

Political Relational Influencers: The Mobilization of Social Media Influencers in the Political Arena

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Social media platforms are a powerful tool to exert influence and impress opinions—for commercial operators, brands, and political campaigns. Influencers can help campaigns reach specific audiences and convey support for issues and candidates. In this study, we focus on political relational influencers who operate to legitimize and amplify political messages, specifically in the context of Instagram and TikTok. We define this group of influencers as content creators who promote political and social causes, for payments or without payments, to their audiences. Through in-depth interviews with 18 influence campaign stakeholders—a term under which we congregate influencer marketing executives, political organizers, strategists, influencers, journalists, academics, and regulators—we shed light on the complex and sophisticated ways influencers coordinate among each other and with political campaigns, the motivations of influencers to get involved in political campaigns, and the question of where to draw the line between genuine grassroots coordination and disingenuous (astroturfing) organizing.

Keywords: social media, influencer, politics, Instagram, TikTok, grassroots, astroturfing

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In recent years, social media have become important platforms for advertisers. Marketers, as well as political campaigns, often turn to social media influencers in attempts to target various audiences with their messaging. In this research, we study a particular type of influencer—political relational influencers—to understand what motivates them to engage politically, how they coordinate with political campaigns, and whether this constitutes genuine grassroots coordination or disingenuous (astroturfing) organizing. We investigate this in the context of two platforms that are particularly relevant among influencers—TikTok and Instagram (Abidin, 2020a; Cotter, 2019).

Though influencers are sometimes perceived as a new phenomenon, their activity follows a history of celebrity endorsements in marketing. Owing to a celebrity's popularity, appeals from the celebrity can increase the impact of a campaign (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008) and the perceived trustworthiness of products (Wang, Cheng, & Chu, 2012). However, social media have fostered new and innovative ways for everyday citizens to become Internet celebrities, creating a media ecosystem wherein any person can theoretically build an audience and grow their influence.

Increasingly, marketing firms and brands have turned to influencers for product endorsements (Marwick, 2015) due to these influencers' loyal fanbases. Compared with their traditional celebrity counterparts, these influencers are seen as more relatable and trustworthy (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2019), making them valuable advertisers. Beyond selling products, influencer accounts also legitimize and amplify information on social media. In the networked communication ecology, a lack of traditional information intermediaries and source authorship has left users responsible for evaluating the credibility of an overwhelming amount of information on their own (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). To mitigate the cognitive load of this task, people rely on heuristics to evaluate the credibility of information on the Internet, including the reputation of the messengers (in this case, influencers). Research confirms this: When a person notices that a celebrity they perceive as trustworthy is attached to a piece of content, the content is evaluated as more credible—even when that information is false (Mena, Barbe, & Chan-Olmsted, 2020). On social media, influencers can assist in amplifying messages, including fringe beliefs, conspiracy theories, and incorrect information (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). As influencers are increasingly engaging in political communication while at the same time their activities are harnessed by political campaigns and organizers, exploring precisely how influencer work intersects with politics becomes an important area of inquiry and one in which existing research is still scarce (notable exceptions: Esteve Del Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018; Lewis, 2020). Conceptually, we contribute to the literature by presenting the term *political relational influencers* to refer to content creators who promote political and social causes toward their audiences by expressing support for them and endorsing them implicitly or explicitly. They are different from influencers in other topical domains in their willingness to associate their online influence with political and social causes. Practically, our research sets the stage for future work that delves into novel forms of political campaigning.

This work showcases the ways that influencers coordinate among each other and with political campaigns, teasing out varying motivations for influencers to get involved in politics in the first place, and drawing the difficult but important line between what influencer work may constitute grassroots activity and what constitutes astroturfing.

Literature Review

Social Media Influencers

A social media influencer is defined as an individual or group that has built a sizable and trusting social media audience such that they are able to “exert a significant influence on their followers’ and peer consumers’ decisions” (Ki & Kim, 2019, p. 905). Early scholarship on influencers focused on examples of influencers such as camgirls, who became microcelebrities within certain communities (Senft, 2008). Since then, influencers have changed many aspects of media ecologies, from how goods and services are marketed (Santiago & Castelo, 2020) to how information and updates about current events are gathered (Lewis, 2020). Subsequent literature has highlighted the broad range of topical areas where we can now find social media influencers (Duffy, 2020), including politics (Esteve Del Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018; Lewis, 2020).

Naturally, as influencers grow in popularity, many seek to monetize their efforts, especially through branding. Influencers’ ability to disseminate information and ideas gives these actors considerable social capital (Burt, 1999). In other words, influencers appear similar to what Katz (1957) has described as opinion leaders—individuals who pass on information to others and who enjoy special clout. This has resulted in mutually lucrative relationships between influencers and the brands they market. Influencers are the online equivalent of word-of-mouth marketing (Duffy, 2020) due, in no small part, to the trust that influencers build with their audiences. From an economic perspective, influencers effectively engage in a “commodification of relationships” (Shtern, Hill, & Chan, 2019, p. 1952), using the rapport they develop with their audiences to advertise products and services.

However, an influencer is only as successful as their ability to engage with their audience. For this reason, engagement metrics are often used as measures of success (Marwick, 2015), and social media influencers are constantly developing novel ways to garner larger and more engaged audiences. Recent studies have found that influencers sometimes work together in coordinated influencer campaigns that help to collectively amplify messages, similar to how “meme factories” coordinate the creation and sharing of memes (Abidin, 2020b). Scholars have also noted the growth of an ancillary industry of intermediary companies such as talent agencies, management software providers, and marketing firms that provide services to influencers and influencer firms (Abidin, 2018), like engagement tracking tools (Bishop, 2021) and resources to connect influencers and marketers (Stoldt, Wellman, Ekdale, & Tully, 2019).

Key to the success of influencers is their ability to convey authenticity. Conceptually, authenticity has different connotations: (a) being true to oneself, (b) being real (*vis-à-vis* being fake), and (c) being original (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Authenticity can serve as an ethical compass for influencers to stay true to themselves and their audiences (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020). When an influencer successfully performs authenticity on social media, they build trust between themselves and their audience, which grows their social capital. For influencers, however, authenticity does not just exist in its own right; it needs to be performed and displayed to audiences. Terms like “calculated authenticity” (Pooley, 2010) and “strategic authenticity” (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015) emphasize the stylized and performative nature of authenticity for influencers (Reade, 2021; Shtern et al., 2019).

Another key variable for the success of influencers and a core norm of the industry is credibility. Credibility is important in a bifold manner, as Abidin and Ots (2016) point out, “for the growth of their own media brands and for their effectiveness as commercial product brand endorsers” (p. 154). Authenticity and credibility are conceptually interwoven as being perceived as authentic can contribute to seeing an influencer as credible in their online activity (Wellman et al., 2020).

Political Relational Influencers

Our work focuses specifically on political relational influencers on social media. We define political relational influencers as content creators who promote political and social causes toward their audiences by expressing support for them and endorsing them implicitly or explicitly. They are different from “other” influencers in their willingness to associate their online influence with political and social causes. This includes (but is not limited to) influencers who act at the behest of political campaigns, those who are remunerated for their political activity, and those who operate without pay. They are embedded in webs of coordination among campaigns, candidates, political strategists, influencer marketers, other influencers of lower or higher status, as well as their own social media audiences. Such webs are constituted of formal or informal relationships that are sustained online. While all influencers maintain a relationship with their audiences, political relational influencers are unique in their perceived reciprocity and approachability: To their audience, the political relational influencer evokes friendship. Sometimes, a political relational influencer’s audience includes their real-life, offline social network.

Examples of political influencers abound: In 2020, Deja Foxx, a reproductive rights activist, influencer, and model, joined Kamala Harris’s presidential campaign (Dunlea & Smith, 2021). Rogan O’Handley was an entertainment lawyer in Hollywood before dedicating himself to a full-time career as a conservative influencer by the name “DC Draino,” supporting Donald Trump and Make America Great Again Republicanism (Mahoney, 2022). Leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump, Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders, and Andrew Yang, among others, worked with influencers (Glazer & Wells, 2019). Celebrities, too, have become more involved in political campaigns, with many lending their credibility—and their audiences—to politicians and political issues. This includes examples such as singer Taylor Swift endorsing Democratic candidates in Tennessee in 2018 (Nisbett & Schartel Dunn, 2021) and actors Mandy Patinkin and Kathryn Grody promoting Democratic candidates (Becker, 2021).

However, neither celebrity endorsements nor general endorsements are new in the political realm. Newspaper outlets in the United States have historically endorsed presidential candidates (Ansolabehere, Lessem, & Snyder, 2006). While the merits of celebrities getting involved are tangible—more visibility for a campaign, and/or the prospect of voters that register or turn out on election day—the tested effectiveness of celebrity endorsements is mixed (Nisbett & Schartel Dunn, 2021). Research among Taiwanese voters suggests that, particularly for young voters, endorsement-based political advertisements work better than general ads (Chou, 2014). Austin, van de Vord, Pinkleton, and Epstein (2008), in the context of the 2004 U.S. presidential election, found that celebrity endorsements can positively impact people’s self-efficacy for voting. As political margins shrink, harnessing influencers may be an increasingly useful strategy for political campaigns. In this scholarly pursuit, we are interested in the motivations of influencers to engage politically, and we posit the following research question:

RQ1: Why are influencers motivated to engage with political issues?

Coordination and the Mechanics of Influence

We are also interested in how political organizers and influencers strategize and coordinate with one another. To understand the complex interactions among political organizers, influencers, and audience members, we propose Figure 1 below.

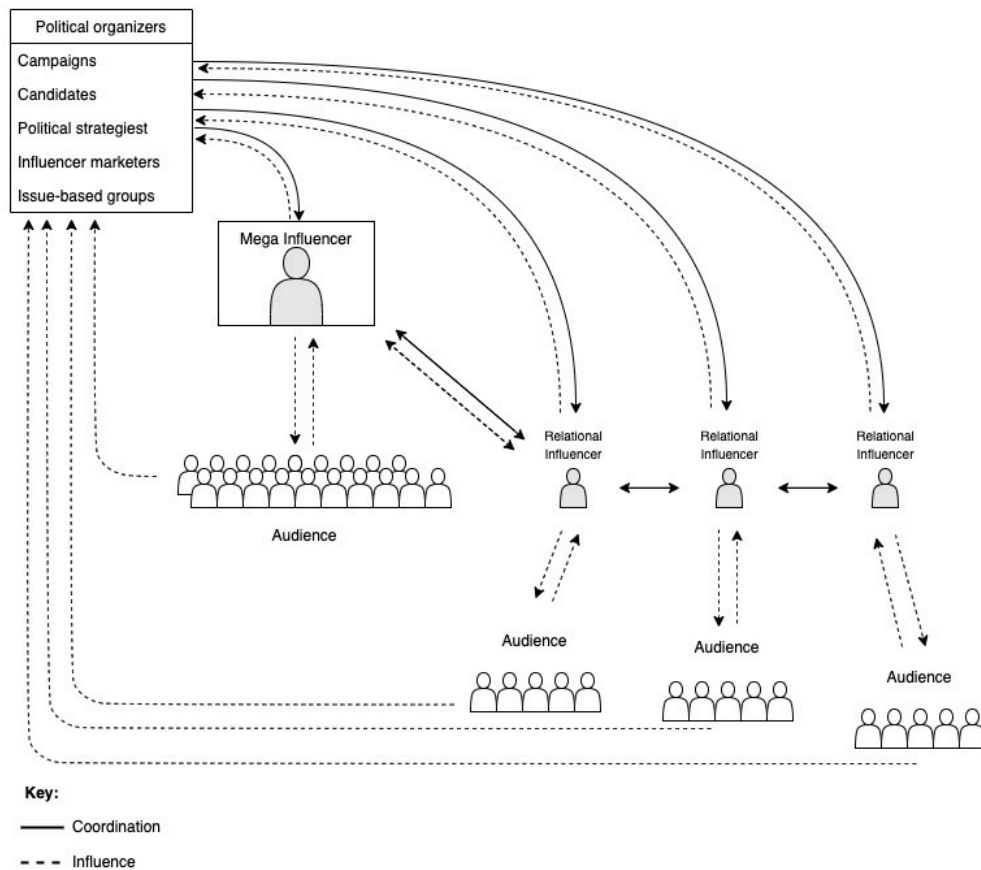


Figure 1. Political coordination and influence.

This figure highlights two dynamics across three sets of actors. The first dynamic is *coordination*, which occurs between political organizers and political relational influencers and among influencer communities, sometimes by posting around the same time or strategically promoting one another’s content. Owing to the elevated status of political speech compared to other forms of speech in the United States, the ability of influencers to monetize their social media activities by engaging in political speech has raised thorny legal and ethical questions (De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022).

The second dynamic is *relational influencing*, which encompasses interactions between influencers and their audiences. Because political relational influencers engage with one another and with their audiences on social media networks, they can be opinion leaders in a multistep flow of information (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Esteve Del Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018; Katz, 1957). In fact, a growing body of research in computer science and systems focuses on how to maximize influencers' engagement metrics (e.g., Jendoubi, Martin, Liétard, Hadji, & Yaghlane, 2017).

In this study, we are especially motivated to understand how patterns of coordination emerge between influencers and political organizers, including campaign staffers, candidates, and traditional strategists. We anticipate that—like journalists who are strategically ephemeral (e.g., when deleting old tweets; see Ringel & Davidson, 2022)—political organizers do not often leave public traces of their coordination. Our study seeks to shed some light on this through the following research question:

RQ2: How does coordination happen among political organizers and influencers?

Grassroots Organizers or Astroturfing?

A third research question emerges when thinking about the positionality of political relational influencers within a broader political campaign. Specifically, should the activities of such influencers be categorized as a form of genuine grassroots organizing (Ryan, 1991) or as digital astroturfing (Keller, Schoch, Stier, & Yang, 2020)? The latter of these two forms of organizing constitutes the “manipulative use of media and other political techniques to create the perception of a grassroots community organization where none exists for the purpose of political gain” (McNutt & Boland, 2007, p. 169). The use of human influencers constitutes a logical progression from clunky automated bots that could not convincingly engage in conversation to an understanding that astroturfing can involve bots, but the two are not synonymous (Keller et al., 2020). When people perceive a third party to be exerting influence over somebody's content (e.g., bloggers), this can have detrimental effects on the perceived credibility of the emitter (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Once audiences recognize something as an advertisement—for instance, a native ad, which is a form of sponsored content branded like other content provided on a platform but which is in fact a paid-for advertisement—they evaluate it more negatively (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Influencers typically must disclose sponsored content (Wellman et al., 2020), but politics presents an idiosyncratic case in the United States since political influencers' content qualifies as political advertising.

The Federal Election Commission (FEC), the authority in charge of regulating political advertising in the United States, has not issued rules about Instagram influencers (Notopoulos, 2020). Moreover, between July and December 2020, the commission did not even have the quorum necessary to change its rules (Naylor, 2020). Presidential candidates like Michael Bloomberg in 2020 and Bernie Sanders in 2016 used paid political influencers to promote their campaigns (Wong, 2020). Furthermore, although some social media platforms banned all political advertising in the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the ban did not necessarily include political influencers (Culliford, 2020).

To complicate matters further, not all political influencers are created equal: While some accept money for their services, others might be compensated through barter (e.g., campaign merch) or social

clout, making mandates for disclosure more difficult. Against this background, it is important to parse where actors intimately familiar with political influencers, a group that we refer to here as influence campaign stakeholders, perceive the fault lines between genuine and disingenuous political influencing to be drawn. With this in mind, we ask the following research question:

RQ3: Where do influence campaign stakeholders map political relational influencing on a spectrum between genuine (grassroots) coordination and disingenuous (astroturfing) organizing?

Methods

We employed semi-structured in-depth interviews, an approach common in research about influencers (Reade, 2021). Interview participants were identified through non-probability purposive sampling, specifically through the collection and analysis of news articles about American influencers in politics, academic and legal texts, extensive review of LinkedIn, and snowball sampling references and introductions garnered from interviewees (Bryman, 2016; Handcock & Gile, 2011). Institutional Review Board approval was granted on October 31, 2019.

In total, we conducted in-depth interviews with 18 individuals involved in the political mobilization of influencers, a group we refer to as influence campaign stakeholders. Categorized by profession, we interviewed the following persons: Influencer marketing firm executives (five), political marketing strategists (four), influencers (four), journalists (two), academics (two), and a former regulator (one). All influencer marketing firm executives and political marketing strategists interviewed were either the founders of their companies or part of the executive leadership. We selected these individuals because of their openness to discussion and overarching awareness of the political influencer field. By casting a broad net of interviewees, we were able to harness different forms of expertise on the subject matter. Furthermore, triangulating interviews with people deeply immersed and working in the influencer space themselves with outside perspectives from journalists, academics, and a regulator allowed us to balance the sample and avoid skew. Participants were politically diverse, ranging from liberal to conservative to nonpartisan. We interviewed six women and 12 men. All our participants were based in the United States. The interviews were conducted between April 2020 and February 2021.

The interviews typically ranged between 45 minutes to an hour and were conducted via video software (i.e., Zoom or Google Meet). Most interviews were conducted by two interviewers, one junior and one more senior scholar, and all interviews were consensually recorded and carried out under the condition of anonymity. The interview questions pertained, for example, to incentives and motivations for influencers to do their work, career goals, coordination between influencers and political campaigns, success strategies, observations on trends in the space, and more. By speaking with political influencers and individuals with expertise on the topic, we were able to garner insights that observational or content-based research methods cannot reach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). We stopped recruitment when we reached a point of saturation, and additional interviews did not yield significant further insights (Charmaz, 2006). After each conversation, the interviewers created memos summarizing the most important themes and takeaways. In addition to memos, the researchers also created transcripts of conversations with the help of computer-assisted transcription software. The researchers created thematic memos, which "bring together the data

from across several sources on an emerging theme" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 250). Two authors conducted the analysis, which consisted of repeatedly reading the materials, identifying and comparing themes that appeared across interviews, and condensing the material accordingly. Through our analyses of the memos, thematic memos, and transcripts, we were able to develop a set of themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), which we congregate in the results section as they align with and respond to our research questions.

Our Foci: TikTok and Instagram

While political relational influencers exist across many social media platforms, we focus on two that have gained prominence in recent years: TikTok and Instagram. Both have strong visual platform cultures, are popular with influencers, and lend themselves to influencers' tactics (Abidin, 2020a; Cotter, 2019). TikTok focuses on short video content whereas Instagram specializes in image and caption combinations. More recently, the "reels" function on Instagram was created as a response to, and closely mimicking, the existing functions of TikTok, and some users cross-share content on both platforms (Hurley, 2022). In the summer of 2022, Instagram further experimented with prioritizing video-focused content over static images, but the company quickly walked back the changes after user backlash (Newton, 2022). Instagram has been studied since its inception in 2010, often focusing on the platform's impact on self-esteem (Paramboulis, Skues, & Wise, 2016) and its role in marketing (Munoz & Towner, 2017). Developed in 2016, TikTok is comparatively newer but is nevertheless an important arena for research (e.g., Medina Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, & Hegelich, 2020). In digital marketing, TikTok is viewed as the "new" major social media platform for advertising. In 2021, TikTok appeared to overtake YouTube in time spent on platform per user in the United States (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2021).

Results

RQ1: Influencer Incentives—Why Get Involved?

Although influencer marketing executives and influencers noted a range of benefits and risks associated with posting political content, many emphasized the importance of personal beliefs as justification for posting. "I want to wear my values on my sleeve," one influencer told us; "I don't have a problem using my voice for something important," said another. By wearing their values on their metaphorical sleeve, the influencer connects their public performance to their personal opinions. This also manifested in statements such as "I wanted to spread a message that was meaningful. I wanted to make a difference in society . . . I didn't feel like I was doing enough." By a similar logic, those who worked as political relational influencers explicitly stated they would not work with an organization or candidate of their political opposition. Monetary compensation was notably absent as an incentive among the influencers we interviewed. While a few smaller-scale influencers had been paid around \$100 per post a handful of times, the larger-scale influencers were not paid for political posts and were instead compensated with interactions with candidates and other campaign perks.

Another motivating factor was the ongoing news events of 2020, including Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. One conservative creator (with more than 350,000 followers on TikTok and several million views across their videos) said the BLM protests were "the main catalyst for me

to start making content after I saw people burning flags . . . I wanted to make a difference in society, one way or another.” Another influencer was inspired by her ongoing research about racial inequality— research she was only able to do as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns. She expressed shock at “discovering these truths and saying, ‘Oh my god, how is no one talking about this?’”

A third motivating factor was the influencers’ perception of their audience and the expectation to participate in public expressions of support. In one interview, an influencer marketing executive highlighted how perceived audience pressure can encourage influencers to engage with a social media campaign related to social issues. For example, during the 2020 BLM protests, Instagram users posted black squares on their profile pages as a sign of support for the movement; many influencers were expected to participate to satisfy their followers: “If you wanted to continue having your life, you know, continue doing what you do, it was almost a tax you had to pay,” one executive said.

Not all influencers felt similarly about voicing a political opinion. One influencer, a person of color, said they were not willing to discuss racism on their platform, fearing it would be taken out of context: “If I say something the wrong way, it will go viral, and that would be the end.” These responses highlight the risks involved in sharing political content, like damaging their brand by expressing an opinion on a contentious and personal issue.

Interviewees also noted that their audiences responded differently when the influencers’ content changed or became more political. A Republican influencer noted that their followership grew on TikTok. However, a progressive influencer discussed how they lost followers and received several threats of violence. “I turned off a lot of White people,” she said.

Many influencers who chose to become politically outspoken did so because expressing their voices in a particular cultural moment became more important to them than appeasing certain followers who did not hold their same values. Others were incentivized to become politically outspoken because they were able to gain followers because of it.

Issue-Based Campaigns Versus Candidate Endorsements

Political strategists we spoke to also discussed the best applications of relational influencing versus other forms of political advertising. Campaigns for political candidates who do not have “celebrity” appeal generally faced difficulty recruiting large numbers of political relational influencers to post on their behalf: “It [mobilizing influencers] works much better on those cause-based campaigns than it would on a local candidate or a political candidate,” one strategist noted. Our interviewees said that, during election primaries, recruiting influencers can be especially difficult when the candidate is not well-known or if there is another candidate running who aligns more strongly with the influencer. For example, one Bernie Sanders supporter felt comfortable endorsing the “Settle for Biden” movement during the 2020 general election because she was against Trump, but she did not wish to endorse Biden directly. Candidate-driven campaigns can also miss the personal connection that issue-based campaigns have, which can create an “authenticity gap” when an influencer posts an endorsement with a “paid for by” disclosure.

Other interviewees revealed how relational influencing can engage local influencers and their audiences to produce heartfelt stories. Speaking about a campaign at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a chief executive officer (CEO) of a progressive marketing firm shared how the campaign, Health Care for All, was conducted:

Recruiting frontline workers, who are content creators and social media influencers to tell their personal stories. And then we have subsets of micro-influencers [smaller-scale] who are sharing their personal interactions and experiences with those front-line workers. Think of those as concentric rings.

Here, at least two groups of actors are at play: Frontline workers who produce content and smaller-scale influencers who interact and engage with the produced content. As the CEO remarked, "It shows you the specificity with which you can create powerful, emotional, personal, and often local narratives." However, even issue-based campaigns vary in size, scope, and strategy. A campaign to enroll in a college savings fund, for example, does not have the same emotional appeal as an advocacy campaign for the American Heart Association.

As influencers are incentivized to choose causes and issues that they strongly believe in, relational influencers are especially valuable for issue-based social media campaigns. As one campaign strategist stated,

What these smaller-scale influencers lack in follower counts, they make up for in both engagement and audience trust. To me it doesn't matter how many followers they have, it's about how many people would find them credible and a powerful messenger.

Here, the strategist highlighted the credibility and engagement levels of a relational influencer: These assets are essential for effectively building a relationship between a relational influencer and their audience.

RQ2: Coordinating Influence—Mobilizing Influencers and Meme Accounts

Several of our interviewees remarked that the coordination of influencers to build a consistent message for a campaign was often top-down, from marketing firms and political strategy organizations to the influencers, who were sometimes (though not always) paid. By targeting influencers close to these causes, strategists told us that the influencers are more willing to post on behalf of their campaigns and often do so without payment. "If they feel they're fighting for the cause, they're happy to engage," said one strategist.

According to our interviews, building rapport between the influencers and the political organization and/or marketing firm usually begins with research. Based on the target audience that the political organization wants to reach, the organization builds a database of personas representing ideal influencer collaborators. Influencers who are similar to these personas are tracked using a variety of demographic and audience metrics—including gender, age range, location, follower count, and topics covered—which are typically collected through website scraping.

When there is an appropriate proposed project, organizations often use influencer management platforms, where they can select their audience targets, propose content style, and solicit bids from influencers. In some instances, political organizations may reach out to an influencer directly, especially if that influencer fits a preferred persona or has a followership that demographically reflects the campaign's intended audience. When relevant, political organizers will also pair their influencer content with additional research or promotional content. For example, one firm used location-based targeting to connect traditional advertisements with influencer content. After inviting both large-scale and smaller-scale relational influencers to a campaign, they would then pair that content with advertisements on streaming platforms and other online ads.

One political strategy group used this set of tactics to great effect. Focusing on relational influencers, this group built a proprietary database of several hundred thousand influencers, accumulated over many years of "building relationships with real folks" through outreach, a referral program, and "prospecting"—gathering the content of thousands of Instagram creators on a daily basis who are "segmented by age, size, and location."

This group was not an outlier—across five interviews with influencer marketing firms, the participants emphasized the growing availability of relational influencers. According to the interviewees, there are many reasons why political organizations would seek out relational influencers specifically. In addition to having a smaller, more committed followership, relational influencers are less expensive and typically have less bargaining power, making them easier to hire in bulk. Hiring relational influencers distributes risk across many influencers. As one marketing executive who worked with Instagram influencers stated, "If you can get 10 people with 100,000 followers to post something for the same price as one person with 3 million followers, you've got 10 times the likelihood that it goes viral."

Firms that streamline their hiring process of influencers through marketplaces and influencer management platforms can make precise requests that use Internet trends while still expressing the political message. "You can upload a piece of media and say I want a thousand versions of this, or I want this to be *Humans of New York* style," said another executive. This streamlining also creates a large pool of influencer content that can be reposted and reused by the campaign later.

A final aspect of relational influencer marketing for political organizations is assessment, which can be done using social listening tools that monitor the popularity of a candidate or issue campaign in real time. The successful engagement of hired influencers then gets fed back as data into a database, which assists political organizations in selecting influencers for future campaigns.

Despite the increased access to relational influencers, obstacles remain when it comes to successfully integrating them into political campaigns. This is partly attributable to the nascent nature of their coordination; as one influencer firm executive said, the practice is "still very early on" and "they [campaigns] don't really know what they want to do, just that, 'We need to use influencers.'" As a result, political campaigns may at times be unsure of how to collaborate. One marketing firm executive expressed frustration with some campaigns' inadequate preparation: "They'll usually show up right after a crisis or right before an election when there's not a lot of time to do anything." Another point of contention stemmed from occasional micro-managing by campaigns, resulting in a catch-22 for influencers between producing authentic content and meeting the

expectations of a political campaign. As stated by another influencer firm executive, "You get a lot of campaign managers who obviously like control . . . but when you work with influencers, you have way less control. . . it makes it really difficult for influencers to actually do work with them."

Mutual Coordination Among Influencers

Interviewees also noted instances of coordination among influencers through engagement pods, influencer collectives (e.g., "hype houses"), and apps that promote the exchange of likes-for-likes, or other engagement metrics. Influencers, particularly smaller-scale influencers, may coordinate through engagement pods: Groups that form to increase engagement and boost one another's social media posts, specifically on Instagram. Although some pods are more systematic and commercialized as formal companies, some are coordinated through informal Facebook groups and Instagram direct messages.

Engagement pods are often organized on Telegram, WhatsApp, and Reddit, and in private direct message groups on Instagram or private Facebook groups. While each group has its own rules, engagement pods are generally based on exchange systems such as likes-for-likes, comments-for-comments, or follows-for-follows. Many have thresholds for engagement their members must meet to remain part of the pod. Pods artificially enhance an influencer's engagement metrics, making their content appear popular.

Relational influencers also interact with large-scale influencers by collaborating to grow engagement and encouraging them to produce political content. One influencer we spoke with, who had more than 50,000 followers on Instagram and several hundred thousand views on TikTok, got involved with a candidate-associated campaign during the 2020 U.S. presidential election because fellow influencers had contacted her. She also joined a virtual allyship group that hosts racial injustice experts and activists to educate influencers and inspire action.

Large-scale and relational influencers may attempt to coordinate informally with other influencers that they know either through personal relationships or reputation; however, this is not always successful. For example, the aforementioned Instagram/TikTok influencer tried to mobilize her own personal network of five influencers, two of whom had several million followers. Unfortunately, none of the influencers wanted to get involved in political messaging, which she lamented, "kind of rubbed me the wrong way because I wasn't asking for a personal favor, and I wasn't asking for them to work with some random brand."

For larger influencers and, to a lesser extent, relational influencers, branded partisan collectives are yet another coordination strategy. This includes Conservative Hype House, Turning Point USA, TikTok Leftists, and the Dem Hype House. Established collectives often have organized structures. One member of a prominent collective described how his collective grew to have multiple tiers of members whose status depends on the number of followers, ultimately leading to a clear hierarchy with a supervisory board, onboarding protocols, content dissemination plans and strategies, monetization plans for merchandise, and even meetings on how to deal with content that needs to be removed. Leaders of the collective also selected and amplified content from content creators' profiles by posting it to their branded collective page on TikTok (which at the time had millions of followers).

RQ3: Concerns About the Hybrid Turf—Is it Grass or Astroturf?

Whether relational influencers engage in grassroots activism or coordinated astroturfing was hotly debated among most of our interviewees. One expert in election law emphasized that the issue at hand was not persuasion, but obfuscation:

The problem is not that some person might influence another person's vote. The problem is that some person might influence another person's vote in a surreptitious way or an overly manipulative way—a nontransparent way that we think is bothersome.

Critiques and arguments centered around a few key considerations: (1) Was the coordination disclosed? (2) Was there a form of payment, monetary or otherwise, and if so, was the payment provider disclosed? (3) Was the influencer incentivized or pressured to share content that they did not authentically support?

In the physical realm, when a campaign representative knocks on someone's door, they would be dressed in apparel signaling their connection to a campaign to impress legitimacy. Thus, when influencer firm executives and political strategists engage in "e-canvassing" with influencers, the question emerges whether disclosure should be required as well. According to one of our interviewees, a former member of the FEC, there is contention on the board over whether disclosure would constitute a violation of the right to free speech because it could result in intimidation. Based on this argument, some influencers could be deterred from supporting a political cause and from practicing their right to (political) free speech if they had to disclose sponsorship. Due to a regulatory vacuum that left the FEC stalled between July and December of 2020 (Naylor, 2020), according to the former FEC interviewee, "people know they can just act with impunity and there's not going to be any enforcement." As a result, opportunities for dark money and foreign actors to anonymously coordinate influencers arise. One influencer firm executive we interviewed said that a representative of the Turkish government sought to hire American influencers to support President Erdoğan but refused to reveal the origin of funding. The executive refused his request but did not know if the representative found another, less-principled firm to work with: "It really depends on how much you care about the source of the income you receive."

Beyond regulatory issues, there was disagreement regarding whether influencers, particularly small-scale ones, should be paid at all. One executive said influencers should be paid for the value they provide: "Look, we've been paying people to knock on doors, we've been paying them to make phone calls . . . So, we pay people to do this all the time. This is digital door-knocking." Besides the monetary value of time spent, another executive explained that some advertising campaign topics are not engaging enough to attract volunteer influencers, so they must pay to incentivize participation. Other executives and strategists said that political campaigns did not want to "pay to play" and felt that influencers could be compensated through time spent with the candidate, photo opportunities, and free merchandise (e.g., T-shirts). Lack of payment complicates disclosure. As one executive explained, "We didn't pay anybody, so it wasn't even a question."

Another issue that emerged in our interviews pertained to whether influencers could be pressured into sharing political messages that they did not believe. One executive was particularly adamant: "I tell

you that would never happen. Never. Influencers cannot be bought into having opinions. Not the good ones, not the ones that people actually follow . . . I would fall on my sword about this opinion.” Another strategist added that influencers are unlikely to misrepresent strongly held beliefs: “You’re not going to go and say, ‘Hey, I’m pro-life’ when you’re really pro-choice.” The strategist conceded that money may incentivize influencers who are not politically active to get engaged, and that campaign expectations may partially sway the presentation of beliefs, particularly for influencers who need financial support.

Discussion

The brand world has driven the development of tools to make influencers more accessible. Political campaigns are using these platforms to mobilize influencers for their causes. Our study explored the nascent domain of political relational influencers through interviews with influence campaign stakeholders—marketing executives, political organizers, influencers, and other experts. In this study, we defined political relational influencers as content creators, paid or unpaid, who promote political and social causes toward their audiences. They are embedded in webs of coordination among campaigns, candidates, political strategists, influencer marketers, other influencers of lower or higher status, as well as their own social media audiences. Our study describes how coordination takes place between political organizers and influencers as well as directly among influencers. It sheds light on the motivations of influencers to engage with political issues and catalogs influence campaign stakeholders’ perceptions on whether and when the social media activities of political influencers may be classified as a form of grassroots political activism or astroturfing.

Our findings reveal that, in the context of political and electoral campaigns, engaging with relational influencers as a campaign tool is only getting more important. As intermediary companies connect political campaigns with ever-more influencers, and as influencer management tools (Bishop, 2021) become more readily available, the relationships between political campaigns and influencers are likely to become more professionalized, sophisticated, and structured (Stoldt et al., 2019).

Correspondingly, our findings highlight a greater level of coordination between political organizers and relational influencers—and among the influencers themselves—than may have been expected. In addition to the explicitly political collectives of influencers (e.g., Conservative Hype House, TikTok Leftists), our interviews highlight the variety of ways in which political campaigns strategize and incorporate relational influencers into their broader advertising campaigns. While political campaigns at times might think hierarchically about influencers as one element in top-down communication structures, influencer firms and marketing executives are cognizant that communicating with influencers requires political campaigns leveling with influencers. For example, Biden’s campaign reported low rates of returns from influencers wanting to post on behalf of campaigns. While it is beyond the scope of this article to assess the quality of this specific campaign, it highlights the difficulty in engaging in this hybrid coordination of political messaging (Chadwick, 2017).

Many of our interviewees also noted that the relationship between campaigns and the relational influencers they are working with must be mutually beneficial. In this dynamic, political campaigns hold power to some extent (they are, after all, the ones with the pocketbook). However, influencers carry a lot of

communicative power: They may be able to engage and mobilize voters that campaigns cannot reach. Furthermore, for either performative or personal reasons, influencers are very selective about the issues they promote—there are few ways to get an influencer to promote a political position they do not personally believe in. As a result, influencers may have substantial bargaining power when coordinating with political campaigns.

Our results underscore the gray area in which political influencers operate. Given the absence of strict regulatory requirements from the FEC regarding disclosure (Naylor, 2020; Notopoulos, 2020), U.S. influencers can work with political campaigns relatively unencumbered and without disclosure, regardless of whether their work is remunerated or not. However, the levels of sophistication and coordination among campaigns and influencers raise questions about when this activity can be seen as grassroots organizing (Ryan, 1991), and when it dips into astroturfing (McNutt & Boland, 2007). The critical distinction between influencer work that qualifies as grassroots organizing versus astroturfing lies in the question of motivation, intent, and disclosure. Someone sharing content about a political candidate they support of their own volition and because of their own ideological convictions may well fall into the first bucket, whereas the work of an influencer who does not disclose their affiliation with a political campaign but shares specific, targeted content provided to them by the campaign, and who might even get paid for this, would clearly qualify as astroturfing. Notably, the interviewees highlighted many official and unofficial means of coordination to boost engagement numbers, such as sharing apps, engagement pods, and other platforms to organize and coordinate. These strategies may create the illusion that political content is more popular than it actually is, which manipulates and artificially inflates peoples' perceptions of political issues.

Additionally, there is a greater question of whether influencers are genuinely motivated to post about politics or whether they are pressured into it—be that directly via campaigns or through influencer marketing firms that operate as intermediaries between campaigns and influencers. While political campaigns may not be able to put pressure on influencers, the audiences of these influencers may become increasingly vocal if an influencer does or does not engage in a social issue.

As political relational influencing becomes more popular, we expect to see a greater level of organization. Already, researchers have found that as the industry matures, influencer management tools and third-party agents managing influencers reify inequalities and hierarchies (Bishop, 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

Our research is not without limitations. Assessing questions about political influencing as a manifestation of grassroots activism or coordinated manipulation is inherently limited by the sampling strategies of our research. We were only able to assess and interview influencers involved in campaigns who disclosed their associations with campaigns (that is how we could find them). While in-depth interviews “take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world” (McCracken, 1988, p. 9), such subjective truths also come with inherent limitations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Our results are limited to two (if prominent) platforms and the U.S. context—TikTok and Instagram—whose idiosyncrasies might not translate to other platform contexts, countries, and corresponding influencer cultures. Results of this study may be sensitive to current events when the data were collected specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 BLM protests after George Floyd’s murder. Future studies may find different dynamics, and political influencer behavior and attitudes may shift over time.

Limitations notwithstanding, our in-depth interviews reveal key insights into political relational influencers and how they communicate and coordinate with audiences and political campaigns. Our analysis of these unique actors in the media ecology complicates notions of grassroots and astroturfing strategies, expectations that audiences have toward political campaigns, and disclosure of affiliations influencers might have with campaigns. Disclosure impacts how audiences perceive advertising (Carr & Hayes, 2014; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Future studies should investigate how regulatory changes regarding political influencers impact influencer conduct. Simultaneously, experimental research could explore how different types of disclosure (e.g., influencer content being tagged as political advertising by platforms) can impact audiences' credibility perceptions of influencers as well as of political campaigns. Lastly, as the field of political influencers matures, researchers would do well to monitor and observe isomorphism and standardization across the industry and its emerging ethics (Wellman et al., 2020).

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