



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



Laidlaw Scholars Leadership and Research Programme 2026: Research Report

**Delegated Citizenship: Exploring Young Irish Adults' Reliance on
Social Media Influencers for Political Sense-Making and Its
Impact on Their Political Understanding and Behaviour**

Author: Anna Halvey

Supervisors: Dr. Roderick Condon and Dr. Tom Paskhalis

Abstract

Digital actors, including social media influencers (SMIs), are increasingly prominent within the public sphere. Bypassing traditional political institutions and legacy media, these informal digital intermediaries interpret, frame and simplify political information for their audiences, raising questions about citizens' reliance on them for political sense-making and the consequences of this reliance. This exploratory study examines this emerging phenomenon in the underexplored Irish context, conceptualising the potential outsourcing of political interpretation and judgement to SMIs as a form of 'delegated citizenship'. Drawing on international examples, existing survey evidence and 15 semi-structured interviews with young Irish adults, the study explores whether, why and how citizens rely on SMIs for political sense-making and the extent to which this shapes political understanding and behaviour. Thematic analysis revealed a complex and ambivalent process of influence. Participants encountered SMIs through algorithms and social networks and were drawn to their accessibility, relatability and infotainment value. SMIs often functioned as gateways to information and perspectives participants might not otherwise encounter, but were rarely relied upon exclusively; participants instead navigated multiple sources and placed varying trust in creators. Influence was most apparent in heightened political awareness, understanding and discussion, while substantive political action was comparatively limited. Delegated citizenship therefore emerged not as a complete outsourcing of political thought, but as selective reliance on SMIs for aspects of political sense-making. SMIs' growing intermediary role points to a potential re-verticalisation of the public sphere, with selective delegation alongside more passive forms of political participation carrying important implications within an already fragmented, post-truth political environment. These insights can inform efforts to strengthen citizens' critical engagement with SMI content and debates around the responsibilities and regulation of influential digital actors, ensuring that as political information environments evolve, citizens remain active participants in, rather than spectators of, democracy.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Table of Contents	ii
Introduction	1
Literature Review	2
Methodology	5
Results	7
Encountering SMIs	8
Appeal and Evaluation of SMIs	9
SMIs and Political Understanding	11
SMIs and Political Behaviour	12
Limitations	13
Discussion and Conclusion	14
Bibliography	16

Introduction

The way citizens engage with political information is changing. Rather than relying primarily on traditional political institutions or legacy media, many citizens now encounter political issues through social media influencers (SMIs) and other digital intermediaries who interpret, frame and simplify these issues on their behalf. This represents more than another source of information; it signals a shift in who mediates political information and raises questions about citizens' reliance on these actors for political sense-making.

This changing political intermediation forms part of a broader transformation of the public sphere. Following Habermas's (1989) seminal work in this domain, the public sphere was conceptualised as a relatively horizontal space in which citizens discussed matters of common concern, only to become increasingly verticalised as mass media concentrated information production and dissemination among powerful media organisations. Social media challenges this hierarchy by lowering barriers to participation and enabling more horizontal information exchange. Yet, despite this apparent re-horizontalisation, disparities in media visibility and influence persist. Within commercialised, algorithmically mediated platforms, SMIs can accumulate disproportionate visibility, creating new asymmetries in who shapes political discourse, with implications for how citizens form political judgements and participate in democratic life.

The political significance of these intermediaries is evident internationally, from YouTuber Rezo's intervention in Germany's 2019 European Parliament election (Klüver, 2024) and Mustafa Nayyem's role in the initial mobilisation of Euromaidan (Shmalenko et al., 2021) to the prominence of creators in the 2024 US 'influencer election' (Peck, 2025). Existing research similarly links SMIs to varied and sometimes contradictory effects on political understanding, engagement and behaviour (Munzir et al., 2025; Von Sikorski et al., 2025).

While such research demonstrates the growing influence of SMIs, less is understood about the demand side of this relationship: why citizens turn to these actors, how they engage with their content and citizens' perspectives on how political influence operates.

To address this gap, this study conceptualises the conscious or unconscious reliance on digital intermediaries for aspects of political interpretation and judgement as 'delegated

citizenship'. The concept draws on the idea that democratic citizenship involves active engagement in political life, including forming political judgements and making political choices, and considers what happens when elements of this role are entrusted to other actors. Crucially, it does not imply the complete outsourcing of political thought, but represents a partial reliance on SMIs, where individuals selectively outsource elements of their political sense-making.

These dynamics are examined within the Irish context, using interviews to explore participants' encounters with SMIs, evaluations of and reliance on these actors, and perceptions of SMIs' effects on their political understanding and behaviour.

In doing so, these findings contribute to wider interdisciplinary debates across political science, sociology and communication studies concerning opinion leadership, political reasoning and the transformation of the public sphere. More broadly, it considers what the growing role of informal digital intermediaries, and by extension spectator-oriented forms of political engagement, may mean for future regulation and democracy.

Literature Review

To understand changing political intermediation, it is useful to situate SMIs within the transformation of the public sphere. The public sphere is an important benchmark for assessing the relationship between communication and democratic life. Originally associated with eighteenth-century coffee houses and town halls, Habermas (1989) conceptualised the public sphere as a relatively horizontal space in which private citizens could come together to deliberate matters of common concern through rational-critical discourse, independent of established political and commercial interests (Dahlberg, 2005).

During the twentieth century, print and mass media increasingly verticalised this space, concentrating information production and circulation among large, corporatised intermediaries. The emergence of the internet and social media challenges this structure, however, with Habermas (2022, p. 158) describing it as a "caesura in the development of the media in human history comparable to the introduction of printing". By lowering barriers to participation, digital media enables individuals to become 'prosumers' of information (Lam,

2019; Dusi, 2016; García-Galera & Valdivia, 2014) and promises a more horizontal and participatory public sphere (Gibson & McAllister, 2015).

Yet this optimistic vision has been questioned (Iosifidis, 2011) as digital participation typically occurs within privately owned, commercially driven platforms, where algorithms produce substantial inequalities in whose voices receive attention (Gillespie, 2014). Habermas (2022) similarly argues that while platformisation has empowered users as “independent and equally entitled authors” (p. 159), its fame-based logic has contributed to a fragmented and “unbounded public sphere” (p. 160), posing new challenges for public opinion formation. Rather than eliminating vertical structures of intermediation, social media may therefore be generating new concentrations of influence. It is within this environment that SMIs have emerged as increasingly important information intermediaries (Riedl et al., 2021).

Understanding this intermediary role requires clarity over who constitutes an SMI. While numerous typologies distinguish between SMIs (Von Sikorski et al., 2025; Caliendo et al., 2024; Riedl et al., 2023), this study conceptualises SMIs as online content creators who cultivate a public identity, build relationships with followers and possess the capacity to influence those audiences. This includes both explicitly political SMIs and lifestyle, entertainment and other creators who occasionally engage with political or social issues (Muth & Peter, 2023; Schmitt, 2016).

This capacity for influence can be understood through traditional ‘opinion leadership’, where personal characteristics - ‘who one is’ - and perceived expertise - ‘what one knows’ - enable individuals to influence others (Katz, 1957; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). These classical mechanisms are evident among SMIs, whose influence is often built around relatability, credibility and authenticity labour (Ebben & Bull, 2023; Shtern et al., 2019). However, digital platforms enable opinion leadership at unprecedented scale while commodifying identities, relationships and audience attention. SMIs might therefore be understood as “old wine in new bottles” (Riedl et al., 2021, p. 4): established forms of opinion leadership operating within an increasingly digitalised, commodified and transnational public sphere.

This evolved form of opinion leadership has acquired considerable political significance. Research links SMIs to increased political awareness, efficacy and attitude formation (Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2023; Naderer, 2023; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Schmuck et al., 2022), exposure to alternative perspectives (Casero-Ripollés, 2020), and political engagement and voting behaviour (Bené & Juhász, 2025; Rothut et al.,

2024; Arnesson, 2023). However, SMIs have also been associated with misinformation (Boichak, 2023; Starbird et al., 2023), polarisation (Stewart et al., 2023; Garibay et al., 2019) and, in more extreme cases, radicalisation (Lewis, 2018). The wider ‘influencerisation’ of politics further reflects this shift, as politicians adopt the influencer playbook of platform affordances, personal branding and performed authenticity, while campaigns increasingly incorporate creators to reach and mobilise voters (Shmalenko et al., 2021).

These broader developments provide the context for examining SMIs in Ireland. Almost half (49%) of respondents to the 2025 Eurobarometer Social Media Survey reported following influencers, rising to 82% among 15-24-year-olds and 76% among 25-39-year-olds (European Commission, 2025). Similarly, 65% of Irish 18-24-year-olds and 64% of 25-34-year-olds reported consuming creator news content in the previous week (Lloyd et al., 2026). SMIs are also increasingly intersecting with Irish politics, from Stefanie Preissner explaining electoral politics to followers during the 2020 general election to creator mobilisation around Catherine Connolly’s 2025 Irish presidential campaign and far-right influencers’ role in circulating anti-immigration narratives and mobilisation around the 2023 Dublin riots (Fattibene et al., 2024).

Yet evidence of the growing prominence of SMIs does not establish whether their interpretations are trusted, relied upon or incorporated into political reasoning. This distinction informs the present study’s concept of ‘delegated citizenship’ and its examination of whether, why and to what extent young Irish adults rely on SMIs for political sense-making, and the resulting implications for their political understanding and behaviour.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory design using semi-structured interviews, allowing individual experiences to be explored in depth while enabling unexpected themes to emerge.

The target population comprised Irish adults aged 18-30, informed by evidence that younger adults are particularly likely to obtain political information through social media and encounter SMI content (Lloyd et al., 2026; European Commission, 2025). Purposive sampling was employed, seeking maximum variation across age and geographical location to capture a range of experiences rather than a statistically representative sample.

Recruitment was conducted through an open call circulated across university, civil society and personal networks. Respondents were screened for eligibility and required to be aged 18-30, based in Ireland, regular social media users, and to have encountered SMI content. Actively following SMIs was not a prerequisite for participation: by selecting participants based on potential exposure rather than pre-existing engagement, the study allowed patterns of reliance to emerge naturally during the interviews.

Fifteen participants aged 18-27 from different regions of Ireland were interviewed. Interviews moved from participants' general political information habits to their encounters with SMIs, including reasons for engagement, evaluations of creators and perceived effects on political understanding and behaviour. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom, lasted approximately 20 minutes and, with consent, were recorded, transcribed and anonymised.

Data were analysed thematically using an abductive approach, informed by the research questions, existing literature and the concept of delegated citizenship.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics¹

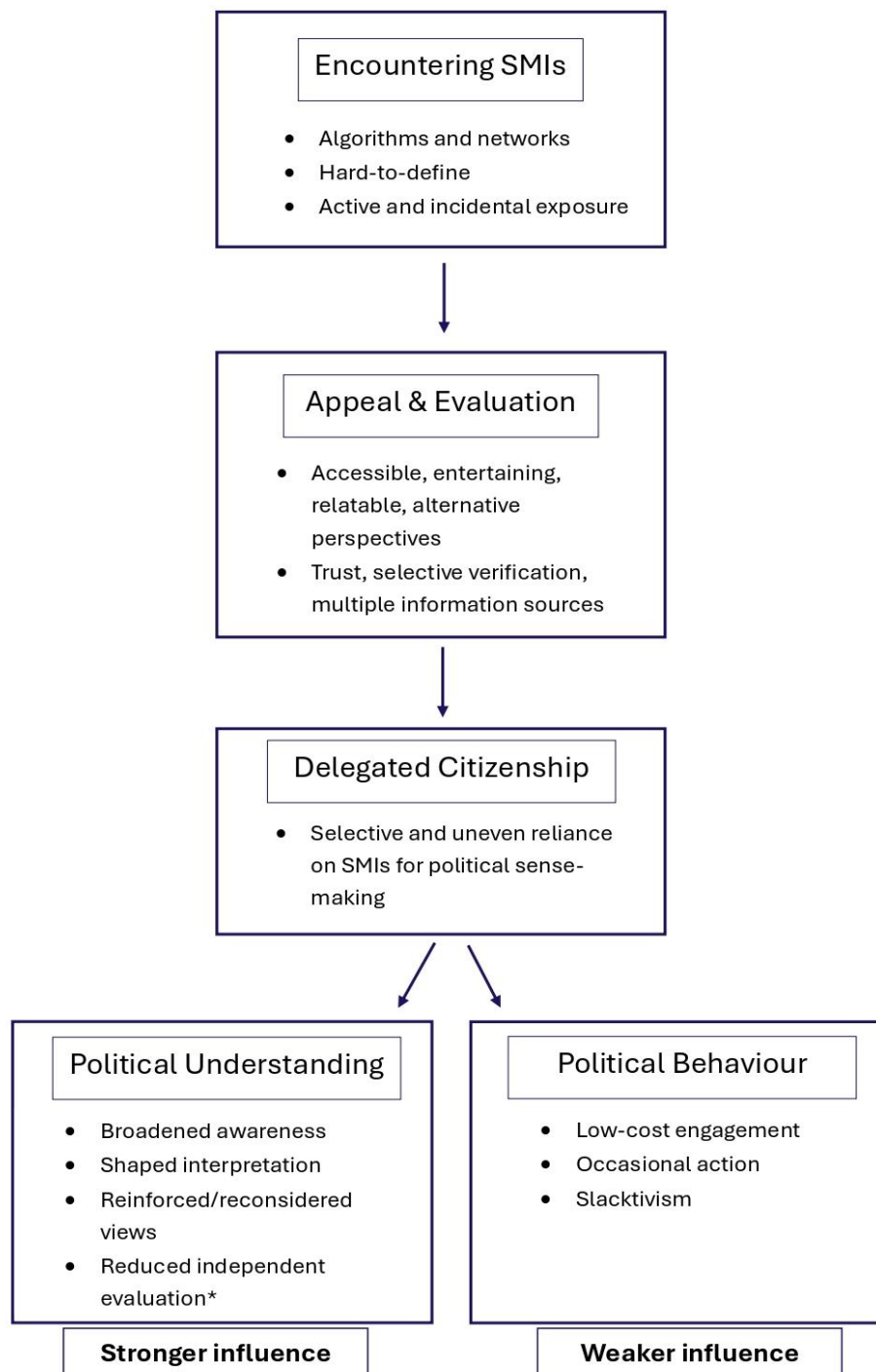
Participant	Age	Gender	Region
P1	21	Female	Urban
P2	26	Female	Urban
P3	21	Male	Urban
P4	21	Male	Urban
P5	23	Male	Suburban
P6	22	Female	Suburban
P7	25	Male	Rural
P8	23	Female	Suburban
P9	18	Female	Suburban
P10	20	Male	Suburban
P11	27	Female	Rural
P12	24	Female	Suburban
P13	18	Male	Rural
P14	22	Male	Suburban
P15	24	Male	Rural

¹ Although demographic comparison was not the primary focus of this exploratory study, several patterns in SMI engagement were evident. Younger participants generally reported more frequent and embedded engagement with SMIs, while those at the older end of the sample tended to engage more selectively. Gender differences were less pronounced, although some variation emerged in the types of SMIs and creators participants followed. Geographic variation was more apparent: suburban participants reported less frequent engagement, including with explicitly political creators, whereas urban and rural participants engaged more frequently and were more likely to identify explicitly political creators. Participants from similar geographic backgrounds also sometimes encountered or followed the same creators despite residing in different regions of Ireland. These patterns were not systematically examined given the study's scope and sample size, but warrant further investigation.

Results

The thematic analysis revealed a complex and often ambivalent relationship between participants and SMIs. The findings are presented across four interconnected themes, moving from participants' encounters with SMIs and the factors shaping their appeal and evaluation, to their perceived influence on political understanding and behaviour.

Figure 1. Summary of Key Findings



Encountering SMIs

While exposure to SMIs addressing political and social issues was widespread across the sample, the nature of this exposure varied.

Most participants actively followed SMIs. For some, SMIs were deeply embedded in their political information environments; P9 described them as a core part of how they encountered politics since becoming “politically sentient”. By contrast, a small minority encountered SMIs regularly without following them: P2 described influencers as “kind of pushed on [her] through algorithms and friends” and “always there”, despite her engagement remaining “very passive”. Exposure therefore was not confined to those who actively sought out such creators but formed part of participants’ everyday social media environments.

Participants described a variety of Irish and international SMIs spanning different political positions, including both dedicated political commentators and lifestyle or entertainment creators who discussed politics only occasionally. Reflecting this diversity, the boundaries of the SMI category were often unclear. Some participants were uncertain whether particular creators actually constituted “influencers”, while others resisted the label because of “negative connotations”. For example, P4 described “influencer” as “a derogatory term”, preferring “content creator” or “publisher of information”. This ambiguity highlighted the difficulty of delimiting the actors involved in contemporary political intermediation.

How participants encountered these actors reflected both algorithmic and interpersonal dynamics. Algorithmic recommendation was the most common route, with creators frequently described as simply “coming up” on participants’ feeds, while friends and peers introduced creators through conversations and “word of mouth”. These routes could also interact: P14 explained that Instagram’s display of friends’ likes and reposts made unfamiliar content feel “more personal” and credible.

Overall, participants encountered a diverse and difficult-to-define range of political intermediaries, both deliberately and incidentally. Yet exposure alone did not constitute reliance on these actors for political interpretation or judgement. The following section examines how SMIs cultivated audience attention and converted casual viewership into reliance on SMIs for political sense-making.

Appeal and Evaluation of SMIs

Participants engaged with SMIs because they made political information accessible and understandable, communicated it in engaging and relatable ways, and provided alternative perspectives.

SMIs' ability to make complex issues more "manageable" and "digestible" was very prominent. Participants described independent understanding as requiring considerable time and effort, whereas SMIs filtered and condensed information into accessible forms. As P1 explained, "if you see a short form video breaking things down, instead of [a] long article, it kind of helps you understand". Combined with being immediately available "at the touch of a button" (P11), SMIs reduced the effort involved in accessing and making sense of political information.

Their communication style further strengthened their appeal. Participants highlighted humour, attention-grabbing hooks and passionate delivery, with P10 contrasting influencers' "shorter, more exciting videos" with the "boring, monotone voices" he associated with legacy media. Others valued creators who blended information with entertainment in novel ways, such as "cooking and telling you about something that's going on in the world", describing this as "way more appealing, and probably more impactful" (P4).

Relatability and authenticity were similarly valued. Participants were drawn to creators whose experiences or identities resonated with their own, including those offering "an opinion from a young person's point of view" (P13). Perceived authenticity could foster a "sense of personal relationship"; as P7 explained, influencers are "meant to be down with the people and be just like you and authentic. So you're gonna listen more."

Participants also appreciated the range of perspectives SMIs provided. Some were drawn to issues or viewpoints they perceived as overlooked elsewhere that news sources "wouldn't tackle or don't talk about too much" (P13), while others deliberately sought creators whose views differed from their own. SMIs could therefore both reinforce familiar perspectives and expose participants to viewpoints they might not otherwise encounter.

Whether participants relied on SMIs for political interpretation, however, depended on how they evaluated their credibility. Engagement did not equate to unquestioned trust. Almost all participants distinguished between more and less credible sources, including among SMIs themselves. P5 explained that he would "trust certain [SMIs] more than others",

particularly those focused on current affairs rather than advertising products. Participants also questioned creators' motivations: P2 questioned "how genuine their interest is", while P1 questioned "who was paying for them". Established news organisations were consequently regarded as more reliable, despite being used less, due to their professional standards, regulation, reputation and accountability mechanisms.

However, assessments of credibility were rarely straightforward. Participants also identified shortcomings within legacy media, with some describing established outlets as omitting important information or failing to tell the "truth" or the "whole story" (P13). For some, an influencer's political position was easier to identify and account for than the perceived ideological assumptions of established media. P3 contrasted the New York Times' "vested interests" with an influencer who was "very clear about the political agenda he has". Reliance therefore depended not simply on whether a source was established or informal, but on assessments of its interests, transparency and motivations.

Nevertheless, most participants did not rely exclusively on SMIs, who instead occupied a complementary role within their broader information environment. While SMIs often provided an initial source of information or interpretation, participants typically consulted news websites, search engines or interpersonal sources alongside them to cross-check claims. However, this verification was selective. Despite emphasising its importance, most reported accepting information at "face value" unless an issue particularly interested or concerned them. As P12 explained, "if there's something very serious, I will go and check". Reliance was therefore conditional, with the extent of independent verification varying across participants and issues.

Ultimately, SMIs' accessibility, engaging communication and ability to filter and interpret complex issues reduced the informational and cognitive burden of political sense-making, creating conditions in which aspects of this process could be 'delegated' to them. However, engagement did not correspond to unequivocal trust or reliance, which varied considerably between participants and creators. The following section examines whether and how these relationships shaped participants' political understanding and behaviour.

SIMs and Political Understanding

Most participants attributed some role to SIMs in shaping their political understanding, although its extent varied and was not always readily recognised. Some initially denied significant influence despite describing SIMs as informing their understanding, shaping their views or, in stronger cases, reducing independent evaluation.

SIMs broadened participants' awareness of political issues and perspectives and made complex topics more accessible. P2, for example, used creators to "help inform [her] opinions" and develop "a broader understanding", including of why someone with whom she disagreed might think differently. P15 similarly described an influencer's discussion of Irish political structures as something they "wouldn't even have considered" until prompted to "think about it". SIMs therefore played an informational role in political sense-making.

SIMs also contributed to participants' political views without necessarily changing their positions outright. Several described creators as strengthening, developing or "solidify[ing]" their thinking. P3, for example, described one creator as a "gateway" to different philosophies and forms of critical thinking that shaped how he evaluated political information. In some instances, SIM influence therefore extended beyond outright opinion change to reinforcing, developing or prompting reconsideration of existing views.

Participants also described stronger forms of SIM influence in which reliance on particular creators could reduce independent political evaluation. P5 reflected that consuming "much more of one influencer versus another" could leave someone "completely oblivious" to alternative events or perspectives. P2 similarly questioned whether attachment to a creator could lead her to "automatically go along with what someone says" rather than asking "is it actually how I feel?". P3 likewise wondered whether his political opinions were his own or whether he was "falling for [a creator's] rhetoric".

However, participants were generally more confident identifying such influence in others than themselves, describing family and friends becoming more entrenched in political positions or adopting SIM arguments. P4 believed SIMs could give peers "a false sense that they had extensive knowledge about something". This perceived reduction in critical evaluation was repeatedly characterised as "dangerous", "scary" or "unsettling", particularly for younger generations. While these accounts cannot establish influence on third parties,

they reveal a tension between participants' recognition of influence on others and their portrayal of their own engagement as relatively independent.

In sum, SMIs assumed different roles in participants' political understanding, from broadening awareness to shaping interpretation and, in stronger accounts, reducing independent evaluation. These effects varied considerably and were not always recognised by participants themselves. Delegated citizenship therefore emerged as selective and uneven rather than a wholesale outsourcing of political thought, which nonetheless could run deeper than the conscious awareness of participants themselves.

SMIs and Political Behaviour

While participants identified a clearer relationship between SMI engagement and political understanding, the relationship with political behaviour was less pronounced.

The most commonly reported behavioural outcomes were increased political discussion and low-cost engagement rather than more active participation. Participants described SMI content as able to stimulate discourse, introduce political issues or campaigns and heighten their "desire and awareness of how to get involved" (P8). However, more substantive changes, including boycotting, electoral behaviour and political mobilisation, were reported only occasionally.

SMIs could therefore provide an entry point into political engagement without necessarily prompting further participation. P1 traced the "beginning of any political engagement" to influencers online, while acknowledging being "not very involved in real life" and reflecting that, without social media influencers, she might instead "go to protests to learn about these things and to build a community that's more engaged". Participants also raised concerns about 'slacktivism', whereby consuming, sharing or discussing political content could create a sense of participation without further action. P2 described this as a "persona of someone who's really engaged", despite this being "not the same as actually going to a protest or actually boycotting a company".

Where behavioural change occurred, SMI influence was often mediated through participants' social environments. First, seeing SMI content shared by peers could reinforce its message and encourage action. P6 described registering to vote after encountering SMI voter-registration content and seeing it shared by people she followed, while P14 described such reposting as creating a "chain of credibility" that encouraged action. Second, social

dynamics could create pressure to act. Following creators could operate as a “social symbol” (P3), while P6 questioned whether people reposted content because “‘X, Y, Z’ is [doing it], so I’m going to do it”. Another participant described boycotting a product following commentary from a local influencer partly because of concern about peer perceptions. SMI influence on political behaviour could therefore be shaped by participants’ wider social environments.

Taken together, SMI influence on political behaviour, often mediated through social relations, was limited but still evident, operating more consistently through political discussion and low-cost engagement than through voting, mobilisation or other offline participation.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. Firstly, the small, purposively selected sample is not representative of the wider Irish population. Volunteer recruitment may also have introduced selection bias towards individuals more interested in politics or social media. Secondly, the study relies on self-reported perceptions of influence. Participants may not recognise how information sources shape their political understanding or behaviour, while social desirability may have affected accounts of critical evaluation, verification and political behaviour. Thirdly, the qualitative design precludes causal claims. Reported changes in political understanding or behaviour cannot be attributed to SMI engagement independently of existing beliefs, other information sources and wider social environments. Finally, thematic analysis necessarily involves researcher interpretation, meaning that the identification and interpretation of themes may have been shaped by the researcher’s analytical judgements.

Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, this study suggests that the rise of SMIs is reshaping not only how young Irish adults access political information, but how they interpret and make sense of politics.

The findings provide qualified support for delegated citizenship: participants sometimes relied on SMIs to filter, simplify and interpret political issues, delegating elements of political sense-making to these actors. This was not a wholesale outsourcing of political thought, but a selective and uneven process shaped by varying levels of trust, verification and critical engagement. Importantly, this reliance appeared more consequential for political understanding than political behaviour.

Situated within the Irish context, these findings broadly align with previous research linking SMIs to political awareness, attitude formation and engagement (Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2023; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022), as well as exposure to alternative perspectives and ideological reinforcement (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Koerner, 2016). However, this study extends this literature by shifting attention from whether SMIs influence citizens to how citizens come to rely on them for political interpretation. This demand-side perspective suggests that SMIs' significance lies not only in their capacity to shape opinions, but in citizens' willingness to let them, providing a qualitative account of this underexplored relationship and the extent to which younger Irish citizens grant SMIs a role in interpreting political reality.

The findings also lend partial support to concerns about a potential re-verticalisation of the public sphere. While social media has widened access to political information, participants' reliance on SMIs to filter and interpret that information suggests that interpretative power may increasingly concentrate around intermediaries whose visibility and authority are shaped by algorithms, platforms and commercial incentives.

The democratic implications are complex. For political understanding, SMIs can make politics more accessible and broaden exposure to diverse perspectives, yet excessive reliance on personalised interpretations could weaken independent evaluation and heighten risks of selective framing, misinformation and ideological echo chambers. For political behaviour, their capacity to stimulate discussion without consistently translating into substantive participation exposes a further tension: citizens may become better informed yet increasingly reliant on others to interpret politics, without actually becoming more active in shaping it. This raises the possibility of a more spectator-oriented democracy.

The findings also highlight the need for greater transparency around the interests and motivations shaping SMI content, raising questions about the responsibilities and regulation of these emerging political intermediaries. The transnational nature of digital influence (González-Díaz & Quintas-Froufe, 2024; González-Díaz et al., 2024) and tensions surrounding freedom of expression, however, complicate where responsibility should lie (Takeuchi & Eid, 2026; De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022). Regulation alone cannot safeguard democratic citizenship; however, media literacy is equally important in equipping citizens to critically interrogate political information and those interpreting it on their behalf.

Future research should examine delegated citizenship across larger and more diverse populations and longitudinally investigate whether reliance on SMIs produces lasting changes in political understanding, judgement and participation. Comparative research should also assess how different regulatory and media-literacy approaches should optimally evolve.

Ultimately, as the public sphere becomes increasingly mediated by informal digital actors, the challenge is not to eliminate these new forms of intermediation, but to ensure citizens retain agency within them — remaining active participants in, rather than spectators of, democracy.

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