

Think For Yourself?

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

Introduction & Research Question

Social media influencers (SMIs) increasingly bypass traditional institutions and legacy media to interpret, frame and simplify political issues for their audiences. This shift in who mediates political information raises important questions about how citizens understand politics, form judgements and participate in democratic life. Yet while research demonstrates the growing political influence of SMIs, less is understood about the demand side of this relationship: why citizens turn to these actors and whether they come to rely on them for political sense-making. This study explores this emerging form of political reliance in the Irish context, conceptualising the conscious or unconscious 'outsourcing' of elements of citizens' political interpretation and judgement to SMIs as 'delegated citizenship'.

Whether, why and how young Irish adults rely on SMIs for political sense-making, and the extent to which this shapes their political understanding and behaviour.

Theoretical Context

The rise of SMIs reflects a **transformation of the public sphere**.¹ While social media appeared to horizontalise political communication, algorithmic inequalities in visibility and the profit-driven attention economy have enabled new forms of political intermediation.² SMIs represent one such form, emerging as **contemporary opinion leaders** who combine established forms of influence with unprecedented digital reach. Research links their content to both increased engagement and risks to independent political judgement, with significant implications for democratic participation.³ This matters particularly in Ireland, where 82% of 15–24-year-olds follow influencers⁴ and 65% of 18–24-year-olds consume creator news content.⁵ Yet **following SMIs does not equal reliance for political sense-making—a distinction this study explores.**

Methodology

- Design:** Qualitative, exploratory study using semi-structured interviews
- Participants:** 15 Irish adults aged 18–27, purposively recruited through university, civil-society and personal networks to ensure variation across age and region. Participants were screened for regular social-media use and prior exposure to SMI content
- Interviews:** ~20 minutes, exploring political information habits, SMI encounters, trust and evaluation, and perceived effects on political understanding and behaviour
- Analysis:** Abductive thematic analysis informed by the research question, existing literature and the concept of delegated citizenship

Findings

Four interconnected themes trace participants' engagement with SMIs: from how they encounter and evaluate them, to how selective reliance emerges as delegated citizenship, and how this shapes political understanding and behaviour.

1. Encountering SMIs



- Active & incidental exposure
- Algorithms & social networks
- Diverse & difficult to define

"Influencers are kind of pushed on me through algorithms and friends."

2. Appeal & Evaluation



- Accessible & engaging
- Relatable & perspective-broadening
- Conditional trust & verification

"Influencers are meant to be down with the people and be just like you and authentic. So you listen more."

3. Delegated Citizenship



- Selective & uneven reliance
- Rarely a wholesale outsourcing of political thought

"I worry that I automatically go along with what someone says instead of stopping and asking myself, 'Is it actually how I feel?'"

4. Political Understanding & Behaviour



Stronger Perceived Influence	Weaker Perceived Influence
• Broadened awareness • Shaped/reinforced views • Reduced independent evaluation*	• Low-cost engagement/slacktivism • Rare substantive action • Socially mediated*

"The beginning of any political engagement for me was probably through influencers online... [but I'm] not very involved in real life."

Discussion

- The findings provide **qualified support for delegated citizenship**.
- However, reliance on SMIs was selective rather than a wholesale outsourcing of political thought, shaped by varying levels of trust, verification and critical engagement. Similarly, delegated citizenship was more consequential for political understanding than behaviour.
- By shifting from whether SMIs influence citizens to how and why citizens rely on them, the study highlights the demand side of political influence.
- **SMIs' significance may therefore lie in citizens' willingness to grant them a role in interpreting political reality**, potentially contributing to a re-**verticalisation of the public sphere**.

Conclusion & Future Research

SMIs are reshaping not only how young adults encounter political information, but how they make sense of politics. While improving accessibility and exposure to different perspectives, reliance may also pose risks to independent political judgement and public opinion formation, potentially contributing to a more spectator-oriented form of democracy. This highlights the need for:

- **Stronger media literacy** and critical evaluation
- **Greater SMI transparency** and **regulatory debate**
- **Testing delegated citizenship** across populations and over time

- As digital intermediation grows, citizens must retain agency—
- *remaining active participants in, rather than spectators of, democracy.*

