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Trending Topics, Growing Knowledge? How Curating Actors' Political Social Media Content Affects Youth's Political Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Whether youth can gain political knowledge through social media is long debated. Existing research has insufficiently accounted for different curating actors of political information, an indirect learning logic, and within-person changes. To fill these gaps, we conducted a large-scale three-wave panel study among 16- to 30-year-olds ($N_{T3} = 2276$) to examine how exposure to different social media actors such as politicians, peers, or influencers relates to the acquisition of current affairs knowledge over time. We investigated perceived opinion leadership gratifications as a novel underlying mechanism in this process. While increased exposure to all curating actors' political content was related to higher opinion leadership gratifications in the same wave, we found little indirect learning effects over time on the within-person level through obtained gratifications. This association emerged only during the national election period, when perceived opinion leadership gratifications from peers' political content were linked to above-usual gains in objective political knowledge over time.

KEYWORDS

Political learning; social media; curated flows; opinion leadership

Being exposed to political content on social media is part of the modern information environment, especially for young people. People with formal political roles, like politicians (Farkas & Bene, 2021) and journalists (Mellado, 2022), as well as those without formal ties to politics, such as ordinary people (Weeks et al., 2017), influencers (Suuronen et al., 2021), and celebrities (Gonzalez et al., 2024), share political content to varying degrees. Prominent examples are model Bella Hadid speaking up about Palestine or Kamala Harris capitalizing on TikTok trends to engage young voters. As young people increasingly rely on such social media actors for political information (Newman et al., 2025), questions arise about whether young people actually *learn* about politics from this content. Since holding knowledge on politics is needed to “act meaningfully as citizens” (Van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 5), considerable research has explored the potential for political learning on social media (for a meta-analysis, see Amsalem & Zoizner, 2023). While exposure to political social media content seems to make people feel more knowledgeable, it does not seem to translate into being

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more knowledgeable (Nanz & Matthes, 2022). However, several scholars have called for more nuanced research (e.g., Kleinberg, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the current study advances the existing research in three ways. First, most research measures general social media (news) use in relation to learning (e.g., Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). Such unnuanced measures can underestimate learning outcomes (Kleinberg, 2024) for two reasons: Marketing research indicated a more substantial persuasive influence can be expected from personal social media accounts (Johne, 2023), and the political content of social media personalities and ordinary citizens plays an increasingly important role in the social media diets of young people (Newman et al., 2025). Hence, our study examines five actor types who curate political information on social media—that is, politicians, journalists, peers, influencers, and celebrities. Second, the current body of research has so far documented the direct link between political content exposure and knowledge (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2023), while literature also reasons that part of this relationship can be explained by cognitive elaboration processes (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). Yet empirical evidence is lacking here, especially in view of how such processes take shape. Therefore, we draw from the Cognitive Mediation Model (Eveland, 2001) and the opinion leadership literature (Stehr et al., 2015) to examine whether obtained opinion leadership gratifications explain indirect learning from different sources. Third, existing studies examining the association between social media and political knowledge only measured between-person variations (e.g., Bode, 2016), which cannot account for changes within an individual—that is, whether social media exposure is related to changes in knowledge over time. With a large-scale three-wave panel design using a panel of $N_{T3} = 2,276$ young people, the current study allows separating within- and between-person variance (Certo et al., 2017).

The context of this study is the 2024 federal, regional, and EU elections in Belgium. Political knowledge is of particular importance during elections, because citizens need to hold a certain degree of knowledge to make informed voting decisions (Park, 2019). In Belgium, citizens are obliged to attend the polling station in federal and regional elections, which somewhat “forces” citizens to hold a certain degree of political knowledge. Simultaneously, elections and the campaigns leading up to them are unique phases in electoral cycles (Poljak & Van Aelst, 2024), with political content exposure spiking right before elections take place (Haugsgjerd & Karlsen, 2024).

Political Current Affairs Knowledge

Political knowledge can be distinguished on two dimensions: objective and subjective knowledge (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). *Objective* political knowledge refers to the ability of recalling political information from long-term memory (Carlson et al., 2009). Politically knowledgeable citizens are required for a healthy democracy, as they make more informed participatory decisions (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), for instance, by casting votes more aligned with their views (Park, 2019). *Subjective* knowledge refers to how knowledgeable someone thinks they are (Carlson et al., 2009). Research shows that such perceptions of one’s knowledge do not always correspond to factual knowledge (Yamamoto & Yang, 2022). This bias seems especially present among people who rely on social media for political information (Rapeli, 2024). Our study includes both subjective and objective knowledge and focuses on *political current affairs knowledge* (PCAK) due to our focus on

social media. This type of knowledge refers to short-term developments in the political and societal sphere (Barabas et al., 2014), which matches social media's fast-changing content about timely (political and societal) occurrences (Park, 2019). Several social media sources may play a role in shaping political knowledge.

Curators of Political Social Media Content

Drawing from Thorson and Wells' (2016) framework of curated information flows, the process of content curation, defined as "the production, selection, filtering, annotation, or framing of content" (p. 310), is no longer limited to traditional gatekeepers. In today's digital media environment, a wide range of actors, including friends, social contacts, computer algorithms, and individual media users themselves, can take part in shaping what information is seen and shared. Specifically, we identify five distinct types of "curating actors." First, politicians have personal accounts, where they share content about both their political and personal lives (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Second, journalists use personal accounts to share content ranging from material aligned with their organization to opinions and topics they cannot express through their employer (Mellado, 2022). Third, "ordinary" people relay political information on social media, among others, aiming to influence their network's attitudes (Weeks et al., 2017). Fourth, social media influencers (SMI)—once "ordinary" people who gained celebrity-like status through strategic self-presentation on social media (Khamis et al., 2017)—also share political information with their large audiences (Harff & Schmuck, 2025a). Fifth, traditional celebrities, such as singers or athletes, who rose to fame outside of social media (Chiu & Ho, 2023), have also been identified as political communicators (Gonzalez et al., 2024).

Curating actors can be considered so-called parasocial opinion leaders (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2022). Individuals do not know them personally but have formed close, one-sided bonds—known as parasocial relationships—with them (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Within such parasocial contexts, curating actors are theorized to convey political messages to their followers (Stehr et al., 2015). Algorithmic and personal curation further increase the likelihood that users are repeatedly exposed to content from curating actors they favor (Thorson & Wells, 2016). This broader parasocial context is believed to facilitate the likelihood that users will be favorable toward the (political) messages these actors provide. According to Stehr et al. (2015), political influence by opinion leaders on political outcomes operates through complexity reduction, political orientation, and the arousal of political interest, which can be understood as gratifications followers receive from opinion leaders. These gratifications may function as media response states, which could foster indirect learning from political social media content (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

Opinion Leadership Gratifications

The Cognitive Mediation Model by Eveland (2001) explains political learning as an indirect process, where attention to news lies under the motivational control of individuals. We theorize that the intensity to which a user obtains gratifications from sources of political information is a media response state that develops from increased exposure to curating actors' political content (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Following this reasoning, higher levels of gratifications would be expected to enhance attention to

encountered political information and foster more elaborate processing of subsequent political content. Drawing from Stehr et al. (2015), we conceptualize opinion leadership gratifications as the level of obtained gratifications, with perceived complexity reduction, received orientation, and evoked interest representing three core gratifications that can be obtained. First, perceived complexity reduction, also termed perceived simplification (Schmuck et al., 2022), refers to the notion that opinion leaders make complex political topics comprehensible for their audience by presenting the information in a way that is easy to interpret and process (Stehr et al., 2015). Being more often exposed to political content of a certain curating actor may fulfil the gratification of perceived simplification of politics, as shown for SMIs by Schmuck et al. (2022). This may stem from SMIs' close connection to young people's reality (Schouten et al., 2020), which makes them better equipped to present topics in a way that is understandable for them. A similar argument could be made for peers; since they are similar in age, they might be better equipped to present political topics in a way that is understandable for youth. Due to their formal training, journalists could also use the additional space on their individual accounts to explain political topics in more depth (Mellado, 2022), making them easier to understand for young people.

Second, providing orientation refers to whether users have the perception that the opinion leader orients their audience toward certain political issues that they might not have known about or did not deem important before (Stehr et al., 2015). In the current high-choice media environment, young people indicate that they seek orientation about political topics from a variety of actors (Harff & Schmuck, 2025b). For instance, by presenting their stance on political issues on social media, politicians can be understood as orienting citizens toward certain issues (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Additionally, there is evidence that influencers (e.g., Allgaier, 2020) and celebrities (e.g., Sobande, 2022) can serve as catalysts for elevating certain issues on the public agenda, thereby providing orientation toward certain political issues.

Third, by talking about a certain political issue, curating actors can fulfil the function of making their followers curious about issues, i.e., arouse their interest in this topic (Stehr et al., 2015). For instance, peers are among youth's most important (political) socialization agents, meaning they also mirror their interests to those of their peers (Wegemer, 2022).

On social media, content is fleeting and short in nature (Zhang & Xu, 2025). Therefore, for obtaining the gratifications of perceived simplification, orientation, and interest arousal, multiple exposures are likely necessary. Additionally, a certain curating actor might be better equipped to simplify politics (e.g., news influencers; Stocking et al., 2024), whereas another might rather try to push a certain topic on the agenda (e.g., lifestyle SMI; Allgaier, 2020). Although evidence of increases across all examined gratifications does not exist for every curating actor type, these processes are likely to occur across actor types (Stehr et al., 2015). Accordingly, we theorize that the added value of increasingly encountering political content from a given curating actor type manifests in stronger perceived opinion leadership gratifications, both shortly after exposure and over time.

H1: Exposure to a) politicians', b) journalists', c) peers', d) SMI's, and e) celebrities' political content positively predicts perceived opinion leadership gratifications at the within-person level (over time).

Indirect Learning: Feeling Knowledgeable, Being Knowledgeable, or Both?

Drawing on the Cognitive Mediation Model (Eveland, 2001), perceived relevance, conceptualized here as obtained opinion leadership gratifications, can promote political learning through increased attention and elaboration of all political content. Rather than operating in isolation, perceived simplification, orientation, and evoked interest function as interrelated dimensions of a broader relevance experience that collectively lowers cognitive barriers and motivates engagement with political information. Perceived simplification may lead to the feeling that political issues are not too complex for a young person to understand. Consequently, young people might feel empowered to attend to and process political information better than they normally would. This would result in an increased perceived ability of being able to process subsequent encounters with political information. Perceived orientation may guide young people toward the political topics they should engage with and learn more about (i.e., enhance attention), which consequently may increase elaboration of these topics when they encounter them (Eveland, 2001). Thus, after exposure to curating actors' political content, a young person could have the impression they now know which topic(s) they should be knowledgeable on, and pay more attention to future encounters of political information on that or similar topics. Evoked interest in political topics complements these processes by increasing individuals' attention to these topics and motivating more elaborate information processing (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). This feeling of increased interest can be a crucial motivator to process future political information encounters. Taken together, we theorize that the overall attainment of opinion leadership gratifications creates a receptive cognitive and motivational state in which young people are more likely to attend to political topics both within and beyond curating actors' content. This heightened attentiveness and elaboration, in turn, aligns with the mechanisms through which political learning may occur over time (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Eveland, 2001). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: Opinion leadership gratifications obtained by a) politicians', b) journalists', c) peers', d) SMI's, and e) celebrities' political content positively predict objective current affairs knowledge at the within-person level over time.

Furthermore, higher perceived relevance of political content in the form of obtained opinion leadership gratifications may not only play a role in shaping what individuals objectively learn, but also what they *believe* they know. Supporting this, Dreston and Neubaum (2023), as well as Nanz and Matthes (2022), found that more intensive elaboration was directly linked to increased levels of self-assessed knowledge. Therefore, young people may gain higher objective knowledge *and feel* more knowledgeable because they allocate more attention to political topics—both regarding this specific actor type and overall—in response to opinion leadership gratifications.

H3: Opinion leadership gratifications obtained by a) politicians', b) journalists', c) peers', d) SMI's, and e) celebrities' political content positively predict subjective knowledge at the within-person level over time.

We further hypothesize a mediation logic from exposure to the different actors via opinion leader gratifications on both types of knowledge (Figure 1).

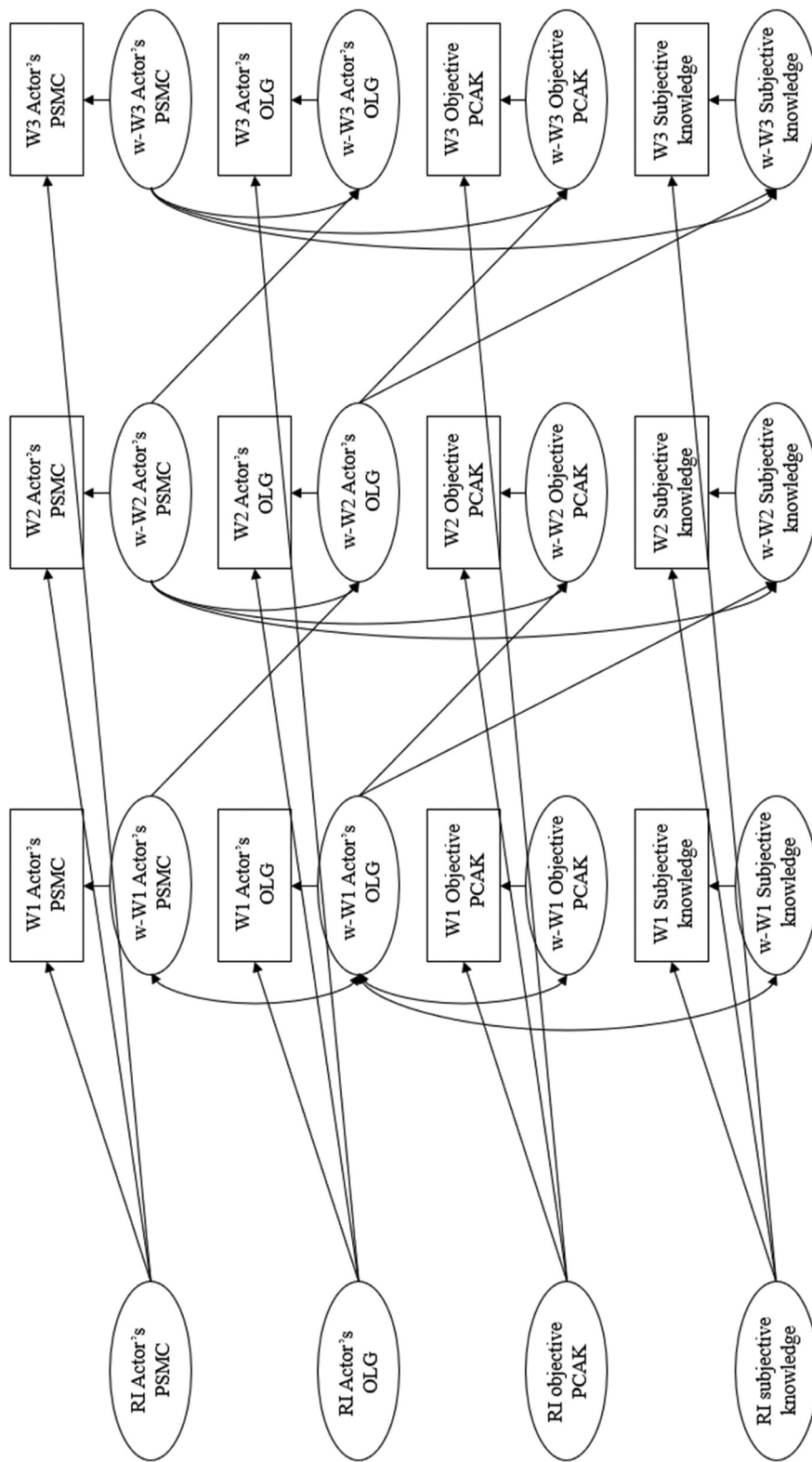


Figure 1. Hypothesized model. Note: One model ran per actor. Control variables are not shown for model parsimony. w = within-person variable, RI = random intercept (i.e., between-person variable); Actor's PSCM = exposure to an actor's political social media content; Actor's OLG = opinion leadership gratifications obtained from an actor; Objective PCAK = objective political current affairs knowledge.

H4: Exposure to a) politicians', b) journalists', c) peers', d) SMI's, and e) celebrities' political content positively predicts objective current affairs knowledge through obtained opinion leadership gratifications at the within-person level over time.

H5: Exposure to a) politicians', b) journalists', c) peers', d) SMI's, and e) celebrities' political content positively predicts subjective knowledge through obtained opinion leadership gratifications at the within-person level over time.

Method

We conducted a three-wave panel study in Flanders, Belgium, in April, May, and June of 2024. There was a one-month time interval between each wave, with the goal of minimizing recall bias in media use. Federal, regional, and EU elections took place between W2 and W3. Ethical approval was obtained through KU Leuven's internal review board (G-2023-6711-R2(MIN)).

Sample

Our sample was a Flemish youth panel, aged 16 to 30 years old. Participants were recruited both physically and online. Physical recruitment took place, for instance, in high schools, libraries, or coffee bars. Online recruitment included calls via the social media accounts of youth organizations and large media outlets. In total, 4,443 people enrolled in the panel. To encourage continuous participation, participants received €5 per completed wave and an additional €25 if they completed all waves in a qualitative manner (i.e., not failing attention checks and no speeding). For a detailed description of the youth panel and recruitment, see the field report on OSF (<https://osf.io/ze32m/overview>). Excluding duplicates, 2,630 participants completed W1, 2,597 completed W2, and 2,527 completed W3. Including only participants in our analyses who completed all three waves ($N = 2,314$) and excluding participants who failed two or more attention checks and/or sped through all three surveys ($N = 38$), our analytical sample consisted of 2,276 participants (63.62% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.48$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.21$; 93.50% high education level). We found some significant differences between participants included and excluded in the analytical sample (Appendix A1).

Measures

All items can be found in Appendix A2, and the dataset and syntax are available on OSF (<https://osf.io/jbdw4/overview>).

Exposure to curating actors' political content (Table A3.1) was measured in line with previous studies' measures of political social media content exposure (e.g., Lee et al., 2022), for the five actors separately, by asking "On average, how often did you see political content on social media by these people in the past month?" (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). Political content was defined as "... politics in a broad sense: parties and elections, but also societal and social themes, such as climate and migration." To clarify the type of actors, we added

two or three examples for each actor (except for friends/acquaintances) and explained the difference between an influencer and a celebrity.

Opinion leadership gratifications (Table A3.2) were measured per actor by asking participants: “Indicate the person for whom you find the following statement to apply.” For each statement, participants could choose to indicate no actor, one actor, or multiple actors. As such, we obtained a binary variable per actor for each gratification (0 = *not applicable*, 1 = *applicable*). This construct is made up of perceived simplification of politics (“... makes political topics easier to understand”), arousing interest (“... arouses my interest for new political topics”), and providing orientation (“... shows me which topics are being discussed in politics and society”; Stehr et al., 2015). For each actor type in each wave, a summative index was created to measure how many gratifications participants perceived from that actor.

Objective PCAK was measured using eight multiple-choice items (Appendix A4) related to a political or societal event that happened in the month leading up to the survey. Participants received four response options: three statements of which one was correct and a “don’t know” option. The process of how the items were formulated can be found in Appendix A5. The selected items reflected multiple themes (national politics, international politics, health, social justice, and crime & safety; based on Newman et al., 2023). We created the index by recoding responses to 0 = *incorrect* and 1 = *correct*, where *don’t know* was recoded to *incorrect*. Those binary variables were summed to create a score out of eight for each participant ($M_{W1} = 5.50$, $SD_{W1} = 1.87$; $M_{W2} = 4.12$, $SD_{W2} = 1.85$; $M_{W3} = 4.92$, $SD_{W3} = 1.81$). This measure is in line with existing research (e.g., Park, 2019).

Subjective knowledge was measured using five items. It is recommended to use comparable dimensions of objective and subjective knowledge (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). Hence, the items were chosen to reflect the themes represented in the objective PCAK measure: national politics, international politics, health, social justice, and crime & safety (Newman et al., 2023). Participants were asked, “To what extent do you feel like you know a lot about the following themes (e.g., what is happening in the news surrounding this theme)?” Answer categories ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very knowledgeable*. A mean score of the five items was created per wave ($M_{W1} = 3.32$, $SD_{W1} = 0.65$; $M_{W2} = 3.26$, $SD_{W2} = 0.69$; $M_{W3} = 3.30$, $SD_{W3} = 0.62$).

Covariates

Gender was measured as 0 = *man*, 1 = *woman*, 2 = *other*. Considering the low number of participants who indicated “other,” they were recoded to missing values (35.33% men, 63.62% women). *Age* ($M = 20.48$, $SD = 3.21$) was measured by asking participants’ birth year, which was recoded to age by subtracting their birth year from the year of the study (2024). *Education (enrollment) level* was assessed based on participants’ current enrollment (if still in school) or highest obtained diploma (if not). Responses were recoded into a binary variable: 0 = *low/medium education* (6.5%), and 1 = *high education* (93.5%). Low/medium includes lower secondary education, vocational secondary education, or higher secondary as the highest diploma. High education includes enrollment in general/technical secondary or higher education, or a diploma in higher education. *Political interest* ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 2.25$) was measured on an 11-point Likert scale, with one item “To what extent are you interested in politics?” We again referred to politics in a broad sense, as defined above, ranging from 0 = *very*

uninterested to 11 = *very interested* (Bode, 2016). *News media use* ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.74$) was measured by asking participants how often in the last month they used a list of seven channels to obtain news (e.g., television, social media), ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*. Those variables were averaged to create an index. *Social media use* ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.89$) was measured by asking how often participants typically use a list of social media, ranging from 1 = *never* to 6 = *multiple times a day*, of which a mean index was created. News media use (Andersen et al., 2022) and social media use (Coyne et al., 2019) are stable, so they were only measured respectively in W1 and in the intake survey (W0).

Analytical Strategy

Means and standard deviations, zero-order correlations (Appendix A6), and intra-class correlations (ICC) were computed for the related variables in R. Five Random-Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Models (RI-CLPM) were estimated (Table A7) using MLR as an estimator (Speyer et al., 2025) in *Mplus*. Although we hypothesized the same relationship to occur across all curating actor types, we analyzed actor types separately to avoid drawing conclusions about curating actors in general that might be driven by only one or two specific types, as this would be problematic (Rubin, 2024). We only hypothesized within-person differences, but it is typical to expect the same relationships to occur at the between-person level (Beyens et al., 2020). Each model used mean scores as manifest variables, which we regressed on a corresponding latent variable with loading constrained at 1, i.e., the within-person variance. Autoregressive, cross-lagged, and concurrent paths were drawn (Figure 2) using the latent variables, as well as a random-intercept factor (RI). This RI was created for each main variable per model, with manifest variables at three timepoints and loadings constrained at 1. The correlations between the RIs stand for the between-person variance. The error variance of all manifest variables was constrained to 0. Confidence intervals of direct and indirect path estimates were calculated with corrections for bias and skewness of the sample (MacKinnon et al., 2002). We included gender, education level, age, political interest, social media use, and news media use as control variables. The model fit was considered acceptable if $RMSEA < .05$, $SRMR < .05$, and $CFI > .90$ (Speyer et al., 2025). Before conducting the analyses, we first tested whether the means of the main variables could be constrained across the three waves for a less demanding model by comparing the difference between chi-squares of the model fit for a constrained and an unconstrained model (Mulder & Hamaker, 2021).

Due to an implicit time lag in our measures within one wave, it was advised to include concurrent (Lag0) paths (Speyer et al., 2025). Hence, we included those from exposure to the curating actors' political content (measured using a timespan of four weeks prior to the survey) to opinion leadership gratifications, objective PCAK, and subjective knowledge (measured as gratifications/knowledge at the time of the survey) for W2 and W3. For W1, it is not possible to include within-person concurrent paths, as the within-person covariance needs to be included for the first measure point to calculate the Lag0 within-person regression paths (Muthén & Asparouhov, 2024). We compared the fit of a model including and a model excluding the concurrent paths, based on the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC).

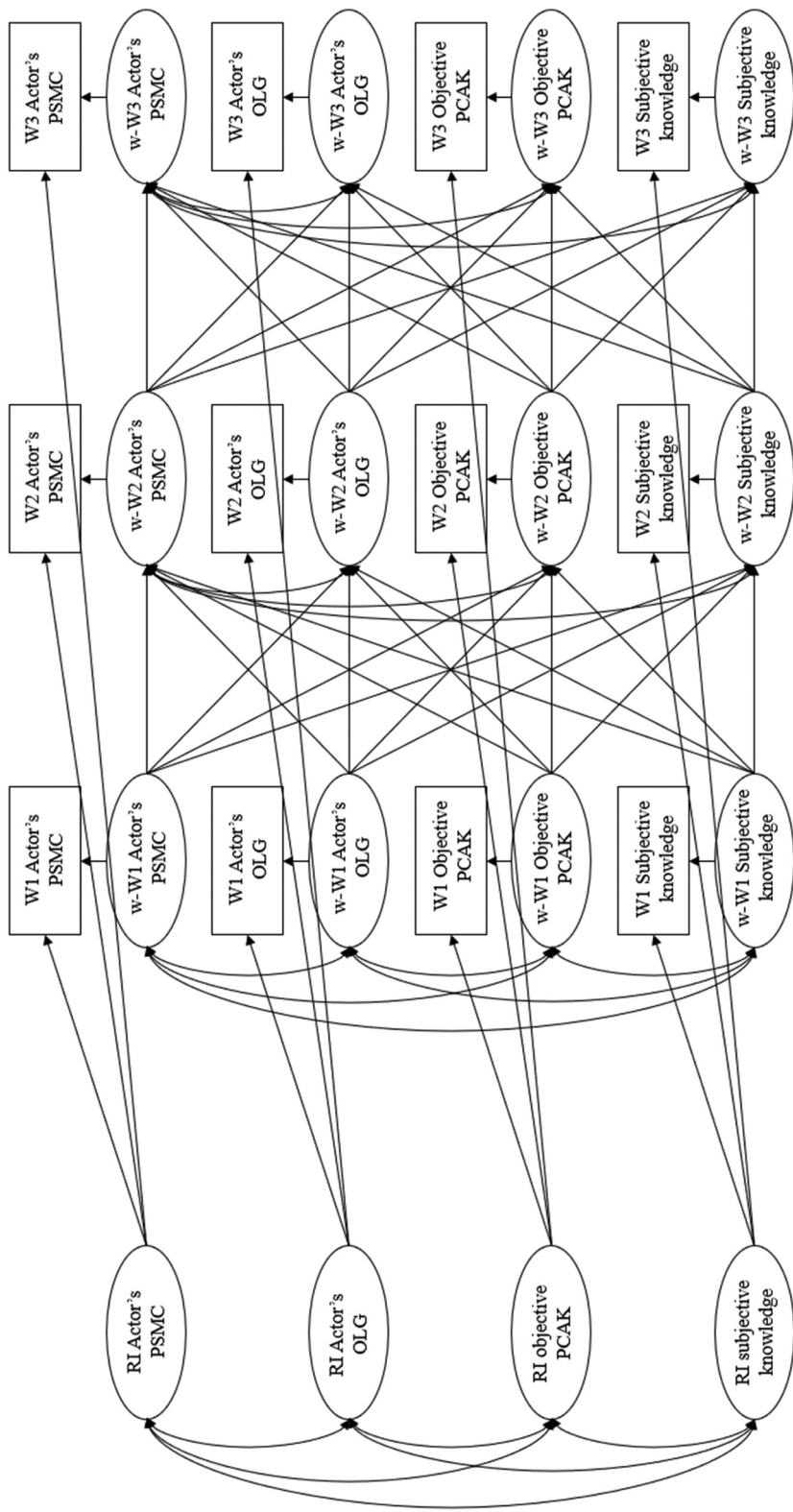


Figure 2. Full analyzed model, including all autoregressive, cross-lagged, and concurrent paths. Note: One model ran per actor. Control variables are not shown for model parsimony. w = within-person variable, RI = random intercept (i.e., between-person variable); Actor's PSMC = exposure to an actor's political social media content; Actor's OLG = opinion leadership gratifications obtained from an actor type; Objective PCAK = objective political current affairs knowledge.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

ICCs indicated that moderate degrees of variance in all studied variables could be attributed to between-person differences: exposure to political content by politicians (0.398), journalists (0.431), peers (0.435), SMIs (0.406), and celebrities (0.370); opinion leadership gratifications obtained by politicians (0.469), journalists (0.551), peers (0.496), SMIs (0.553), celebrities (0.449); and objective PCAK (0.440) and subjective knowledge (0.665). For instance, for objective PCAK, this means that 44.0% of variance is explained by between-person differences. The rest could be attributed to error variance and within-person fluctuations across waves.

Hypotheses Testing

BIC values for the models including concurrent paths were comparable to those without concurrent paths, so we relied on the former (Speyer et al., 2025). The models we ran did not include constrained means of the main variables, since those had worse model fit than unconstrained models. All models showed good model fit (Appendix A8). All parameter estimates can be found in Appendix A9. Our hypothesized mediation model (Figure 1) was in one direction, but we also tested the inverse relationships (Appendix A10) and direct relationships between content exposure and knowledge (Appendix A11).

Within-Person Level

A positive concurrent relationship between exposure to the actor's political content and perceived opinion leadership gratifications occurred in Model 1 for politicians (W2: $\beta = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .002$; W3: $\beta = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .003$), Model 4 for SMIs (W2: $\beta = 0.20$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; W3: $\beta = 0.18$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), and Model 5 for celebrities (W2: $\beta = 0.15$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; W3: $\beta = 0.16$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). For journalists (Model 2) and peers (Model 3), we found the same relationship, i.e., more exposure to their political content increases opinion leadership gratifications, but only in W3 (Model 2: $\beta = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .001$; Model 3: $\beta = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .021$). No within-person cross-lagged paths from exposure to an actor's political content to perceived opinion leadership gratifications were significant. These findings support H1a–H1e on a concurrent within-person level, but not across waves.

Model 1 showed that there is no relationship between perceived opinion leadership gratifications obtained by politicians and objective PCAK on the within-person level. Models 2 (journalists), 4 (SMI), and 5 (celebrities) showed that higher perceived opinion leadership gratifications by journalists ($\beta = -0.12$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .002$), SMIs ($\beta = -0.11$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .008$), or celebrities ($\beta = -0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) than usual in W1 were related to less objective PCAK than usual in W2. In Model 3, we found a positive within-person relationship between perceived opinion leadership gratifications obtained by peers in W2 and objective PCAK in W3 ($\beta = 0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .001$). These findings show no support for H2a, show partial support for H2c, and partially contradict H2b, H2d, and H2e. Our study found no support for a within-person relationship between perceived opinion leadership gratifications obtained by either type of curating actor and subjective knowledge.

So, H3 was not supported. No indirect relationships were significant, meaning we found no support for the hypothesized mediations in H4 and H5.

Between-Person Level

For all actors, the random intercept (RI) of exposure to their content was positively related to the RI of obtaining opinion leadership gratifications from them (Model 1: $\beta = 0.41$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$; Model 2: $\beta = 0.37$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; Model 3: $\beta = 0.28$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; Model 4: $\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$; Model 5: $\beta = 0.26$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$).

Models 1 and 2 showed positive relationships between perceived opinion leadership gratifications obtained by politicians and journalists and both objective (Model 1: $\beta = 0.24$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; Model 2: $\beta = 0.51$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) and subjective (Model 1: $\beta = 0.19$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; Model 2: $\beta = 0.27$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) knowledge. We found no relationship between opinion leadership gratifications obtained by peers (Model 3), SMIs (Model 4), or celebrities (Model 5) and either type of knowledge.

Discussion

Political learning through social media has become a debated topic in today's high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Looking systematically at both within- and between-person variance in a large-scale three-wave youth panel, our findings align with Amsalem and Zoizner's (2023) recent meta-analysis by showing that learning about politics through social media content is very limited, even when applying an indirect learning logic (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). Simultaneously, by considering concurrent (Lag0) effects, we found that increased exposure to curating actors' political content evokes perceived opinion leadership gratifications like perceived simplification of politics, orientation toward important political topics, and aroused interest for politics, which is in line with the Process Model of Parasocial Opinion Leadership (Stehr et al., 2015).

Within-Person Findings

When we studied changes that fluctuate within the individual, we found that when young people experienced higher-than-usual exposure to political content from politicians, journalists, peers, SMI's, or celebrities, they also perceived the actors to simplify politics, arouse interest in politics, and/or orient them toward political topics more than usual in the same wave. While this observation was consistent across waves for most actors, for journalists and peers, it only occurred in the last wave. Our survey was conducted in the time leading up to important elections, a period when political issues increase in salience (Haugsgjerd & Karlsen, 2024). By being present on youth-oriented platforms like Instagram and TikTok, politicians may try to reach young voters, while the other actors may aim to inform their followers on political matters (e.g., Allgaier, 2020) or urge them to vote for a certain candidate. During such an important political period, all actors could put in additional effort to, for instance, simplify political topics or orient their followers to important topics, particularly given Belgium's compulsory voting system. Due to personal and algorithmic curation (Thorson & Wells, 2016), it is likely that people largely see political content from curating actors they like and see messages that reinforce one another. This could explain why the opinion leadership gratifications are almost always obtained across all actor types

after exposure. However, it is also possible that participants assumed that these mechanisms had occurred merely as a result of encountering political content from a specific type of curating actor.

Young people who perceived more obtained opinion leadership gratifications from their peers (W2), also had higher objective PCAK than usual (W3). Here, the explanation could lie in the specific election context between W2 and W3, which aligns with long-standing research showing that during elections, people rely on opinion leaders in their personal network for political facts to cast informed votes (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Our study suggests similar processes occur on social media. This is also in line with previous studies that found that peers play a crucial role in political learning among young people (Hamann et al., 2009; Solhaug & Kristensen, 2013). Our findings add to this research that political learning through peers' political content occurs when increased exposure to such content increases perceived opinion leadership gratifications—that is, feelings of perceived simplification of politics, arousal of interest for politics, and political orientation (Stehr et al., 2015). This could suggest that during elections, exposure to peers' political social media content could temporarily motivate cognitive engagement with political topics, resulting in higher objective PCAK (Eveland, 2001). However, since these findings were only observed between two waves, results should be generalized cautiously.

Overall, we found limited support for perceived opinion leadership gratifications to facilitate future learning from political social media content on the within-person level. A first possible explanation for this limited evidence may lie in the link between political content exposure and perceived opinion leadership gratifications: Overall, both exposure to the curating actors' political content (Table A3.1) and perceived opinion leadership gratifications were rather stable across waves (Table A3.2). This could suggest that, on the one hand, our one-month time interval was not the appropriate interval to capture variations in these variables (Ohme et al., 2016), especially given that we only found concurrent within-person relationships between exposure and opinion leadership gratifications; this could suggest that the fluctuations on the within-person level are short-term. On the other hand, it could be that measuring it on an aggregate level of type of curating actor does not allow for sufficient nuance, since effects of social media content are often dependent on perception of or relationships with the specific person (Khamis et al., 2017) or the specific piece of content (Breves et al., 2021).

A second possible explanation lies in the link between opinion leadership gratifications and PCAK: We found either an absence of a relationship or a negative relationship here. On social media, curating actors tend to post about a limited number of topics (Mellado, 2022) that usually fit with their persona and social media content (Breves et al., 2019). So, if, for instance, arousal of interest in politics happens through the curating actors' political content, it likely only happens for a specific topic, which could mean the theorized cognitive elaboration (Eveland, 2001) only happens for a limited (number of) topic(s), fostering selective PCAK. Yet, we had broad PCAK measures covering a range of topics. This selective exposure could explain the decreases in overall knowledge in response to opinion leadership gratifications obtained by journalists, SMIs, and celebrities in W2. It may also account for the decrease in knowledge over time in this study, since people might have been more knowledgeable on a broad range of topics, while they informed themselves more specifically about certain issues (presumably more national or local issues), when the elections came closer.

A final explanation could be that we did not measure the right type of political knowledge that could be influenced through the actors' political content or motivated by the gratifications. Politicians, for example, often use social media for self-presentation and issue positioning (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), which might foster other types of political knowledge like issue position knowledge (van der Meer et al., 2016).

Between-Person Findings

When comparing differences *between* people, our findings indicated that people who are exposed to any curating actor's political content more frequently also perceive to obtain more gratifications from this actor. Together with ICC values showing substantial between-person variance for these variables, this supports the idea that observed differences are primarily driven by individual differences like prior political socialization or political talk with parents (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) rather than fluctuations in exposure. Moreover, algorithmic curation could cause this stability, since algorithms generally show similar content to what the social media user has favored before (Thorson & Wells, 2016). The same conclusions can be drawn for differences in PCAK. Given that ICC values indicate knowledge variation primarily reflects individual differences, we conclude that knowledge disparities likely stem from stable individual traits rather than fluctuations in exposure or perceived opinion leadership. This aligns with research connecting political learning to stable civic habits (Delli Carpini, 2000).

As for opinion leadership gratifications, only people who obtained these from politicians and journalists have more objective PCAK and subjective knowledge. In line with the dynamic media effects theory (Slater, 2015), it is conceivable that young people who obtain opinion leadership gratifications from such formal political actors are more likely to seek out their political content. For peers, SMI, or celebrities, no links were found between people who see their political content more often and perceived opinion leadership gratifications. Perceived opinion leadership gratifications obtained by such political sources without formal ties to politics may be linked more closely to other stable traits, such as political interest and political cynicism—as previously demonstrated by Schmuck et al. for SMIs (2022)—rather than to political knowledge.

Limitations and Future Research

First, we relied on a non-representative sample, with a particular bias in terms of education (enrollment) level (93.5% highly educated). Hence, generalizations should be done cautiously, as our findings largely pertain to highly educated young people, or youth enrolled in higher education. Second, the design of our study was structured around a national election campaign. While this allowed us to examine differences between pre-campaign and campaign periods, it meant the three waves were not necessarily comparable, making it difficult to identify stable within-person patterns.

Third, with five independent variables, each with its unique mediator, and two dependent variables, running one RI-CLPM including all variables was too demanding. Hence, we followed existing studies (e.g., Carbone et al., 2025) and ran one model per independent variable. This approach is associated with an increased risk of Type I error due to multiple comparisons. To the best of our knowledge, no established procedure exists for addressing

this issue in RI-CLPM. Moreover, Rubin (2024) argued that correcting for this type of multiple testing is not necessary. We therefore did not apply a correction. Yet, we encourage future research to examine whether such corrections are necessary within the framework of RI-CLPM, and, if so, how they should be implemented. Additionally, by testing separate models per independent variable, we could not control for the potential time-varying influence of the other independent variables. Future research should employ a larger sample size to be able to estimate an RI-CLPM that can incorporate all measured time-varying variables.

Fourth, our PCAK items varied across waves. To ensure comparability, we kept the topic areas constant. Additionally, to have a comparable measure for objective PCAK and subjective knowledge, we measured subjective knowledge on the different topic areas present in the objective PCAK measure, which is not a validated scale. Consequently, our subjective knowledge findings cannot be compared to previous studies. Since both our knowledge measures represent a broad selection of themes, we could not test the reliability of the indices, as we did not necessarily expect more knowledge in one topic area would be related to more knowledge in another topic area.

Finally, our longitudinal panel design was valuable to uncover broad processes of knowledge acquisition in an externally valid manner. Mobile experience sampling and experimental studies could be used to closely link content exposure to knowledge outcomes. This is needed because aggregate measures of political content exposure are likely not nuanced enough. Such self-report measures entail the risk of systematically overestimating exposure (Araujo et al., 2017). Moreover, in the current high-choice, curated information environment (Thorson & Wells, 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2017), the social media feeds of no two people look the same. Mobile experience sampling studies, particularly linking tracking data to survey responses (Ohme et al., 2016), could examine mechanisms related to content pieces or specific sources, such as cognitive elaboration or the intentionality behind exposure to specific content pieces (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). Experimental studies could compare individual accounts to one another or to organizational accounts, or test differences within one curating actor type. Additionally, future experiments could distinguish between the different opinion leadership gratifications, as these may yield divergent effects, particularly since we know different curating actor types might tap more into some gratifications and less into others.

Implications

On a theoretical level, our study implies that perceived opinion leadership gratifications may only explain indirect learning from peers' political social media content during elections, but not for other actors or other contexts. As such, our study corroborates the traditional notion of opinion leadership, namely that during elections, personal contacts are sought out and relied on (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Our results point to the applicability of these findings in the context of social media and curated flows. Yet, at the same time, our findings do not support this process for parasocial opinion leaders like SMIs (Stehr et al., 2015). Although youth obtain short-term gratifications from exposure to their political content, their content does not seem to contribute to political learning. At a practical level, this means that institutions focused on youth's political education should acknowledge the importance of peer influence and explicitly integrate peer roles into classroom discussions on political learning (Hamann et al., 2009; Solhaug & Kristensen, 2013).

Additionally, since we found differing relationships across curator types, the findings indicate that it is important to distinguish between different sources of political information on social media. Future research should, in particular, further explore the distinction between information sources that users know personally and those they do not, as well as the mechanisms underlying these differing relationships.

Finally, our findings also contribute to the debate about which actors can be seen as opinion leaders (Stehr et al., 2015) by showing that the political social media content of all investigated curating actors can yield gratifications such as increased interest, orientation, or perceived simplification—at least in the short-term. This suggests that the social media affordances allow several actors to become opinion leaders for young people, which may affect other democratically relevant outcomes such as political interest (Schmuck et al., 2022), efficacy, or participation (Harff & Schmuck, 2023).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data Availability Statement

The data and code needed to reproduce the results of the study are available at <https://osf.io/jbdw4/overview>.

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data and Open Materials through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at <https://osf.io/ze32m> and <https://osf.io/jbdw4/overview>

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