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Exploring Young Women's Construction of Social and Political Communicative Realities

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Purpose

The time-honored role that communication plays in the symbolic construction of young adults' reality is always changing, perhaps no more so than in the age of ubiquitous global media. Yet research on how young people construct contemporary social media and political experiences is lacking. This panel, designed to extend research, reports the results of a qualitative examination of young women's experiences with two salient aspects of contemporary life: the social, focusing on their parasocial involvement with social media influencers, but also the more politically consequential arena, with a look at the development of political attitudes as a function of political events and mediated politics.

Literature Review

When social media influencers disclose more information about themselves online, they gain positive benefits

When influencers are highly familiar to viewers, they have more followers, but lower engagement. On the other hand, if the social media influencer is more likeable, they will have fewer followers but higher engagement.

Followers view the influencer-follower relationship as collectively reciprocal, (a)synchronously interactive, and co-created.

Most participants showed positive bias towards their favorite influencers' endorsements or sponsorships, whether they were openly disclosed or not,

See, for example: Lou, C. (2021). Social media influencers and followers: Theorization of a trans-parasocial relation and explication of its implications for influencer advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 1–18.

Methodology

Researchers conducted and audiotaped an in-depth interview with 15 young women (in their '20s), asking these questions and probing.


(1) Could you tell me a little about this? How does following influencers help you cope with life or make you feel?

(2) Think about how several social and political issues (e.g., possible changes in women's reproductive rights, Donald Trump's presidency, and role of African Americans in America) had an impact or role in your life and tell me some examples of how this worked and how they touched on your life.

(3) Interviewers, coding each person with a number to protect their privacy, transcribed each individual's response.

(4) The research group, calling on qualitative methodology, went through all the data and came up with general themes that described the collective responses. Interviewers then used these themes to select interviewees' responses that best fit the themes.





**Chamberlain
Coffee**

★ STEEPED COFFEE BAG ★

tasting notes of chocolate
cherry, and nuts



100% COFFEE

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN
COLOMBIA, GUATEMALA, NICARAGUA

MEDIUM ROAST
FRESHLY GROUND • NITRO SEALED

The background features two large teal shapes: a triangle on the left and a trapezoid on the right, both pointing towards the center. The text is centered between these shapes.

Themes in Reasons Participants Gave for Turning to Influencers

1. Influencer as a role model:

- “I feel like I view the people I have in my life as role models not like influencers”
- “They all started from somewhere small. Now they have become these public figures where people can look up to them and reach out to them. They have always been down to earth, I wanna say.”

2. Influencers as Relatable

- “...Victoria Garrick, obviously I’m a D1 athlete and so she’s gone through that and she also focuses on the mental side and body image and all that stuff and I feel like that’s something I struggle with and a lot of people struggle with.
- “She’ll talk about her down days, and she’ll post unflattering photos of herself and show that everyone is real.”

3. Influencers affirming minority status

- (Seeing) “queer people online definitely helped me with my own journey through that. Again, growing up around a bunch of straight people you don’t exactly have examples for what it means to be queer, so they definitely helped.”

Major Issues
that Influenced
Participants'
Social and
Political
Attitudes

Abortion rights

Pandemic

Donald Trump's presidency

Role of African Americans in America

"YOU GOTTA FIGHT..
FOR YOUR RIGHT..
TO: ~~PARTY~~ EXIST IN
A WORLD CONTROLLED BY
SENILE, WEALTHY, WHITE MEN
W/ GOD COMPLEXES of our own

SCOTUS. YOU HAVE
BLOOD
ON YOUR
HANDS



Passive

- “[On if she ever posts political content:] I do not. I try to keep anything political off of my social medias because I don’t need the drama that comes with it”
- “I know everyone has their own opinion on things, so I just kind of look at their posts...but I’m not going to start a fight over it.”
- “I try to keep my own thoughts off of social media. All of the employers I’ve worked for have said they have looked up my social media, so I don’t want that to become an issue.”

Nature of their Political Attitudes

Active

- “[On George Floyd Murder:] I went to a protest that was going on during that time with one of my friends so that kind of influenced me. If that event didn’t happen, I wouldn’t have been at the protest.”
- “[On George Floyd murder?] It just made me look into it more and I feel like I’ve even posted on social media about it too, which I might not have done if all those things weren’t occurring”

Nature of Political Attitudes

Disillusionment

- “I looked at the higher ups as good people who tried to help us and tried to help our country and they cared for all the people. When they put him (Trump) into office, and how he was, I looked at it as a joke.

Processes in Political Attitude
Formation and Change

Reinforcement

“The only thing I thought differently about was maybe that we should not have a bunch of men running women’s lives, **but I’ve always thought that.**”

“It (abortion rights topics via social media) was so upsetting and definitely influenced my viewpoint a lot. **It just intensified my attitude on it.**”

Change

“I think that had a major impact (MeToo) on my life as a woman because growing up it was always a fear to me...”

“[after seeing incidents between police and black people:] Yeah, I’d say I was informed on issues, but I wasn’t understanding that police violence was as targeted as it was, or subconsciously intentional.”

Shortcomings in the study

- Questions could have probed more in-depth attitudes more specifically.
- Sample composed primarily of White adult women.
- Study was conducted before the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, and some responses might have been different if interviews were conducted after the study.

Discussion: Influencers

- The study offered exploratory research to extend research in the area. We gained insights on why people turn to influencers – role modeling, relatability, and affirmation.
- Young women can form strong parasocial relationships with influencers, turning to and emulating them when they are looking for a friend, feeling down, and looking for self-esteem support, confidence and validation.
- Influencers can disarm followers by openly acknowledging they are promoting a brand.
- Fundamental questions: Are influencers offering social support to followers, with followers willing to put aside their knowledge influencers make money from their fandom, as they are gratified by the parasocial friendship they gain? Or is all this the latest iteration in capitalism that exploits individuals to advance a brand?

Discussion: Political attitude socialization

The study offered information about the contemporary issues that concern some adult women, showcasing that some participants are active, with their strong views reinforced by the contemporary environment. Our participants clearly are cognizant of issues and can feel reinforced, disillusioned and changed by the contemporary political environment.

Importantly, there was not an alignment between their enthusiasm for social media influencers and their less passionate consideration of key political issues of the day. As a group, they were more emotionally involved with influencers than political issues.

Fundamental questions: In a democracy, where the public must deliberate on issues, through their elected representatives, are young people simply following an issue superficially, switching when a new issue comes into a media cycle? Or are they seriously processing issues, as we saw with abortion and race? How can political leaders and media motivate individuals to more deeply consider burning political and social issues of the day?