model 2 (external OPE) also returned a good fit despite the statistically significant chi-square [χ^2 = (df = 243) 703.90; p < .001; CMIN/df = 2.90]. The baseline comparison statistics were CFI = .94, TLI = .93, and RMSEA = .048 (p = .74).

Model 1 Results

As Table 1 indicates, following a PSMI had a significant positive effect on political interest and political trust, therefore supporting H1 and H2, respectively. See footnote 3 for the path diagram.[3] Political interest also had a significant positive effect on internal OPE, therefore supporting H3; but political trust did not affect internal OPE, therefore H4 was rejected. Internal OPE significantly affected political participation negatively; therefore, H5 was also rejected. Further analysis was run to examine mediation and serial mediation effects among the variables. Among all combinations, only one showed substantively significant effects. Political interest mediated the relationship between following a PSMI and internal OPE such that when political interest rose, internal OPE also rose (β = .39, p < .001). This answers RQ3. However, the serial mediation among following a PSMI, political trust, internal OPE, and political participation was significant but not substantive (β = .012, p < .05). The serial mediation among following a PSMI, political interest, internal OPE, and political participation was not significant. This shows that despite the significant effects reported, following a PSMI, political interest, political trust, and internal OPE did not positively affect political participation.

Table 1. SEM Results for Internal OPE.

Hypotheses	Description	b	SE	β	CR	Decision
Hypothesis 1	PSMI follow → Interest	.47	.030	.55***	15.70	Supported
Hypothesis 2	PSMI follow → Trust	.14	.034	.15***	4.12	Supported
Hypothesis 3	Interest → IOPE	.82	.042	.81***	19.40	Supported
Hypothesis 4	Trust → IOPE	.07	.03	.08	2.67	Unsupported
Hypothesis 5	IOPE → Participation	−.057	.014	−.17***	−4.01	Unsupported

Note. ***p < .001. IOPE, internal OPE.

Model 2 Results

Regarding external OPE, data as shown in Table 2 indicate that following a PSMI significantly increased both political interest and political trust, therefore supporting H6 and H7, respectively. See

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[3] https://osf.io/9h7np?view_only=6e31af6e0f6240ecb7a727c6cc8f9253

the footnote 4 for the path diagram.[4] Likewise, political interest and political trust both positively affected external OPE, therefore supporting H8 and H9, respectively. Like in model 1, external OPE negatively affected political participation; therefore, H10 was rejected. Additionally, only one mediation effect was both statistically and substantively significant. Data indicated that political interest mediated the relationship between following a PSMI and external OPE such that external OPE rose when political interest among those following a PSMI rose ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$). This relates to RQ4. This, however, did not affect political participation and no other mediation or serial mediation relationship did.

<div align="center">Table 2. SEM Results for External OPE.</div>

Hypotheses	Description	Estimate	S.E.	B	C.R.	Decision
Hypothesis 6	PSMI follow → Interest	.47	.03	.56***	15.52	Supported
Hypothesis 7	PSMI follow → Trust	.15	.03	.16***	4.34	Supported
Hypothesis 8	Interest → EOPE	.61	.05	.59***	13.37	Supported
Hypothesis 9	Trust → EOPE	.25	.03	.27***	7.41	Supported
Hypothesis 10	EOPE → Participation	−.08	.02	−.23***	−5.00	Unsupported

Note. ***$p < .001$. EOPE, external OPE.

<div align="center">General Results</div>

To get further insight into the data, I examined correlations among the variable as well as differences between online and traditional political participation. Like the SEM data, Table 3 shows that following a PSMI correlated more with political interest ($r = .51$, $p < .01$) than with political trust ($r = .18$, $p < .01$). Political interest also correlated more with internal OPE ($r = .69$, $p < .01$) and external OPE ($r = .54$, $p < .01$) than political trust did with the two. Additionally, internal OPE and external OPE were highly correlated ($r = .67$, $p < .01$). Political participation negatively correlated with all variables, which also reflects the SEM data. However, traditional and online political participation were highly correlated ($r = .58$, $p < .01$). Because this study uses the new Sasaki (2016) OPE scale, it is important to examine how the traditional and online political participation items performed even though political participation overall was low ($M = 1.56$, $SD = .28$). First, traditional political participation was significantly higher ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .35$, $p < .001$) than online political participation ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .32$). The collective Pearson coefficients also show that online political participation was more negatively correlated with other variables than traditional political participation. This is also reflected in Table 4. The observed traditional political participation items impacted the latent political participation variable more in the two SEM models as shown by the higher standardized regression weights.

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4 https://osf.io/npdc9?view_only=e0aa1619e3e9409d864c72d4dc94d7de

Table 3. Correlations Among Variables.

	Mean[†]	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
PSMI following rate	3.62	1.05	—						
Interest	3.52	0.96	.51**	—					
Trust	2.99	0.94	.18**	.29**	—				
Internal OPE	3.55	0.97	.43**	.69**	.31**	—			
External OPE	3.31	1.02	.34**	.54**	.39**	.67**	—		
Traditional participation	1.66	.35	−0.06	−.09**	−.30**	−.08*	−.16**	—	
Online participation	1.54	.32	−.16**	−.24**	−.11**	−.18**	−.22**	.58**	—

Note. **p < .01; [†]Means based on composite scores for each variable except for PSMI following rate

Table 4. Observed Effects on Participation.

	Type	OPE Type	b	SE	β ***	CR
Participation 1	Traditional	IOPE	1.0[†]	—	.63	—
Participation 10	Online	EOPE	1.0[†]	—	.63	—
Participation 10	Traditional	EOPE	1.0[†]	—	.63	—
Participation 9	Traditional	EOPE	.91	.068	.61	13.32
Participation 10	Traditional	IOPE	.91	.068	.61	13.38
Participation 3	Traditional	EOPE	.92	.071	.59	12.97
Participation 2	Online	IOPE	.91	.07	.59	13.00
Participation 3	Traditional	IOPE	.93	.072	.57	12.93
Participation 5	Traditional	EOPE	.93	.072	.57	12.90
Participation 4	Online	IOPE	.84	.069	.55	12.24
Participation 4	Online	IOPE	.84	.069	.55	12.24
Participation 7	Online	EOPE	.85	.069	.54	12.22
Participation 2	Online	EOPE	.85	.071	.52	11.93
Participation 4	Online	EOPE	.84	.071	.52	11.83
Participation 5	Traditional	IOPE	.84	.071	.52	11.92
Participation 6	Online	IOPE	.84	.071	.51	11.82
Participation 7	Online	IOPE	.71	.07	.43	10.19
Participation 8	Online	EOPE	.72	.07	.43	10.22
Participation 1	Traditional	EOPE	.59	.064	.39	9.28
Participation 8	Online	IOPE	.59	.063	.39	9.25
Participation 6	Online	EOPE	.62	.068	.38	9.12
Participation 9	Traditional	IOPE	.62	.068	.38	9.10

Note. ***p < .001; [†]Items were constrained as 1 in the SEM model.
EOPE, external OPE; IOPE, internal OPE.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study uniquely adds to political communication literature by examining how PSMIs, relatively new actors in the political process, influence their followers. Data indicated that PSMIs increase both political interest and political trust among their followers with a bigger effect on political interest. In turn, political interest increased both internal and external OPE, while political trust only increased external OPE. However, neither type of OPE translated into political participation. The fact that PSMIs increase political interest in the political process and that this positively affected both internal and external OPE is important for various reasons. First, any increase in political interest is beneficial. Second, because a higher percentage of those who follow influencers are young people (YouGov, 2021), it bodes well that PSMIs may ignite political interest in a demographic otherwise known for political apathy (Zimmermann et al., 2020). As mentioned, PSMIs also increase trust in the political process. While this effect did not match their effect on political interest, the positive direction of the effect bodes well for the political process, given that trust in government institutions is currently at a historic low (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Both political interest and political trust boosted OPE, and this too is important, given the untested role of PSMIs in the political process. Here too, political interest had a larger effect on OPE than political trust did, but the positive direction of the overall effects also bodes well for the political process. This also reflects current research indicating the positive effect of political trust and political interest on PE (Blais et al., 2014; Cicatiello et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2018). However, none of the examined variables improved political participation. This is both a departure from and a reflection of prior literature. Research indicates that political interest, political trust, and PE generally improve political participation (Buehler, 1977; Maurissen, 2020; Michalski et al., 2021; Oh & Lim, 2017). But like in the current study, results from studies on PE and social media are mixed (Heiss & Matthes, 2016; Martin et al., 2016).

Noteworthy also was that all interactions involving political participation were negative, and none of the variables predicted political participation. This is contrary to research showing that following an influencer increases political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022) and that OPE also improved political participation (Chen et al., 2019). This suggests that whatever gains PSMIs fostered regarding political interest, political trust, and OPE not only diminished but decreased the chances of political participation. While this study cannot answer this intriguing finding, future scholars may examine why PSMIs can foster political interest, political trust, and OPE but not political participation. As reported in the results section, traditional political participation outperformed online participation. Traditional political participation included voting and attending rallies and local meetings, among other activities. Online political participation included signing online petitions, posting political messages on social media, or changing one's online profile to make a political statement, among others. Given the extent of virtual interaction during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that lines between traditional and online political participation activities have become blurred. For instance, some subjects may have attended a local meeting or political rally virtually. Virtual political rallies were common during the 2020 U.S. presidential elections (Sullivan, 2020). Regardless, this is another intriguing finding that this study cannot answer. Future scholars may examine how influencers affect traditional and online political participation.

Implications

This study has theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. First, by examining PSMIs, an understudied topic (Bause, 2021; Casero-Ripollés, 2021), the study makes an important theoretical contribution. The fact that current trends indicate that influencers will play an even bigger role in social media communication in the future (Amra & Elma, 2020; YouGov, 2021) makes this contribution timely. Second, this study used Sasaki's (2016) new OPE scale, and the findings show that the scale is appropriate, thus making a methodological as well as a theoretical contribution. Furthermore, both SEM models showed a good fit. As mentioned, the traditional PE measures have been shown to inadequately predict efficacy in online and social media contexts (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Regarding the practical implications, even though the data showed that PSMIs did not impact political participation, their positive impact on political interest, political trust, and OPE should be encouraging to political campaigns. This gives more reasons to engage PSMIs and other influencers in campaign activities. Because influencers have a larger following among young people than other age groups (YouGov, 2021), such overtures would help increase political engagement among the young electorate, who are typically politically apathetic (Symonds, 2020). This is important because research indicates that PSMIs are better poised to engage young people in politics than mainstream media sources are (Zimmermann et al., 2020).

Limitations

This study comes with certain limitations. One such is the generalized definition of a PSMI. This study defined a PSMI as any influencer who regularly shares and discusses political content, and this may be a wide criterion. Even though other scholars have used a similar approach when studying PSMIs (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Zimmermann et al., 2020), the difficulty in correctly identifying and defining an influencer remains an issue when studying influencers (Ruiz-Gómez; 2019). Future scholars may use more specificity and only examine followers of specific and known PSMIs. Also, this was not a comparative study, therefore, no contrasts may be drawn between those who follow PSMIs and those who do not. Future scholars may compare PSMI followers and non-followers. Additionally, the study examined four of a variety of pertinent variables. For instance, the study did not examine the role of political knowledge in the process. This is important, given that influencers are content creators and therefore they are sources of information for their followers. Future studies may examine how and if political knowledge from following PSMIs affects PE and other aspects of the political process.

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