

How Friends' Recommendations for Instagram Posts of Political Influencers and News Media Affect Social Media Users' Information and Communication Activities

The hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) allows different actors such as political influencers, news media, and citizens to interact with each other on social media. Little research has examined the effects of these interactions so far. The present study investigates how friends' recommendations for Instagram posts of political influencers and news media affect social media users' information and communication activities.

Building on the theoretical and empirical literature on social media users' parasocial relationship with (political) influencers (e.g., Bond, 2016), news media trust (e.g., Sterrett et al., 2019), and recommendations on social media (e.g., Kümpel, 2019), we assume that social media users' information and communication behavior is influenced by both the communicator and by recommendations of friends.

The study is based on a randomized 2×2 between-subjects online experiment conducted in Germany in summer 2021 ($n = 163$; convenience sample). Participants were exposed to a fictitious Instagram post about the EU-wide ban on selling single-use plastic products (a) of a prominent German political influencer or (b) of Germany's most popular newscast (*factor 1: communicator*). The post was either (a) embedded in an Instagram story of a participant's friend or (b) not embedded in a story (*factor 2: recommendation*; see Kaiser et al., 2021 for a similar procedure). The groups did not differ with regard to sociodemographics and prior (political) attitudes.

Before exposure, participants were asked about their parasocial relationship with the influencer and their trust in news media. After exposure, participants indicated how likely they were to interact with the post (4 items; $\alpha = .74$), seek further information about the topic, and talk to others about the topic.

The results of ANCOVAs indicate that participants would be more likely to interact with the newscast's post than with the influencer's post. If the post was recommended by a

friend, participants were more likely to interact with the post, seek further information, and talk to others about the topic. Interaction effects indicate that the friend's recommendation has a greater impact when it refers to the journalistic post.

The study's findings are noteworthy for two reasons: First, even if the impact of political influencers is often taken as a given in public debate, users seem to rely more on traditional news media. Second, more research should focus on the "social" in social media, such as friends' recommendations, which can be examined with innovative research designs such as those used in this study.

References

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