

I Know Enough to Act!

Youth's Exposure to Political Content on Social Media and its Longitudinal Associations with Political Knowledge and Participation

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Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap - 06/02/2026

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Background and rationale

What about youth's political learning and mobilization on social media?



Towards a more fine-grained research approach (Kleinberg, 2024)

Background and rationale

- Changed opportunity structures for learning
 - **Political content** > strict journalistic 'news'
 - Formal, institutional + **lifestyle**, identity issues (Gonzalez et al., 2023)
- Logic of social media aligns with
 - **Current affairs knowledge**: short-term, recent societal events
 - **Subjective knowledge**: a *sense* of being informed

H1 Exposure to political content **increases** a) subjective knowledge and b) current affairs knowledge over time on the **within-person level**.



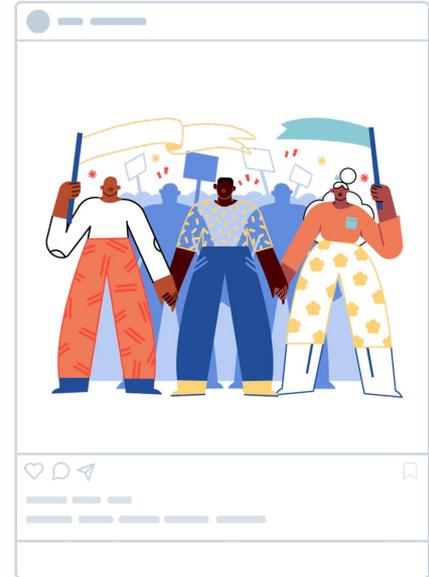
Background and rationale

- Attentively engaging with incidentally encountered, relevant content = '**second-level incidental exposure**' (Thorson, 2020; Kümpel, 2022)
- **Interaction:** opportunity x motivation to learn? (Nanz & Matthes, 2022; Weeks et al., 2022)

H2 Second-level incidental exposure **positively moderates** the relationship between political content exposure and a) subjective knowledge and b) current affairs knowledge on the **within-person level**.

Background and rationale

- **Political knowledge** aligns awareness of issues with opportunities for action (Shah et al, 2005)
- Youth's political **participation**
 - **Protest** outside political institutions
 - Political participation on **social media**
- **Monitorial citizens**: up to date, ready to act (Hustinx et al., 2012)



H3 Current affairs knowledge **increases** a) offline protest participation and b) participation on social media over time on the **within-person level**.

Background and rationale

- **Subjective political knowledge** as a “meta-cognitive” mediator
~ political efficacy
- Feeling more knowledgeable → more able to defend own views?
(Wojcieszak et al., 2016)
- **“Self-righteous circle”** of participation on social media?
(e.g., Lee & Valenzuela, 2024)

H4 Subjective knowledge **increases** a) offline protest participation and b) participation on social media over time on the **within-person level**.

Methods

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Sample & Procedure

- **Three wave panel study** ($N_{W3} = 2240$) in Flanders, Belgium; April ($W1$), May ($W2$), and June ($W3$) 2024
- **Elections** on June 9th during $W2$ and $W3$
- **Youth panel**: 16 to 30 years, 63.79% female, $M_{age} = 20.50$, $SD_{age} = 3.22$



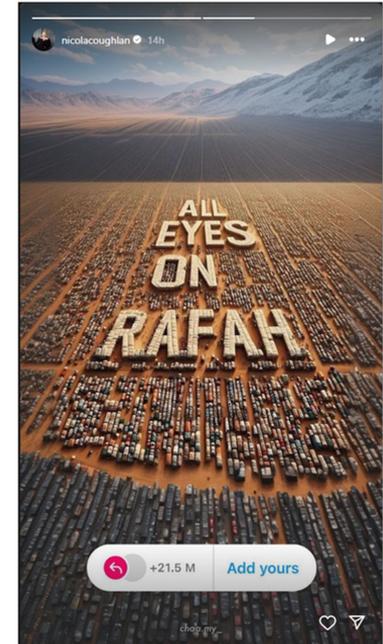
Measures

Political Content Exposure

- Never (1) – Very often (5)
- **Topics** based on Newman et al. (2023), Suuronen et al. (2021)
- $M(SD)_{w1} = 3.39(.65)$; $M(SD)_{w2} = 3.49(.66)$; $M(SD)_{w3} = 3.54(.40)$

*How often, in the past month, **did you see political content** about the topics below on social media?*

- *Belgian politics (e.g., politicians, policy, elections)*
- *International politics, war and conflict (e.g., Israel – Palestine, Ukraine)*
- *Social justice (e.g., poverty, racism, gender, sexuality)*
- *(Mental) health (e.g., care, vaccines, depression)*
- *Crime and safety (e.g., justice, terrorism, traffic safety)*

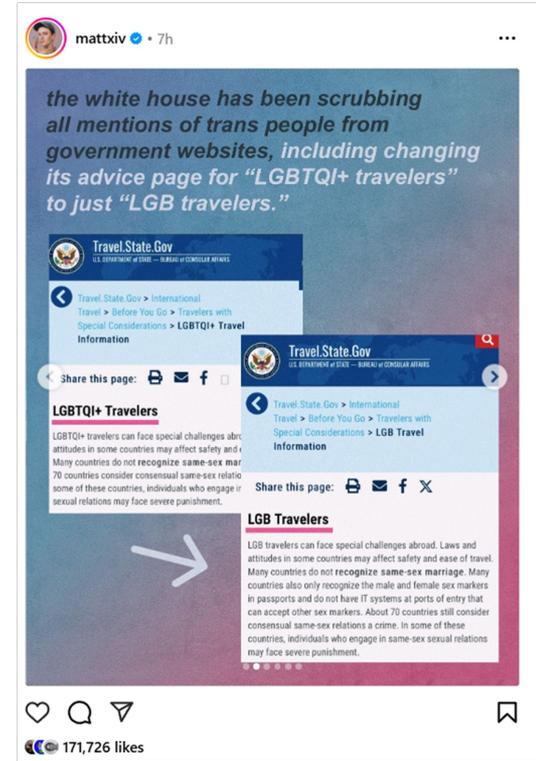


Measures

Second-Level Incidental Exposure

*“If you think about last month, how often did it happen that you **saw political content** by accident and you **paid careful attention** to it (e.g., you read the post)?”*

- Never (1) – Very often (5)
- $M_{w1} = 2.94$, $SD_{w1} = .96$



Measures

Current Affairs Knowledge

- **8 multiple choice questions:** 3 answer options + 'I don't know'
- Summative index: false + 'I don't know' = 0; correct = 1
- $M(SD)_{w1} = 5.52(1.87)$; $M(SD)_{w2} = 4.15(1.83)$; $M(SD)_{w3} = 4.95(1.83)$

Subjective Knowledge

- *"To what extent do you **feel like you know** a lot about the following societal themes?"* (cfr. exposure measure)
- Not at all (1) - Completely (5)
- $M(SD)_{w1} = 3.31(0.66)$; $M(SD)_{w2} = 3.25(0.69)$; $M(SD)_{w3} = 3.29(0.99)$

Measures

Social Media Political Participation

- 4 items; Never (1) – Very often (5)
- $M(SD)_{w1} = 1.49(.51)$; $M(SD)_{w2} = 1.53(.58)$; $M(SD)_{w3} = 1.50(.55)$
- E.g., *“Posted or shared something on a political or societal topic”*

Protest Participation

- 5 items; Never (1) – Very often (5)
- $M(SD)_{w1} = 1.48(.44)$; $M(SD)_{w2} = 1.53(.53)$; $M(SD)_{w3} = 1.45(.45)$
- E.g., *“Participated in a physical gathering for a social/political issue (march, meeting of an action group)”*

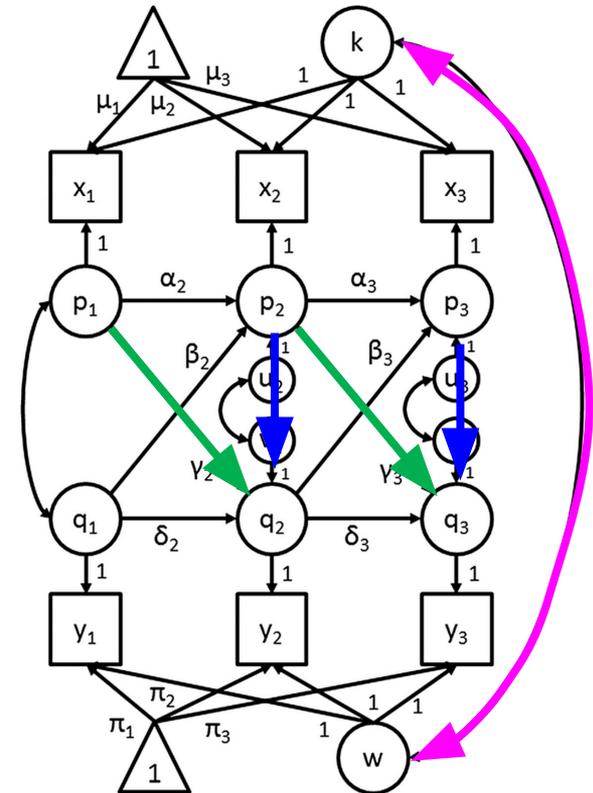
Data analysis

Random Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Model

3-wave panel design allows to test:

- **Within-person effects:** participants' deviations from own mean
- **Between-person effects:** tested via random intercept for each participant

+ modelled **contemporaneous paths** (within single wave) from exposure to knowledge

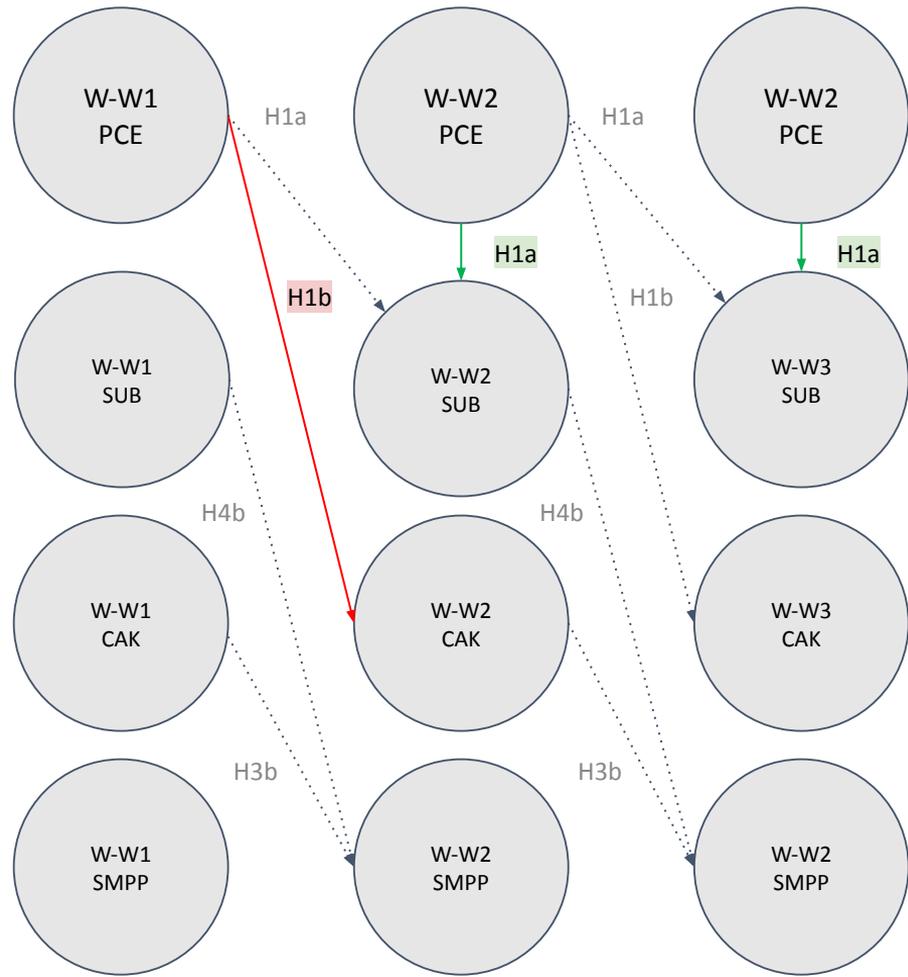
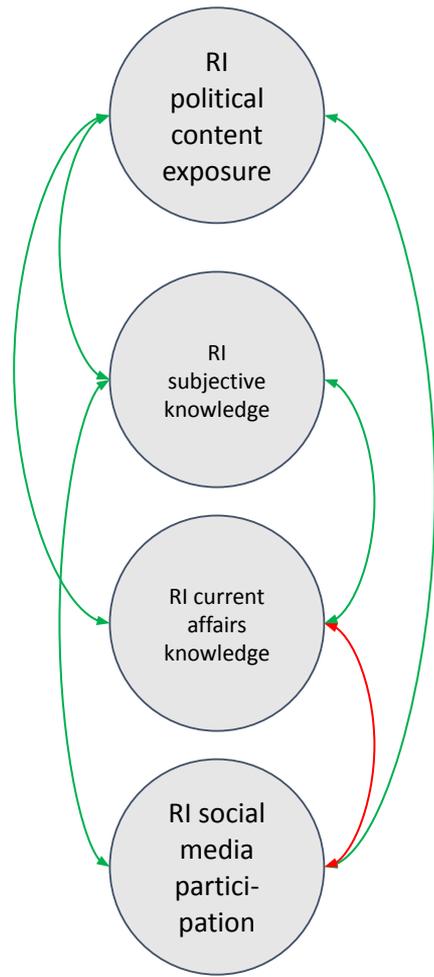


Results

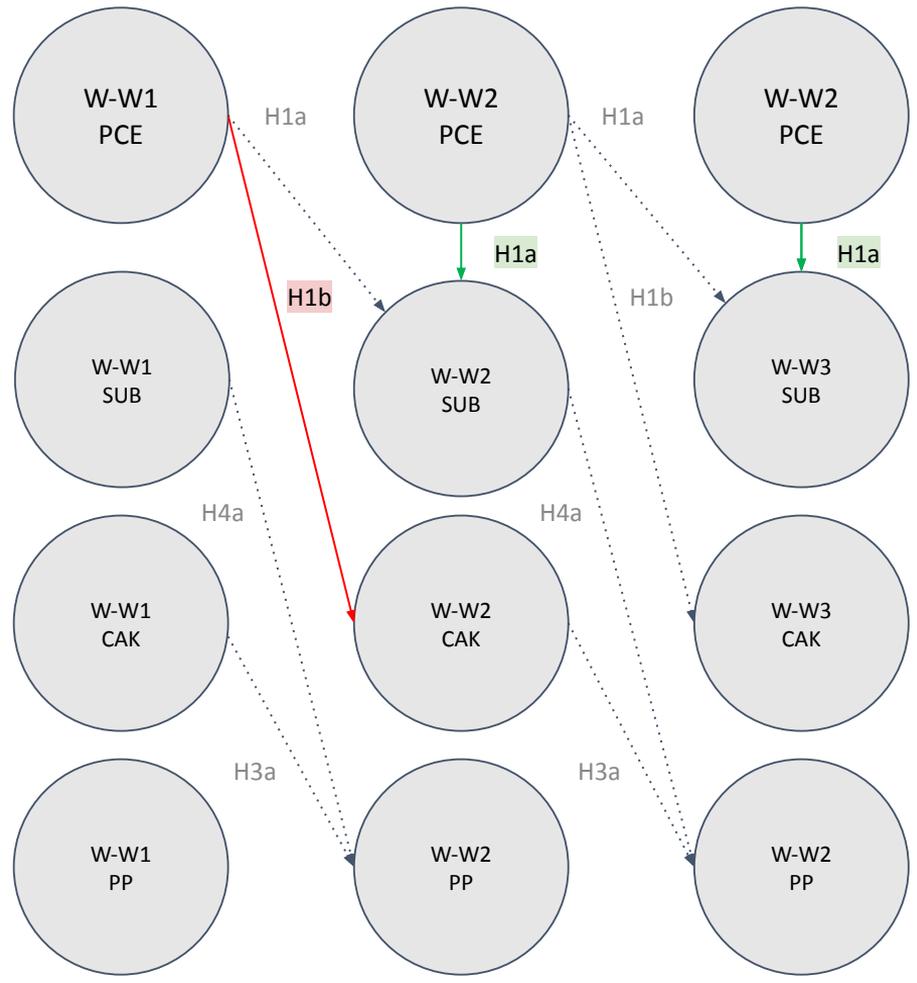
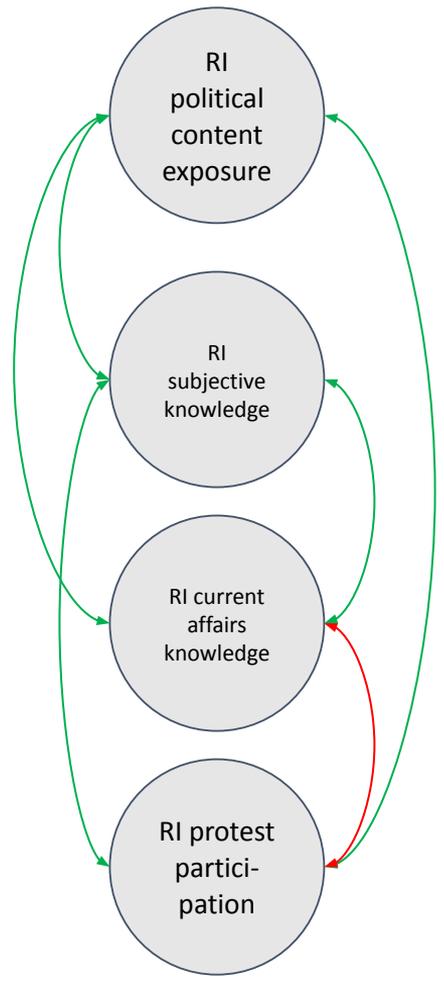
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Model 1



Model 2



Within x Between moderations

Does **second-level incidental exposure moderate** the association between political content exposure and knowledge?

- 8 models including interaction terms
- Cross-lagged (*model 3 - 6*) and contemporaneous paths (*model 7 - 10*)

→ No indication of moderation

→ Reject H2a,b

What does this mean?

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Discussion

1. Negative effects of political content exposure on current affairs knowledge?
 - a. In line with prior research (e.g., Amsalem & Zoizner, 2023), but inconsistent
 - b. Due to **issue-specific interest** and selective exposure? (Guo et al., 2024)
 - c. **But:** positive between-person association
2. Exposure increases one's subjective political knowledge
 - a. Shortly after exposure ~ contemporaneous effects
 - b. **Monitorial citizens:** state of surveillance, ambient awareness

Discussion

3. No moderation of second-level incidental exposure

- a. Due to study design?
- b. Need to unpack different modes of information gathering on social media

4. Mobilizing effects on the between-person level

- a. **Subjective knowledge** driving participation among youth: personal, emotional nature of politics?
- b. Increased knowledge of current affairs → **increased insecurities** about expressing opinions? Lack of deep background knowledge?

Thank you!

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