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PASSIVE AND ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICAL CONTENT ON SOCIAL  
MEDIA: A PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION STUDY

ӘЛЕУМЕТТИК ЖЕЛПІЛЕРДЕГІ САЯСИ МАЗМҰНҒА ПАССИВТІ ЖӘНЕ БЕЛСЕНДІ  
ҚАТЫСУ: ҚАТЫСУШЫЛАРДЫҢ БАҚЫЛАУЫН ЗЕРТТЕУ

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СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СЕТЯХ: ВКЛЮЧЁННОЕ НАБЛЮДЕНИЕ

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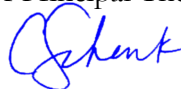
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## Abstract

The role of social media in shaping public perception, particularly in the realm of politics, has become increasingly significant. This study explores the impact of social media on individuals' perceptions of politics, focusing on the context of Kazakhstan and answering the main question: "How does social media influence the perception of politics?" The study heavily relies on digital ethnography, more precisely passive and active observation of Instagram and Telegram, as well as in-depth interviews. The transition from observation to interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of individual perceptions and behaviors. The findings identified that knowledge production and dissemination in social media play an important role in influencing people's perceptions. The results of the study showed two distinct categories of social media users: active observers exhibit a strong interest in politics, actively seeking out information from various sources and critically evaluating it, and are more likely to be influenced by well-articulated arguments supported by expertise, evidence, and examples, while passive observers rely on posts that appear in their feed and may be more susceptible to one-sided narratives due to their lower level of engagement and critical thinking skills. Moreover, external influences, such as social media influencers (SMIs) and online groups, play a significant role in shaping political perceptions, with followers often swayed by their authority and persuasive communication strategies. This thesis contributes to the ongoing discourse on the transformative influence of social media on political perception. By exploring the nuanced dynamics within digital communities, the study provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of information dissemination and its implications for the formation of public opinion in contemporary society.

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## Introduction

The improvement and digitalization of electronic resources, as well as all spheres of life, allow us to take a different look at public space. Informing citizens about some event occurs promptly, creating flexible channels and new interactions between the state and society. For that purpose, people use social media platforms, and different platforms exist, with diverse features. I argue that social media platforms provide alternative sources of political information, influencing different levels of engagement; passive observers, lacking awareness about political information, are more susceptible to influence, while active observers form nuanced opinions by critically evaluating information. Additionally, social media influencers, with their accessible and relatable communication style, play a significant role in shaping political discourse action as intermediaries between official channels and the public.

The motivation to do this study was my personal experience. I use social media platforms every day, for different purposes and mostly for entertainment or studies. I saw different posts on social media that were about politics and realized that certain posts changed my perception or view about it. Delving deeper into the comment section accompanying these posts, I saw diverse attitudes and perspectives expressed by other users. This observation piqued my interest in understanding the influence of social media on shaping perceptions of politics.

Castell and Blackwell's (1998) theory of network society posits that one of the main and traditional channels of communication is the media, which is showing a tendency to reduce its dominant role - newspapers, television, and radio are fading into the background. Sometimes the information in traditional media is not explicitly expressed. Consequently, people often rely on social media groups, communities, and influencers (bloggers) to get more information that can help to comprehend political news (Peter and Muth 2023). Also, Castel (2011) concluded that the Internet is becoming the framework of the everyday life of almost all people. The Internet is the basis of their work, information, and a component of the functioning of politics.

With the help of such useful mechanisms as social media, people can exchange opinions, and information and comment on it, as well as disseminate and publish their own opinions, thereby conveying their position to society. Thus, social media is a set of communication tools of the Internet space, with the help of which users of this space can receive, integrate, and create the necessary information in order to create public opinion and a specific agenda.

Social media is used for different actions, for communication, watching films, scrolling the news, etc. A huge increase in usage has resulted from social media becoming accessible to users "on the go" (Yasseri et al. 2016). The advent of the Internet and social media have enabled the active engagement of people in observing, distributing, and interpreting events (Hermida et al. 2012, p. 816). Diehl et al. (2015) and Xenos et.al. (2014) argued that even when people's first intention was only checking their media and communicating, it might generate few possibilities for unintentional exposure that can lead to political persuasions such as changing their opinion and views or starting to be engaged with politics like following political groups, discussing it. The Internet allows users to access any type of data, thanks to which the amount of information consumed by the average user is increasing every day. Online persuasion is shaped by various factors such as the usage of video posts, etc., and the use of interpersonal communication techniques (Ahmad 2020). The emergence of written communication that persuades people can be attributed to the expansion of social media.

### **Research question**

The thesis focuses on the role of social media on people's perception of politics due to the increasing influence of social networks. It also explores how social media affects the political perceptions of both active and passive observers and the impact of external factors like blogs and groups on users' political opinions. The study's main research question is "How does social media influence the perception of politics?". More specifically the study aimed to address the following questions:



What is the predominant mode of social media changing of the perception, by active engagement, which is deliberate information-seeking (searching for information by themselves), or passive engagement, which is incidental exposure to posts in their social media feeds (recommended posts)?

### **Thesis organization**

In the first chapter, I review relevant literature on the internet and social media phenomenon and how scholars elucidate the role and influence of social media on people's perception through fundamental paradigms that explore and interpret the multifaceted dimension of social media's role in society. The literature review starts with definitions and motivations for using social media and how news consumption has changed because of social media websites. Then I move to the explanation of passive and active learning methods and the phenomenon of "news find me perception" and its impact on users' reliance on social media. For this study, I used an open community (group) in social media and the literature review analyzed the role of weak-tie communities and heterogenous networks as well as their increased vulnerability to influence. Lastly, I review the literature on the role of social media influencers and their role in shaping audience attitudes. The second chapter of the thesis work is dedicated to the description of the methodology part which is based on digital ethnography and interview. Here I will outline the information about the recruitment of the social media platforms and accounts for observation, social media community (group), and research participants. The third chapter is about the findings from observation and interviews. Here I made a content analysis of some Instagram accounts and the Telegram community to understand their activity and engagement with other users and then with the information that was taken from the observation in-depth interviews were done to understand how the action of the external factors influenced them and what factors play a role. The last chapter is dedicated to the discussion of the gathered data and answers to research questions.

## **Chapter 1. Literature review**

### **Introduction**

People use social media platforms every day for different purposes and now it become a place where people can gain information, and sometimes it can influence their perception and in this case the perception of politics.

This chapter explores foundational issues in the study of social media, followed by the examination of user engagement and the motivations of people to use social media. This thesis demonstrates the propensity of active observers to meticulously gather information from diverse sources in social media and subject it to analysis, led to an escalating sense of skepticism and mistrust directed towards official sources (pro-governmental media and traditional political figures). Conversely, passive observers exhibit a higher susceptibility to the influence of incidental posts on social media due to their limited exposure to political information.

Therefore, the literature review draws from existing studies to indicate how people consume news and how active and passive learning methods can shape their understanding and interpretation of information. Uncovered from the findings is the tendency of active observers, owing to their pre-existing knowledge of specific political information, to align themselves with viewpoints akin to their own during community debates on social media platform; while passive ones tend to gravitate towards users whose arguments exude credibility. Consequently, the following section focuses on the influence of heterogeneous networks on the opinion and perception of users, which explains the role of weak tie connections such as comment sections or discussions in a community with strangers that have similar interests. Moreover, it elucidates the role of homogenous networks and how the opinions of acquaintances can influence individuals' perceptions of information. Finally, it was also found that social media influencers are influential figures in shaping political discourse by their ability to foster closeness with the audience and provide information. The last section is going to discuss the crucial role of

knowledge and information dissemination by external influences such as social media bloggers, and groups.

Parfenchik (2017, p. 187) mentioned that the term social network was first introduced by American sociologist Barnes, and it is made clear that a social network is a person's extensive connections with other people. Moreover, social networks in the Internet space are interactive multi-user platforms, online services, or content, the websites of which are formed by network users. Social networks, compared to other web pages, have expanded functionality; they are also an automated information social environment that allows users to communicate through instant messaging services or internal mail, and create groups of users united by common interests. In other studies, Gasanova (2015 p. 216, 2017) to the opinion of Sherstobitova and Smorgunova, they "consider social Internet services as Internet platforms, where they are organized according to the network principle, that is, there is communication between users, content development and joint determination, dissemination of information and cooperation in discussion".

Needs arise from the convergence of psychological dispositions, sociological influences, and environmental conditions which are collectively motivating engagement with media (Wang et al. 2012, p. 1830). Social media eliminates boundaries between users, opens ample interaction possibilities, and rapid spread of information. Halpern and Valenzuela (2017) cited Ellison and Boyd's definition of social media, which states that social networking services possess three key features: they are built on personal profiles, where users contribute the majority of the content; these services facilitate public connections between users; and it enables users to share, receive, and engage with other people's content. Wang et al. (2012, p. 1830) conducted research that found the main needs and motivations to use social media which include emotional needs (enhancing aesthetics, and enjoyable experience), cognitive needs

(gaining knowledge, and information), social needs (communication with people), and habitual needs (checking social media repeatedly).

Social media is also a tool of the population to raise awareness about the problems in the country. With the help of social networks like Twitter, which offers a communication platform for the fast transmission of information and can instantly attract the attention of millions of users (Torrealba 2015).

### **Engagement**

Nowadays news consumption methods changed, in the past people usually used traditional media such as TV, and newspapers, but nowadays internet and social media changed it. In states where media ownership is predominantly private, news programming adheres to the demands of the market. In these countries, the news is not detailed and sometimes omitted, usually having more entertainment-centered information (Iyengar et al. 2010). Because of the mainly “soft” news people use social media to get more detailed information. Bright (2016) believes that the emergence of social media as a platform for news distribution holds significance due to its potential to disturb the traditional media’s ability to set agendas and because of the increase of users, social media can turn into a primary source of news. Peter and Muth (2023) conducted a survey that found out that information about politics and news is mostly searched and read via social media websites like Instagram, and Tiktok (p. 165). People's methods of getting news have altered, especially with modern social media, and it serves as a bond for news by simultaneously presenting users with news from both traditional media sources and news that is shared by other individuals within their social networks (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017). This dynamic exposes users to news content either through intentional searches or incidentally, without any explicit effort on their part, through their utilization of these platforms. Usually, incidental posts occur because of the popularity and the occurrence of viral events highlights the functions of various social media tools at different stages of the knowledge

production and dissemination process (Hemsley and Mason 2012). The increased diversity of choices, publishing, and communication opportunities for people was noted by the authors. Consequently, the traditional dominance of major news outlets in shaping a unified news agenda is perceived as potentially jeopardized by the active involvement of citizens in the agenda-setting process (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017, Bright 2016). Additionally, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) argue that social media could potentially alter individuals' perspectives on the significance of news in their daily existence and their motivations to actively pursue it, thereby influencing their level of political awareness.

Information is all around us and people receive it differently which can somehow influence their perception of certain topics. As mentioned before some users search for information intentionally which can be labeled as active learning, and some users find news incidentally which can be labeled as passive learning, and in both types, their perception and opinion might be influenced (Shehata 2013, Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017).

Users who do *active learning* usually receive information and news from traditional media sources and use social media as secondary data with their individual preferences, disregarding facts that may not be immediately relevant to them, so-called “secondary gatekeeping” (Bright 2016, p. 346, Shehata 2013). The reason why they use at first traditional media is that the information that is received is more verified. However, sometimes this information is not said or written in detail, and for that users tend to follow social media influencers (SMIs), non-governmental groups, and communities who share their political views to assist them in comprehending political news and determining how to process and respond to it, and these influencers and groups are assumed to have an opinion leadership role. They provide supplementary insights into what users acquire from traditional media, offering both simplification and guidance. This shows that SMIs and groups have substantial influence over their followers' perception of specific political topics (Peter and Muth 2023, p. 168).

Apart from influencers' opinions, active learning can also include analyzing posts regarding the number of user interactions as the number of likes, comments, and reposts. As Bright (2016, p. 343) cited “Mainstream media content is the lifeblood of topical social media conversation”. When the post or video has a big number of views or likes people usually watch or read it. Reactions and opinions might also be influenced by reading positive or negative comments on certain posts (Helpern and Valenzuela 2017). From hashtags, for instance, we can see if this topic is popular now by the number of people who use it in their tweets to find users who have similar views and issues. (Beveridge and Tran, 2022, Chen et al., 2021). People are more likely to act similarly or imitate others based on what they have learned from the information others have contributed and Ahuja and Patel (2018) defined this action as “deep profiling”. Yasseri et al (2016) also mentioned this phenomenon, depending on how many other participants there are, various people have varied thresholds for consuming it.

Regarding *passive learning*, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) mentioned the term “ambient news” by explaining that we are surrounded by a huge amount of information on the internet and people might think that they ought not to regularly check and search for it to be informed. By passive learning phenomenon, observing that information comprising substantial amounts of political information has the potential to augment political knowledge via mere exposure, even among individuals who do not actively subject themselves to news and whose first intention to use social media was different. Bright (2016) also pointed out that some users instead of actively searching for news get involved in it by receiving messages from their circle. People are more likely to engage with content that is shared by their peers, even if it contradicts their opinion (Song et al. 2021). While Hermida et al. (2012) noted that some internet users get some of their news through emails or posts on social media platforms like Facebook. Moreover, in research conducted by Peter and Muth (2023), it was found that individuals who gain information about politics only from SMIs or groups are more vulnerable to influence due to

one-sided and less impartial political attitudes. Additionally, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) noted another term called “news finds me perception” which explains that people with this perception believe that they can be informed about politics without following the news and intentional efforts to seek it. But the authors also pointed out that these individuals are not uninterested in knowing this information, they just believe that active search is not necessary and social networks adequately provide the news they need to stay informed (p. 107). Because of that perception, they might think that social media gives them enough information and use it as a main source of information. However, the reliance on posts on social media or SMIs for news aligns with a two-step flow of information, which is when news from traditional media might be filtered to the general public through opinion leaders (Riedl et al. 2021). By that, they may disseminate news to persuade users and their followers. Because of the large amount of information, it is hard to filter it correctly, which can lead to misinformation. Consequently, they might read posts or watch videos that are “fake” without knowing that. For example, fake information on Twitter spreads more rapidly than true ones, so users can disseminate political misinformation due to low barriers which might lead to inaccurate beliefs. When new posts are uploaded, they are not fact-checked or filtered, contents are produced and relayed among users unhindered. The viral nature of this content, which can be shared by millions of users, contributes to a perception of its authenticity among them, despite its falsehood (Anderson 2022). Additionally, activities such as watching television news, and reading newspapers may be perceived as redundant for those with the “news find me” perception, as these traditional media sources are deemed to offer limited additional information when users already feel adequately informed through social media (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017, p. 108). Comparing these two methods of learning, it is important to note that with the passive learning method, individuals’ knowledge about politics widens due to the high choice of media and information, thus they are more vulnerable to influence than individuals with the active learning method

(Anderson 2022). Moving forward, Treadway et al. (2005) cited Mintzberg by analyzing a model of political behavior. This model consists of political will, which means willingness to take part in it, and political skill, which means understanding it right and effectively. However, not everyone can use political skills correctly. Some or majority of people just consume information and might have chances of persuasion without considering it correctly.

### **Weak tie communities**

Sharing the news with someone and discussing is an essential feature on social media. Users can share it by direct messages or on their stories, which might lead to persuasion. Hermida et al. (2012) conducted a survey that found that an increasing number of individuals engage in sharing and discussion via social media platforms and noted that if in the past searching for news was the most significant development, the act of sharing news holds equal importance now (p. 815). Now communities in social media such as Telegram and Facebook becoming popular, so Bode et al. (2014) mentioned that users not only share political information but also associate themselves with a particular group. Consequently, in these communities' users have one-minded people with homogenous commentaries, and when someone sends certain controversial content and posts other users may be persuaded because of their previous similar opinions.

Internet communities can be associated with heterogeneous networks, which by network theory defines people as nodes who have different interests and connections. Diehl et al. (2015) pointed out that usually, persuasion in social media can occur in these heterogeneous networks. Other scholars call it as instrumental ties where a swift development of weak-tie networks, in which people can communicate with one another without being constrained by interpersonal barriers, is made possible by the flow of information (Ahuja and Patel 2018). Additionally, these heterogeneous networks can be seen in the commentary section of certain posts where users may agree or disagree with each other, Diehl et al. (2015) and Halpern and Valenzuela (2017) both



discussed that one of the things that might be the reason of persuasion is disagreement which encourages exposure to other viewpoints by acquiring factual information. People are more likely to temper their opinions when they disagree, weak ties in social media lower the cost of maintaining relationships, lowering the offline world's traditional social barriers, and expanding the possible audience for discussions. When personal interests and professional policies do not coincide, conflicts of interest arise in situations that lead to a transformative effect on people's behavioral characteristics. Although the social communities that emerge in this way are often not stable because the connections in them do not need development, this type of connection can be reactive, and effective. However, some scholars agree that persuasion on social media can happen more with environmental ties communities, which consist of relatives and friends, where users are aware of the issues that affect their environment, and it may lead to ensuing after their peers and engaging in it.

### **Role of influencers**

Accessing politically significant information within online social networks is facilitated by the sharing of such content by other users (Song et al. 2021). In the preceding section, the discussion centered on Social Media Influencers (SMIs), who became an important part of social media engagement and gained prominence as a result of effective self-presentation on social media platforms. They leverage popular online platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, etc., and engage with their audience by sharing and discussing information on diverse topics which makes them popular and in demand (Peter and Muth 2022, Riedl et al. 2021). The speed at which information is delivered to readers is the primary benefit of SMIs over traditional media. Because of the easiest way to create "posts" and disseminate information to an infinite audience, the media is unable to keep up with new media, in the realm of adolescents' informational media usage, non-journalistic sources such as influencers exert a slightly greater degree of influence compared to their journalistic counterparts (Volkov 2015). Peter and Muth

(2022) cited Freberg's definition of SMIs as "a new type of third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" and the authors defined these influencers as "micro-celebrities" because they have a mix of usual users and bloggers (celebrities). Usually, not only they share their political views but also everyday routines such as cooking, studying, etc. which makes the bonds between them and followers closer to "one of them" feeling and establishes parasocial relationships (p. 165). Their parasocial influence is inferred from their extensive social networks and outgoing nature as media personalities who rely on intimate connections with their audiences (Harff and Schmuck 2023). Durau (2022) characterized SMIs as users who have the ability to change and shape their audience's opinions/behaviors through their posts and speeches. Peter and Muth (2022) used the term "opinion leaders", while Schmuck et al. (2022) referred to them as "digital opinion leaders", they also pointed out that due to their charismatic speeches, communicative competence, and ability of a close alignment with the language and context of followers (usually youth), thereby considering them as successful opinion leaders. Schmuck et al. (2022) mentioned that SMI originated from the two-step flow of communication theory, opinion leaders may not hold formal positions of authority but possess extensive knowledge about a particular topic and wields significant influence over others. According to the authors, they are characterized by three criteria: firstly, they embody specific values; secondly, they demonstrate greater social engagement and possess a larger network of social connections; and thirdly, they have an understanding of a particular topic due to their interest and motivation not to lose faith from followers (p. 740). Hemsley and Mason (2012) observed that social media blogs play a crucial role in knowledge production, particularly in relation to the knowledge pyramid, one of the perspectives on the nature of knowledge. According to that, knowledge stems from environmental sensations. These sensations, when quantified and expressed in a communicative

manner, become data. Systematic organization of data results in information, and with added context and structure, thus information evolves into knowledge (p. 3932).

Regarding political content, nowadays with audiences numbering thousands and millions of followers, the reach of influencers in the present day frequently surpasses that of numerous politicians or media figures (Schmuck et al. 2022, p. 738). There might be SMIs whose focus is straightforwardly on political topics (monomorphic opinion leaders) such as war, government, etc., and accounts, whose main focus can vary from fashion to cooking, that may discuss not harsh topics without detailed information (polymorphic opinion leaders) (Peter and Muth 2022, p. 165). Suuronen et al. (2022) mentioned the case when bloggers addressed societal issues through their accounts, directing their followers' focus on political matters. Notably, latter SMIs' posts have greater chances of persuading their followers' opinion due to the incidental information exposure, thus when they see incidental political posts they can get interested. According to the authors' study, it was discovered that unexpected exposure to news on the Internet results in memorable encounters (Ahmadi and Wohn 2018, Haff and Schmuck 2023).

In social media platforms where individuals predominantly obtain news, influencers can function as agents of political socialization, potentially supplementing or replacing other sources of political information in this role (Harff and Schmuck 2023). According to that, Schmuck et al. (2022) established a concept called "Perceived Simplification of Politics" which means that followers' perception of politics is presented lucidly and understandably which is straightforward to comprehend and digest, and easier to understand in contrast with the presentation of political subjects by political figures. Increased exposure to influencer content correlates with a higher likelihood of experiencing perceived simplification of politics. This may lead to personal curiosity and an inherent inclination to actively participate in it and increase their political interest (p. 739). Consequently, the perceived simplification of politics

may contribute to the development of political cynicism among young people as it undermines their confidence in the effectiveness of the political system, and according to authors the combination of the use of social media and political cynicism leads to lower political trust (Song et al. 2021, Schmuck et.al. 2022). Song et al. (2021) argued that active users experience political cynicism since they read from different sources and are aware of politics.

Additionally, in an effort to improve interactions with the public and meet their demands, the government is attempting to harness the power of social media and the internet (Sohrabi and Khanlari 2014), and some politicians are considered to be SMIs. Volkov (2015) wrote that the leadership of the Moscow City Duma strongly recommended that the deputies of the capital's parliament hire special assistants-bloggers who will maintain their pages on social networks and “soon all deputies are going to be obliged to report on their activities on Facebook, Twitter and other resources, as well as formulate their attitude to certain events” (p. 2).

### **Kazakhstan and social media**

Facebook's popularity is still lagging behind Instagram and TikTok, according to data from Kazakhstan (Demidov 2011). The innovative digital hub Wunder Digital has published statistics on the Internet segment of Kazakhstan for 2022. According to the company, 17.3 million people out of the country's 19.5 million population use the Internet with a penetration rate of 89.2%. The distribution of users between regions is uniform, with capitals and large cities traditionally leading the way. 76% of users access the network from their smartphones, and 60% use exclusively mobile traffic (Bekzhanov 2023).

The leader among mobile applications is WhatsApp messenger (13.2 million users), followed by a multifunctional application Kaspi.kz, he is followed in the top three by YouTube and Instagram. The largest audiences are Instagram (10.9 million) and TikTok (10.8 million). Odnoklassniki and VKontakte have half as many users (4.9 million and 5 million, respectively). The next most popular network, Facebook, has 4.2 million viewers. WhatsApp is the undisputed

leader among messengers, followed by Facebook, Telegram, Messenger, Viber, and Skype (Figure 1).

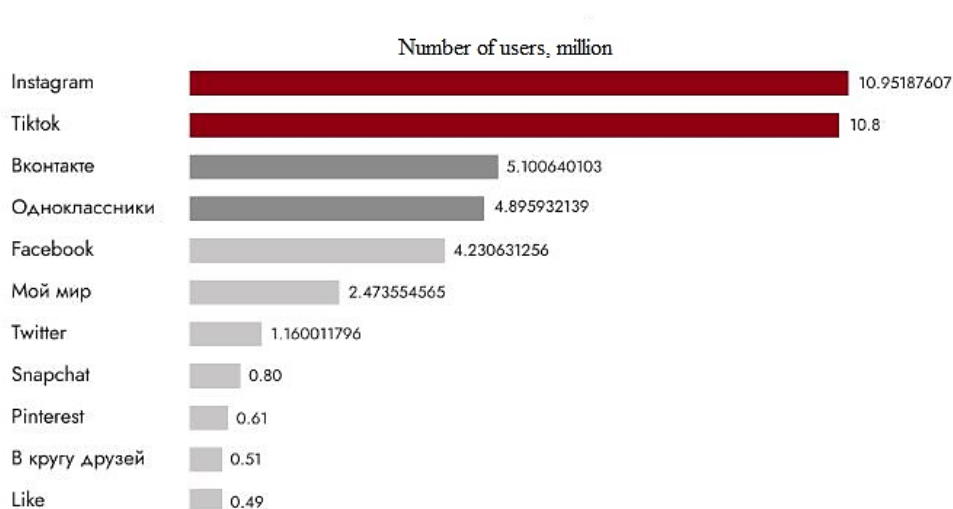


Figure 1. The volume of the audience on social networks (Bekzhanov 2023)

From data for 2023 according to an exclusive industry study, Instagram is the most popular social network in the republic, it is chosen by 71% of respondents. By a significant margin, with 59% of respondents, the TikTok network is in second place. Further, Telegram and YouTube took 57% of the rating (website Profit.kz 2023).

## **Chapter 2. Methodology**

This study applies qualitative exploratory research methodology, more precisely digital participant observation, and interviews in order to study the influence of social media on changing political perception. The study focuses on the influence of social media and to experience and understanding social phenomena as an insider digital participant observation was done. Based on observations, a subset of users was approached for in-depth interviews to delve deeper into their perceptions and behaviors. Although transitioning away from participant observation, the initial observations were guided by the questions and framework of the interviews.

### **Digital ethnography**

Online participant observation was conducted covertly, wherein the researchers conducting participant observation typically do not reveal their presence to their subject, and if they are insiders of the observation, they avoid identifying themselves as researchers (Brancati 2018). The observation encompassed two approaches: passive and covert, active and covert.

Passive and covert observation or unobtrusive is when the researcher watches and records ongoing activities without interfering and participating in them as an outsider. Allowing natural behaviors and interactions (Ugoretz 2017). Active and covert observation involves researchers engaging directly in observed activities or interactions while concealing their identity and purpose from the subjects as an insider (Brancati 2018).

### **Selection of Platforms and Communities**

For the study, I chose Instagram and Telegram platforms for their popularity and wide use. Instagram, a widely used social media platform, offers users the opportunity to share their daily lives, interests, and thoughts through visual content such as images and videos. Users have the option to upload posts captured at the moment or select from stored media in their phone galleries. It has different features designed to enhance users' experience and engagement. Users

can follow accounts to stay updated on their posts. Instagram has two places where they can upload posts, and the first one is their main page which has the account's username, bio, and posts (photo/video) that are shown when visiting their page. The second place is "story". In this feature, users can also share photos and videos that disappear after 24 hours. The post that is uploaded to the main page is shown in the feed feature and uploaded stories are located at the top of the main feed lined up horizontally, but only from the account that users follow. The next interesting feature is "highlights" which allows them to save their favorite stories on their profile, giving them a more permanent presence beyond the usual 24 hours. Also, users can organize and categorize stories by folders and name, making it easier for followers to navigate through a user's profile and find specific content they may be interested in. Another difference between stories and main posts is that on the posts on the main page, other users can see the number of likes and comments and engage in discussion. At the same time, the number of likes on stories is only visible to the uploader (who uploaded it) and individuals can also comment on it. Still, the comment is again only seen on the direct messages (DM) to the user who uploaded it. DM is a place where users send private messages. Users can send posts and stories to their friends by DM, and posts can also be "reposted" (shared) to stories for wider dissemination (only if the account in which the post was uploaded is public). Instagram accounts vary, ranging from personal profiles featuring individual content to dedicated accounts centered around specific topics such as news or sports etc., as well as influencers' blogs.

The Telegram platform is a messaging app and social media platform similar to WhatsApp that offers a range of features for communication and content sharing. But the difference between them is that Telegram has channels that are one-way communication tools where creators can broadcast messages to large audiences, and users can subscribe to the channel to receive updates. This platform also has a group feature that enables discussion among members with a shared interest. Both channel and group are used for data collection.

Observing these platforms provides insight into the behaviors and interactions, and these social media have a wide range of content, including images, videos, and text posts. It allows to exploration of various forms of communication and expression within digital communities.

Instagram and Telegram emerge as suitable platforms for addressing the research question due to their widespread usage among the populace of Kazakhstan. Their popularity ensures a vast landscape for observation, characterized by a wealth of user-generated content, thus offering valuable data for analysis. Next, they represent relevant online spaces where discussions, interactions, and content sharing pertinent to the research topic occur. Both platforms facilitate the formation of online communities and groups centered around specific interests, topics, etc. Additionally, Instagram and Telegram offer features that allow users to maintain varying levels of anonymity and privacy which provide a naturalistic environment for observation, and observed users may feel more comfortable expressing themselves freely.

#### **Passive and covert observation**

Without engaging directly, I observed and monitored the discussions, posts, etc. of selected users. This method provides insights into the organic discussion for active observation, popular political topics, engagement with their accounts, and the type of information they usually share.

For the passive observation, four accounts from Instagram were chosen. The reasons for choosing Instagram were that it is a popular platform in Kazakhstan and has different features that can be observed: stories, highlights, discussion in the comment section, live videos, questions and answers on stories when followers ask questions, and the user can see all the questions and answer them.

The recruitment for the accounts was whether the account was open, the number of stories each day, the number of followers, and the engagement of followers on the comment



section in order to categorize them as influencers, and posts that had political content or content about Kazakhstan.

At first, I chose seven accounts to check if they fit the recruitment. After a week of observation, it was decided to choose the mentioned four accounts since other users had private accounts, fewer followers to be social media influencers and some of them usually were not active every day. The accounts were found in different ways, by asking friends, through a search on Instagram by typing “blogs” and using hashtags, through the reposting of their posts by my followers on Instagram, and also by searching from non-governmental blogs such as “Village Kazakhstan”.

### **Active and covert observation**

For this observation, I was an insider in a community on Telegram where I could send messages and be a part of the discussion. The reason for choosing this platform is that it has a convenient feature that enables easy access to groups through links, and there is no limit to the number of users who can join. In Telegram, groups can be private, in which users need to ask for permission to join, and public where immediate access for users is granted. Groups can also vary according to the ability to send messages, in some groups only the administrator (the user who opened it) can send messages and followers only write comments on certain posts, and groups where all users have permission to send messages. The recruitment for the group was based on criteria such as whether it is a public group, users' ability to send posts or initiate discussions, the number of posts sent each day, the activity of the people, and the discussion level.

To find the community, I conducted searches on Google for popular or political Telegram chats and also searched on Instagram, where users often share links to their Telegram groups in their account information. The group was found in one influencer's account information. One group was chosen for observation. The group was observed for three months.

This ensures genuine interactions and behaviors are observed. Throughout this duration, I actively participated in the discussions concerning politics, contributing by sharing, commenting, and initiating the discussion to assess responses and engagement. This method facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the group dynamics and political discourse within the community.

### **Recruitment for interview participants**

Participants for the study were chosen using a nonprobabilistic purposive sampling method. This method involves selecting participants strategically based on specific characteristics and criteria that are relevant to the research objectives in order to recruit participants who can provide valuable information and experience needed to address the research questions effectively (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). According to that, interview participants were divided into two categories: active and passive, homogenous and heterogeneous networks.

While doing active and covert observation of a community there were diverse discussions on different topics. After each discussion, I observed the user's interactions and level of engagement and chose the active users who usually participated in it and actively engaged with every post that was sent by the administrator and other followers, and also chose some respondents that are not active in the group but follow it. Those users were found on the information desk of the group with the list of all members. Additionally, I also found some respondents through the WhatsApp group, I asked some people to send messages to groups with the invitation to participate in the interview and looked for people who usually are not actively engaged with political posts and information.

The main criterion was the usage of social media in daily life. Active participants were chosen according to their engagement such as following different blogs, groups, and influencers that have political content; searching for additional information from different sources; and

participating in discussions in the chosen or other communities and posts. For passive participants vice versa, having information about politics through their feeds or from friends, no interest in searching for additional information. All interview participants are from Kazakhstan, and their age varies as they were chosen according to their engagement with politics. The total number of interviews is eight.

Participant observation fieldwork was done on social media platforms. According to interviews, there was no exact fieldwork (city) place as respondents were found online. If the respondents were located in Astana, which is the capital city of Kazakhstan, the interviews were done there.

### **Data collection procedures**

Field notes and textual analysis were done to collect data from participant observation. All chosen influencers' stories and posts were observed every day and written on the computer. The stories of the users were also screenshotted due to the fact that stories are available only 24 hours. According to active observation, after choosing the community I did the observation daily, and the information about the type and number of posts, and the level of engagement such as the number of reactions and comments were written on the field notes.

The next source of data for the study was interviews. 8 in-depth interviews were conducted, and the questions were created after reading the literature and information from the participant observation. Sometimes I asked additional questions after the main ones in order to require clarification and explanation. Four interviews were conducted in person and the other four online through the “Zoom” meeting platform. The duration of the interviews varied, some of the respondents answered in short, and some interview participants went off topic and lasted from 20 minutes to 1 hour. All interviewees were aware of the consent form and recorded with their permission.

### **Data analysis procedures**

According to passive observation, the influencer's stories and the posts on the main page were looked at and divided into certain categories regarding the content, the feature highlight, which is the feature that allows saving the story on the main page and the users can create the name for the highlight and put any stories they want, was also observed and divided into categories. With the help of the external program "InFlact", the most popular posts were identified. According to active observation, all the posts and the number of posts and reactions (emoji and comments) were counted and divided by certain categories regarding the content. In the end, the total number of posts in each category was written and compared. The most popular and discussed content was analyzed by me regarding the number of engagements, and also one discussion was used for the interview.

Regarding interviews, I transcribed all the interviews and divided them by open, axial coding. First, the interviews were analyzed and compared to identify commonalities and distinctions for the exploration of the interview data and facilitate the identification of recurring themes across participants' responses. Next, the data were segmented into subcategories, and based on their interrelatedness were divided into categories.

### **Ethical consideration and risks**

In order to collect the data, I applied for and received ethical approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nazarbayev University. The consent form was written and sent to the interview participants with an explanation of the aim of the study, and that the participation in the study was voluntary. Oral consent was given at the beginning of the interview and permission to record was taken. I also repeated that the respondents had the right to end the interview, stop the recording, and ask additional questions. The participants were also reminded that any private information such as their names would be coded with initials, and social media nicks would not be used. All the

data is stored in a personal computer and secured with a password. Additionally, there might be a minimal risk due to the discussion of political topics in Kazakhstan, but the main information that was used for the study consisted only of their engagement in social media.

I did not have a consent form to use the accounts of people for passive observation. All the accounts on Instagram and the community on Telegram were open. Ugoretz (2017, p.13) mentioned that such online communities are public archives, and users post content with the intention to be read, these users and content can be found by a search which is “publicly available information”.

## **Chapter 3. Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the data from the participant observation and interviews which are organized into themes. To start with, I argue that social media impacts different levels of engagement and knowledge acceptance, with passive observers being more vulnerable to influence and active ones critically evaluating the information and being influenced only if the information has proof and analysis from experts. Next, passive observers tend to follow SMIs who usually upload their lifestyles, etc., and are more susceptible to influence when these bloggers post incidental political information, while the active ones usually follow users who are only dedicated to political information and have fewer chances to be impacted. Finally, one-sided posts are more influential than discussion in the community since it had extensive information, along with credible sources and singular perspectives, while the discussion lacks clarity and authority.

Content analysis of chosen influencers and the telegram community was done and analyzed in order to understand how influencers engage with their followers and can influence them. And by these observations ask questions from respondents about how these actions can influence them. According to interviews, the themes grouped into the following categories: 1) social media usage; 2) engagement with political posts; 3) external influence of influencers and blogs; and 4) chosen posts. Each category consists of several subcategories, the first category is the overview of what social media platforms the respondents use and how. In the second category, the respondents described their level of engagement with political posts, and by their responses, active and passive users were determined. The third category explains the role of external factors such as bloggers, or groups, and their actions that can influence their perception of politics. For the last category, I chose one discussion in the community and a post from one

group on Instagram. The respondents were asked questions about the topic before reading and after that given some time to read and see if their perception somehow changed.

### **Passive observation**

The role of influencers can be essential in changing perceptions, and in order to understand their role, and activity I analyzed their Instagram accounts. I chose 4 Instagram accounts. All accounts are public, but I will use special identifiers for each of the accounts: I1, I2, I3, I4.

The activity of the accounts can be seen by uploading “Story”, and main posts.

For the content analysis, I analyzed their posts and divided them into categories:

various- posts about their life, and work.

politics- posts about the government, the President, Kazakhstan, and the economy.

social- posts that contain information about the language and women's issues, employment, and charities.

January events- posts about the unrest in Kazakhstan that happened in January.

history- posts that contain information about historical aspects. Next, I observed and analyzed their Instagram stories for a month, from 12<sup>th</sup> November until 12<sup>th</sup> December.

Additionally, I used the website “Inflact” in order to analyze the most popular posts and engagement rate (ER), which is the average of likes and comments on the posts.

I1 created an account in 2019 and has more than eleven thousand followers and 61 posts, and ER 10,6%, the influencer is a journalist who runs an independent news agency. In a month the user usually uploads 2-3 posts, and all posts were analyzed and divided into categories.

The most popular posts, which have the most likes and comments, are about the influencer’s channel on YouTube and her posts about the Government of Kazakhstan and the role of women in society but do not have a big discussion in the comment section. According

to highlights, there are 4 highlights: book recommendation, work, politics and January events, and grandfather.

According to story observation, I1 uploaded it every day and in one month there were 135 stories. I noted that most of the user's opinions and views are uploaded there rather than posts and from the “social” category there are more stories about gender issues (36, and another 3 about language issues), more precisely about domestic violence. According to the category “politics”, there were only about Kazakhstan (Table 1).

I1	Various	Politics	Social	January events	History
Post	30	7	13	6	5
Story	58	25	39	13	

Table 1. I1's Instagram information

I2 created an account in 2015, and has seven thousand followers and 604 posts, in a month the user usually uploads 1-2 posts. The account's ER is 11,3%. Here is the division of user's posts and stories (Table 2).

I2	Various	Politics	Social
Posts	539	24	41
Story	104	99 (73 KZ, 26 IR)	37

Table 2. I2's Instagram information

The user started to upload posts that were connected to politics from 2020. By comparing them with her post from the category “various”, the former ones have more comments and discussion. According to highlight stories, there I2 has more discussion, from 18 highlights 5 of them are about politics and they consist of more than a hundred stories with discussion, e.g. conflict between Palestine and Israel, and Russia's presents, each highlight has more than a hundred stories. It is interesting to note that the followers asked question I2 in DM



(direct message) and I2 uploaded a story that started with “many followers asked the questions according to the case and my opinion” and answered them with evidence from historical aspects or data. The user’s popular posts are recent uploads in which the political issues of Kazakhstan and the world were discussed.

In the realm of stories, I2 contributed a total of 240 uploads, with a significant majority focused on political subjects. Notably, among the four influencers analyzed, only this particular user addressed international relations. However, when examining the content distribution, it was evident that in the posts, I2 predominantly covered international political affairs, whereas in the stories, the emphasis shifted toward topics related to Kazakhstan’s politics.

I3’s account was deleted during the observation period, only observation of her stories was done. Observation of her stories was done only for 27 days, and in total the user had 98 posts. Notably, all stories categorized under the "social" domain were exclusively centered on the topic of gender inequality (Table 3).

I3	Various	Politics	Social	January
Story	60	4	32	2

Table 3. I3’s Instagram information

I4 created an account in 2015 and has 149 posts, 12,5 thousand followers, and with ER 6.8%, the influencer is a journalist and has a verified badge (in order to show that this is the real account of this person) (Table 4).

I4	Various	Politics	Social
Post	50	96	3
Story	58	35	2

Table 4. I4’s Instagram information

It is notable that I4 usually posts interviews with ministries of Kazakhstan and before that asks followers (on the story feature) to write down the questions from which I4 choose the most required ones and ask. It is also interesting to note that before the posts were about family

and work and in 2023 the user started to make content with the questions to ministries. During the observation of stories, the account was deleted at the end of the observed month. After several months I4 uploaded in the story that “someone blocked my account and mentioned ridiculous reasons, they just do not want to show the truth. They tried to open different accounts using my name and uploading refutation, but I reported to Instagram and got my verification badge and from now you will not lose me”. Regarding highlights, there are several (10) highlight albums with her family and some (2) albums with little question-answer with ministries and citizens. The most popular posts of the I4 are from the politics category which on average has 80-150 comments where the other users discuss it.

Observations regarding stories were limited to 22 days due to the account being blocked and subsequently deleted. It was apparent that I4, who typically posted a variety of content, now opted to share such content exclusively through stories.

From the beginning of November, all four influencers uploaded stories about domestic violence due to the fact that there was a murder case in Kazakhstan when a man killed his wife in a restaurant. They all uploaded the independent news agency “Ne molchi” (Do not be silent), shared other cases of domestic violence, and called to sign the petition. Also, when this case happened, I saw posts and videos from another social media platform called “Tiktok” in which were questions “Why not all SMIs upload about the situation and share their opinion?”

Additionally, there were several stories where bloggers wrote that some independent news agencies were blocked and deleted, and soon after one of the influencers was also blocked.

### **Active observation**

To engage actively, I opted to participate in the Telegram community. The community was discovered through the influencer's story when the user uploaded a post from the telegram group. The group is open and called “Zhapisheva” (Figure 2). At first look, it appeared to be a group where the administrator uploads posts, and users can then comment, when users write a

comment, they are delivered to another group called “Zhapisheva comments” where individuals can engage in discussion and share posts (Figure 3).

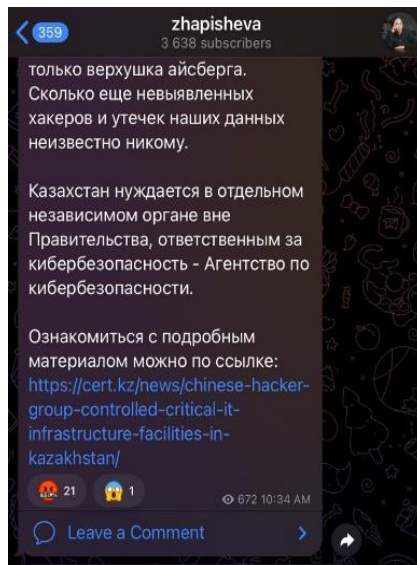


Figure 2. Telegram group

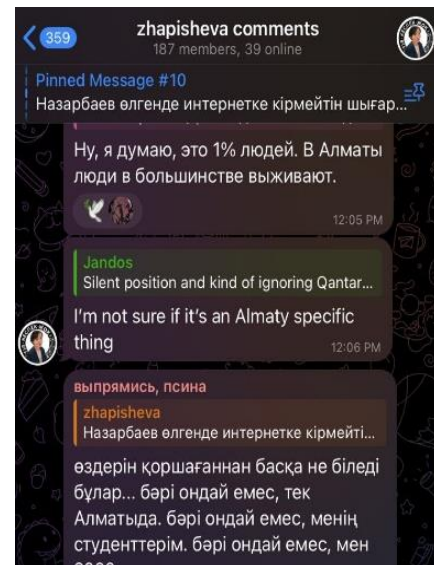


Figure 3. Telegram community

Zhapisheva refers to the modest radio station associated with journalist A. Zhapisheva, known for addressing significant issues in Kazakhstan, predominantly focusing on social and political matters. Established in August 2019, the group has been active for approximately four years and five months, it has 7762 posts and more than three thousand followers. The analysis of the group was made with the help of “TG stat”. One post coverage usually is 1230, and the countries that are usually discussed are Kazakhstan and Russia. According to the division of topics which is shown in Figure 4:

### Posts categories in Telegram group

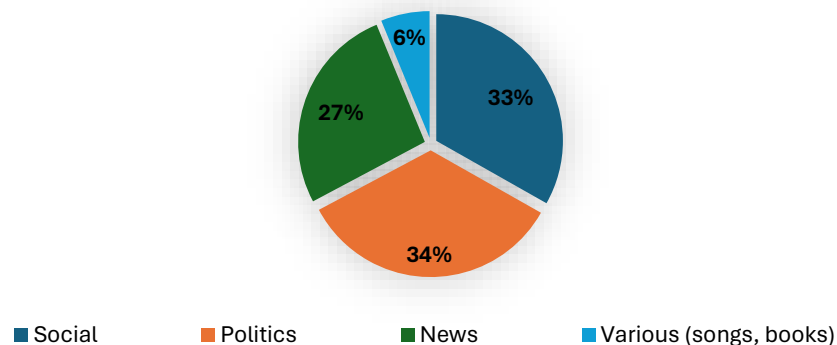


Figure 4. Post categories in “Zhapisheva” telegram group

Regarding the community, with a mere 187 members, the community was selected for observation with the intention of actively engaging and participating in discussion as an insider. This observation spanned a period of three months, from November to February. The table 5 contains the data for the three months facilitating convenient comparison.

Month	Politics category	Social category	Various category	Total	№ of reactions
November	31	10	7	48	1440
December	40	6	10	57	1804
January	45	2	11	58	1840

Table 5. Telegram community's 3 months overview

Observing individuals online offers logistical convenience, yet comprehending and fully grasping the communication dynamics presents greater challenges. The absence of physical cues such as body language, and facial expressions, as well as the inability to perceive tone of voice, etc., significantly limits the depth of understanding in online interactions. In online communication, facial expressions and intentional nonverbal cues are absent, yet we observe the texts individuals publish, often accompanied by emojis (reactions). Emojis, like the "Smile," serve as modern-day equivalents of winks, conveying positive emotions and attitudes such as happiness and warmth (Johnson 2020, p. 8). On average each post received 30 reactions (emojis: heart etc.), and some of the posts received more than 60 reactions.

Despite my attempts to initiate discussions by sharing posts and videos on current events, the response was limited to users merely agreeing with me by tapping the "heart" reaction, while some expressed disagreement with the "angry" emoji. Subsequently, when I actively engaged in the ongoing discussions, my contributions went unnoticed as users persisted in debating with the original initiator. Consequently, while my participation in the community

did not yield substantive insights, it did provide valuable data regarding user engagement within the community.

### *Content analysis*

A diverse array of content can be sent to the community, with common formats including posts, discussions, links, photos, videos, and events. A post typically comprises text only, devoid of accompanying visuals. On the other hand, links entail content sourced from external websites and shared on platforms like other Telegram groups. According to posts, categories can also be divided into subcategories: in November from “Politics” category 6 IR, 16 Kazakhstan government, 6 Russia and Kazakhstan, 3 January events. In December 28 posts about the Kazakhstan government, and 6 posts about January events. In January 34 posts about the Kazakhstan government, and 11 posts about January events.

The most commented post (45 comments) was about a case that happened in South Korea which led to the change of some rules in their constitution and compassion with the Kazakhstan government. From the comments, they all had one view but different reasons that they wanted to persuade others. It is interesting to note that from the fault of the government, the discussion continued to the fault of different IQ levels in the regions of Kazakhstan with which the majority did not agree, consequently some people were deleted from the community because of some harsh words.

The second most commented post (38 comments) was about books from the USSR that wrote (by the opinion of the user) false information about Kazakhstan, eliciting 50 angry reactions. A discussion ensued, representing both concurring and dissenting viewpoints, with certain comments being deleted due to inappropriate language and some answers having an authoritative tone. Reactions were used in order to agree with users’ opinions. Towards the end of the discussion, a user who initially disagreed conceded, stating “From that side you are right”,

and the shift of opinion happened as a result of the debates when people who agreed, provided various historical facts or their personal life experience.

The most reacted post was about the imprisonment of activists before the New Year with angry and shocked reactions which were not commented on at all. Following closely was a post dedicated to commemorating those who had passed away during the events of January.

### **Data from interview**

I selected participants from the community who were either actively engaged or not engaged in discussions, categorizing them as “active” and “passive” based on their level of participation. Table 6 shows information about the respondents.

Code	Age	Gender	Level of engagement	Occupation
R1	27	F	Passive observer	Shop assistant
R2	22	F	Active observer	Student
R3	25	F	Active observer	Student
R4	30	F	Passive observer	Event manager
R5	53	M	Passive observer	-
R6	34	M	Active observer	Teacher
R7	21	M	Active observer	Student
R8	26	F	Passive observer	IT

Table 6. Respondents' characteristics

### **Social media usage**

Several respondents use social media for entertainment: “I like watching fashion shows” (Respondent 1), “... to watch something fun” (Respondent 8). The majority of them use it to be in touch with family and friends and work. Some respondents mentioned that they use social media to read news “I usually use Telegram for reading” (Respondents 2 and 3), “I use social

media to read news, especially Instagram and Telegram” (Respondent 5). Also, other interviewees to the question where they usually perceive news and information about politics mentioned social media “Usually use telegram for that” (Respondent 4), “In Telegram from official groups” (Respondent 5), “Telegram because a majority of unhidden information is there” (Respondent 6), “I usually read news from Instagram and Telegram, but it usually happens (reading news) when some of my friends upload it to their stories” and Respondent 2 also noted that “... Usually my friends send me or I see it from their stories on Instagram”. It is interesting to note that almost all respondents use social media, especially Telegram for reading news and Instagram for watching stories, entertainment, and reading news.

The perception of content on social media varies between *positive and negative perspectives*. Some individuals argue that social media content is more trustworthy and accurate compared to traditional news sources like television. They believe that social media provides more honest information, as it allows for independent analysis, consultation with experts, and access to detailed information that may be hidden by traditional media outlets, “I believe on social media more than news on television” (Respondent 2), “On television the information is kinda not full and might be hidden. On social media, I read one post that had provided an independent analysis of the situation, consulted with experts, and delved into financial statements, and it revealed that in the end, these garbage-burning plants turned out to belong to ....., which was their benefit that they hid” (Respondent 3). “Information on social media more honest, I saw cases where some news agencies were blocked or deleted which told some info about the government that is not good for their reputation and the government tried to hide it. So, all TV channels filter, ... some information they will not share, while in social media people write it in detail and truth... more accurately and truer without filtering by the head” (Respondent 8).

However, there are also concerns raised by some interviewees regarding *the reliability of information on social media* and some interviewees said that information there (social media) “can be romanticized, idealized” (Respondent 7) due to the lack of information on the topic and opportunity to share everything and mislead other users that never heard about it and “Such kind of controversial posts cause a split in society which accordingly forms an aversion to this situation. And this is a very dangerous trend” (Respondent 6). One of the respondents (8) shared the example of being influenced by “idealized” content, “I had a case when my friend criticized some actions of a certain person from the government, and I believed them. But once I had a video with cute edits with their good actions and also good comments, and these videos somehow changed my view because I saw what people wrote about good sides”. Respondent 4 also explained that during the revolts in Kazakhstan, there was a lot of disinformation and fake news that people uploaded in order for others to join them “we need to learn to analyze the information, but because of mass of information it is hard and people because of that can be influenced” (Respondent 7).

### **Engagement with political posts**

According to the analysis of interaction with political content, there exists a cohort of respondents who typically *do not engage* with such material on a daily basis and possess limited awareness of current events globally. Their exposure to political posts primarily occurs incidentally while browsing social media or engaging with their mobile phones. “I do not purposefully visit groups or news agencies, I don't read, but just when it pops up in my feed, I'll read” (Respondent 1), “No, mostly when it comes out on the channel or chats” (Respondent 5), “I don't read it like every day if there will be something interesting or something shocking, there is a usual notification like they show the beginning of the news and after that I sometimes decide to read it or in recommendation in Instagram and TikTok” (Respondent 8).



There exists a distinct subset of respondents who approach engagement with political content differently, while the former ones tend not to actively seek out such content the latter ones demonstrate a *proactive stance by deliberately searching for it* and analyzing it through various sources. This contrasting, attitude suggests a more intentional and informed approach to consuming political information, wherein individuals actively seek out diverse perspectives and supplement their understanding through critical analysis and cross-referencing with multiple sources. This behavior underscores a deeper comprehension of political issues beyond what may be encountered incidentally on social media or other platforms, “When something new in politics or totally in the world happens, it makes me want to read about it in other sources as well, or just like makes me interested in a conflict or like news and then try to read more about it” (Respondent 2), “I usually search in other platforms because some of the posts might be a propaganda, so in order to understand the situation better I look from different sources” (Respondent 7), “I also use YouTube for education, listening to podcasts and usually political ones, I listen to analyses there, about Kazakhstan, and even international. But mostly I use YouTube for, well, some kind of international knowledge” (Respondent 3). The respondent also mentioned that she/he follows pro-government and independent news agencies in order to see how their views differ and what they might hide: “I am also subscribed to pro-government groups, such as ///, which are not independent... it turns out purely as a research interest, for probably, some kind of analysis... I am looking at whether they published or not what they wrote” (Respondent 3). “ ... there are some topics that are currently being discussed in the country and sometimes I'm kind of interested too, and that's why I search for it in social media groups or TikTok” (Respondent 7). One of the respondents mentioned that he/she usually asks their friends from these fields “Yes, of course If the information looks controversial for me, I search for it more and ask my colleagues from these fields for their view” (Respondent 6).

Additionally, it was noticed that not actively engaged users do not *repost or share* the posts with political content on their social media accounts: “I do not share” (Respondent 1), “I know I’m not an expert, so I don’t like to share my opinion” (Respondent 5), “Not always ... I can just send on the DM, but I never upload on my stories” (Respondent 8). And those users who are usually engaged share it, or send someone in order to discuss it: “Maybe just send them to my friends and discuss him in private” (Respondent 2), “In stories where I express my opinion I post only to close friends (Instagram has this feature, where you can choose people who can see it), and if just post from certain group without my view, I post it in the general” (Respondent 3), “Yes, several times” (Respondent 6).

#### *Recommended posts on social media*

When scrolling social media feeds, more precisely TikTok and Instagram have a set of rules and calculations that prioritize the content displayed to users in their feeds. Factors such as users’ past interactions, the relevance of the content, and the popularity of posts are crucial considerations in these algorithms<sup>1</sup>.

There were some respondents who are not interested in political topics and read or watch about politics only on social media when it occurs: “Sometimes such kind of videos occur in my feed, last year when there was a conflict in Ukraine I had videos about the views are reasons from both sides, but I was not into it and it was hard to understand” (Respondent 1), “Yes, it happens to me that things come out, let’s say we have the news about government positions that have resigned, we have had some changes,... various videos are released about some social problems in Kazakhstan or other CIS countries” (Respondent 4), “Quite often I saw such kinds of videos. For example, when I’m scrolling TikTok there can be some videos about some political topics some new laws in Kazakhstan, or what’s happening around the world” (Respondent 8).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.socialpilot.co/blog/social-media-algorithm#:~:text=A%20social%20media%20algorithm%20is,account%20by%20social%20media%20platforms>

However, as was mentioned before in the “social media usage” category their friends or family usually send them posts on these topics, and these respondents are also interested in politics and search about it in their free time. The respondents noted that they usually read about politics daily and posts about politics usually occur in their feeds: “... Due to the fact that I study politics, I have political videos in my feed, and usually, my friends or relatives send them to me or I see them on their stories and read them... and in some cases we discuss them and their opinion may persuade me” (Respondent 2), “I follow a lot of groups and bloggers that post videos about political issues and I am interested in our state situation from different angles and usually read about it every day and consequently my feeds on social media contains such kind of videos” (Respondent 3), “From my school time I am interested in history and then with politics, so I created a group in Telegram to share information, and because of that my social media feeds and information contain historical and political information” (Respondent 6).

#### *Comment section*

The majority of the interviewees responded that they usually read the comment section after watching a video or reading a post on social media. Some respondents answered that they do that to see other users’ reactions, and views and analyze them or to find the comment with their view and see how many people agree with it (according to likes and responses), “Yeah, I read until then the end and analyze what the comment section says” (Respondent 2), “Well, it's just interesting to see/read different opinions” (Respondent 5), “I like reading and watching people's reactions” (Respondent 4), “...I always read their message (their view), then I definitely read the comments, look how many likes there are and so on, if something resonates with my opinion, then I usually like it” (Respondent 3). One of the respondents noted that he/she looks only at the most liked comments and the reason is that the most liked comments show with which opinion the majority of people agree “... I usually, always watch the comment section and read what people say, and usually look at the comments that have more likes. I think

it's because I want to know what most people think about it” (Respondent 8). Another interviewee said that she/he read the comment section in order to read other users’ analyses to understand the situation better and then analyze it using other sources by themselves, and usually such kind of “expert” comments can influence the respondent's opinion, “You know, it happens that you can see experts in the comments. That is, it's not like some person just wrote their opinion, but there are very deep expert opinions that I can base on. Next, I can go further to search for this information in Google, I can scroll through social media further” (Respondent 4). It was also noted that users try to search for comments that have the same view of the situation, and when they find they may believe the rest of the view from the comment that previously did not have because if they have the same view on one thing they may also have the same view in other, “if my opinion is in solidarity with the opinion from the comment that it was written, I will agree... When I find similar comments that describe it exactly how I think, I'll agree with that” (Respondent 6).

#### *Changing of perception*

The interview participants were categorized into two groups based on whether their perceptions were influenced by engagement with social media, with some shifts in their viewpoints and others remaining unchanged. Additionally, respondents provided circumstances under which such influence typically occurs. The responses from the interviews are divided according to previous subchapters who are more engaged with political posts and who are not.

Starting with interviewees who are *not interested in politics* and receive information about it only through social media platforms, their perception usually changes because for them it is new information, but the main role can be played by the content of the post (written plausibly): “They mostly change it, yes. With what I'm not very familiar with it happens and changes” (Respondent 1), “It might happen when I see several posts on the certain topic which have same content” (Respondent 5), “If the post has some facts and arguments it changes my

view, recently I sent one post to my friend that was shocking to me and the my friend explained to me that it is just propaganda an fake information” (Respondent 8). And one interview participant also mentioned that some social media platforms are more influential: “I think a post on TikTok and Instagram can be more influential to me than YouTube. Because in TikTok and Instagram, the videos and posts are short” (Respondent 8).

Regarding respondents who are *usually engaged with politics* and read about it actively from different sources. If they read something controversial about politics they will not believe to it immediately, only after checking and analyzing the facts, “Not always, because what I read in social media I usually know” (Respondent 2), “Yes, but very, very rarely it can affect my opinion. I discuss and communicate. However, did not change my worldview completely ... someone sent it and then you compare it, and then the opinion is being created” (Respondent 6), “Social media platforms have a lot of propaganda, and idealization, and we should not be influenced by it. Some people do not have abilities to see the clear picture” (Respondent 7). Another interview participant said that the opinion of experts plays an important role in changing perception, “some kind of constructive normal dialogue rarely happens, but it has happened ... it affects me, because it's some other point of view anyway, new information. For example, if I know this topic well from one side, and another user who understands other parts that I am not aware of, for example, economics, and explains to me, in that situation, it can change” (Respondent 3).

### **External influence of social media blogs and influencers**

Influencers or bloggers play a pivotal to share information and opinions. Several respondents mentioned that the role of influencers is important in the digital age because the majority of people use social media daily and see their posts and stories.

Bloggers in order to be reliable try to *explain their views with evidence*, “... Sometimes they do some kind of analytics on different things, and I don't know the degree to which I

believe them, but it makes me want to read about it in other sources as well” (Respondent 2), “Well, some kind of expertise, authority plays a role here for me” (Respondent 3), “I saw different posts about this situation and did not pay attention, but after reading the certain blogger my view changes ... I think it is because the certain blogger always uploaded information with arguments” (Respondent 8).

Their (*bloggers*) position can influence the youth and they might believe them without considering other sources, “They can influence our opinion very much; young people are very good at listening to the opinions of bloggers ... they may not even know this situation, but since the bloggers said authoritatively, they can listen to them” (Respondent 4).

Influencers always *upload stories* in order to share their daily life, work, and views. It was mentioned that they usually upload posts from other groups, that have the same view, in order to spread information, and in the next stories might continue the discussion according to that. Interviewees who are not engaged with political information usually see it through their stories, and then continue reading it “... I always check stories on Instagram and such kind of information can show up on my stories, which I usually read” (Respondent 8), “It mostly happens when I'm looking from someone's story and I read from there ... // shared it there, I definitely go and read it.” (Respondent 3), “they can make a repost ... I usually read it” (Respondent 4).

From passive participant observations, it was noticed that they do not always upload posts according to politics and news, but also *upload their daily things* such as hobbies, pictures of themselves, etc. When they upload stories or posts about themselves and their worries, followers feel themselves closer to influencers because they see them every day as their friends. “... shares her experiences and you realize that it seems to be a person too, and at such moments, it's like some kind of rapprochement anyway” (Respondent 3), “I feel sympathy for them, like my friends” (Respondent 2). They might believe bloggers because they had followed them due

to similar thoughts and if they had the same thoughts in the beginning, they may have the same thoughts in other categories, and watching their everyday actions beyond politics gives a friendly attitude to them, “I become closer to their opinions because watch their thoughts daily actions every day, their arguments, maybe because I started to follow them because I had similar thoughts and after that I tend to believe that our thoughts are the same” (Respondent 8).

On social media, there are *non-governmental or independent groups* (sometimes news agencies) that are popular among Kazakhstani people. These entities distinguish themselves from influencers through the nature of their content. Unlike influencers, who blend their posts and stories with personal staff or entertainment content, these groups remain singularly focused on specific topics or themes, presenting content exclusively centered around a particular subject matter. Followers tend to believe them for their ability to explain with facts and without filtering by the government.

Interview participants who *actively engaged with political posts* usually follow those groups, “Follow some personal blogs or people who write about politics. Also, I follow some social pages that write news about different topics like Masa media or Jamal, etc.” (Respondent 2), these groups are good in sharing important issues “They are very good at supporting our weak population as a whole and raising very deep important problems” (Respondent 4). Pro-government groups usually do not post any negative content about the government and try to praise it without any evidence “Expertise, and authority play a role here for me. They are also critical of authoritarian regimes, and they try to dig where it is wrong and so on, *pro-government groups mainly engaged in brainwashing*. In Instagram, I follow I think more than 10 non-governmental groups” (Respondent 3). Some of the respondents use only telegram to read such kinds of groups “I don't subscribe to blogs on Instagram” (Respondent 6).

Regarding interviewees who are not actively engaged, they usually only follow some news agency pages, “... and some political blogs” (Respondent 8).

### **Chosen posts**

The appearance of political content on other users' feeds on social media platforms can occur inadvertently due to the popularity of certain posts, or by discussion within the online community can also influence the perception of people. To assess this phenomenon, I selected one post from a non-governmental group and one discussion from a Telegram community, chosen through participant observation.

#### *Post from social media*

*The selected post* addresses the controversial topic of the celebration of Victory Day on May 9th, suggesting that people should refrain from celebrating it due to its perceived association with the "Cult of Victory" and its use as a propaganda tool. It has more than five thousand likes, and 41 comments but the comment section was closed. Among the most liked comments, there was a division between those expressing agreement and disagreement with the post's perspective. Participants' opinions who are not engaged with politics changed slightly, because of new information and well-written arguments, "My opinion has not changed, I think we should celebrate Victory Day. However, I don't think it's worth investing a lot of money in showing off in the form of a parade" (Respondent 1), "It influenced my opinion, but not much. I agree somewhere" (Respondent 4), "I have never thought about that in this way ... it gave me some new view ...and I questioned myself, why I have never thought about that" (Respondent 8). However, some of the interview participants' opinions did not change due to the reason that their parents participated in it, "In principle, it did not affect ... The contribution to the victory of individual countries should not be belittled" (Respondent 5).

The reasons that might influence the perception of people vary such as the lack of knowledge about the situation, well-explained facts, historical facts, and also the comments to the post, "People's comments and facts" (Respondent 4). Additionally, the authority of the group that uploaded the post also may influence due to the trustworthiness of other posts and stories,



“because of facts, some historical facts and how they analyzed it smoothly ... I know this Instagram group ... of being expert in this area, these factors might have played a role” (Respondent 8).

Users’ perceptions who actively engage with political information usually are not influenced due to the fact that they knew it before reading this post, “My opinion did not change, because I knew these facts before” (Respondent 2), “In my opinion, this is very informative, however compressed but it conveys the main idea” (Respondent 7). But even after knowing this information, the post made them surer about the event, “I heard about it from somewhere, but after reading these facts I was surer. So yes, it changed somehow” (Respondent 6). Because of the arguments that were written by experts and used facts, and the authority of the group can influence their perception, “Yes, it somehow changed because brought some new information that I did not know ... I shared this post on Instagram to spread it” (Respondent 3).

#### *Discussion in community*

The selected discussion, which garnered the highest number of comments and likes, originated from a post concerning a citation from a book written during the Soviet era. The post highlighted that this citation contained inaccurate information about Kazakhstan.

One of the participants lived in the Soviet Times and the discussion did not change the perception, “... hypocrisy from the outside, again this is propaganda” (Respondent 5, who lived at that time). The discussion affected the view of the two respondents because of the mentioned facts that consisted of both positive and negative impacts of USSR time for Kazakhstan, and also the experience of people who lived during the Soviet Union times, “My opinion has changed a little. I emphasized the new information from people who also lived at the time when my grandparents lived” (Respondent 1), “They showed several explanations, like because of that the education was better, they gave some opportunities, and it somehow changed my perception” (Respondent 8).

However, *the active users usually* know the information and try to search the comment that has a similar view, “I don't think it did. I feel like I had some kind of an opinion and when I was reading, I was only paying attention to the stuff that already correlates with my opinion” (Respondent 2), “. . . similar to my personal position, I consider their position closer to the truth and closer to myself” (Respondent 3), “I was close to those opinions that were similar to my opinion” (Respondent 4). Some interview participants were mad, “It did not affect me in any way, on the contrary, it caused me an aversion to these people” (Respondent 6).

## **Chapter 4. Discussion and conclusion**

This study utilized digital ethnography and interviews to analyze the impact of social media on individuals' perceptions of politics. This chapter is dedicated to addressing the research question "How does social media influence the perception of politics?"

### **Knowledge production**

In the literature, it was mentioned that information which officials post might be hard to understand and process, while in social media information about politics is easy to follow (Schmuck et al. 2021). According to the case of Kazakhstan, participants did not mention the complexity of understanding officials but said that the information that they give is not full and trustworthy. Usually, their (officials') information might be idealized or even not mention important cases in the country, while social media gives the opportunity to share without filtering. The majority of respondents highlighted the presence of experts who contribute political content on social media platforms, providing thorough explanations and evidence to support their viewpoints. This practice instills a sense of belief and consideration among users towards these experts' perspectives. In line with existing literature about political cynicism, it is a sense of skepticism and mistrust toward the political system that results in a diminished level of confidence in them. Scholars such as Schmuck et al. (2021) have posited that the use of social media platforms, coupled with increased political cynicism contributes to a decline in overall political trust. Participants noted "information is kinda not full and might be hidden. On social media, provided an independent analysis...., which was their benefit (officials) that they hid." This discrepancy raises suspicion among users, particularly regarding the motivation of political officials in selectively disclosing information for their benefit. Consequently, the use of social media platforms appears to erode political trust, as users perceive a lack of transparency and integrity within the political landscape. However, some respondents noted that there might be information that can be idealized about the country, which is not true.

Political cynicism might happen among all users, as suggested by the literature, which categorizes users of social media into active observers and passive observers of political information. These distinctions were apparent among the respondents in this study, reflecting varying levels of engagement and interaction with political content on social media platforms.

Participants identified as active observers expressed a keen interest in politics, actively seeking out information about specific cases from various sources and also analyzing it with information that was shared by governmental organizations. They noted that by the comparison of independent organizations, and experts with the abovementioned organizations it is obvious that the former ones are more accurate and unfiltered. This observation aligns with the findings of Song et al. (2021) who stated that active engagement with political content on social media fosters skepticism towards the political institution and fuels political cynicism. The active consumption of political information among these participants reflects a deliberate effort to critically evaluate and cross-reference information from multiple sources, emphasizing a preference for unfiltered and objective perspectives. This shift in trust highlights the impact of social media on shaping users' perception of political authority and underscores the role of active observation in fostering critical citizenship and political consciousness.

Regarding respondents identified as passive observers, they typically do not search actively for certain information. As Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) defined with the term, "news finds me perception". These individuals tend to rely on posts that they see on social media and believe that they are well-informed about the situation. They usually do not have such posts on a daily basis and the posts could appear only if a certain case becomes popular in the country. According to data from interviews, these videos might be influential to them, and it was found that due to the fact that they are not aware of certain political topics, they might believe posts that appear incidentally in their feed. Resonating with the work of Peter and Muth (2023) and Song et al. (2021), who suggest that individuals with less interest and motivation in politics

may be more easily influenced by social media content due to its often one-sided nature. Consequently, Social media being the main provider of news for such individuals, and groups or people who provide it can act as agents of political socialization, potentially supplementing or replacing other sources of political information (Haff and Schmuck 2023). Moreover, their passive approach to political information consumption means they may be influenced simply by being exposed to such content, irrespective of their level of interest. Thus, I came to the conclusion that compared with active observers, because of the lack of credible knowledge and critical thinking skills, passive observers are more influenced on the perception of political information. Additionally, it was also found from the data that reading comments on certain posts might also have an impact on the perception. Passive observers are more influential on those who have more likes and trust this information, while active ones usually look through and if find new information search or ask about it. Individuals' attitudes and reactions to content can be shaped by the sentiments expressed in the comments section (Helpern and Valenzuela 2017).

### **External influence of bloggers and groups**

In this section, I discuss the external influences from SMIs and groups in social media, more precisely from Instagram since their status might leverage their influence. According to data from passive observation, which was made through Instagram accounts, it was found that posts and stories shared by influencers are not only about politics. Some of the observed influencers were not political bloggers. They usually share posts on different topics such as social, and economic themes, etc. and explain the cases to their followers. Through these expressions, they influence the attitudes and actions of their followers (Schmuck et al. 2021). Resonating with the work of Ahmadi and Wohn (2018) and Haff and Schmuck (2023), followers may initially follow influencers based on shared interests in non-political areas. However, when presented with incidental political posts, followers may develop an interest that leads to

memorable experiences and then be driven by interest. Respondents stated that because of the authority/popularity of certain SMIs the young population is influenced by their opinions when posting about politics, even if it is not true.

According to stories, as it was found influencers uploaded them every day. Among the topics that were mentioned previously, they also posted about daily things (hobbies, work, entertainment). Participants claimed that they always check Instagram, and when SMIs post stories that are not about a certain topic (their thoughts about work, household, etc.) they feel sympathy for them as friends and closeness. Some participants mentioned that because of these feelings they feel that they can trust them and are mostly passive observers. The same was described in the works of Riedl et al. (2021) and Suuronen et al. (2022), opinion leaders influence their audience by having parasocial relationships, thereby strengthening the bonds formed between followers and themselves and projecting a real image. In essence, the daily sharing of stories creates opportunities for followers to engage with them on a personal level. It was found that SMIs usually post stories rather than posts, and then save most frequently asked to highlight. So, when users find these accounts, they may look through the highlights folder and see explanations of certain political topics. Also, influencers upload stories about their thoughts to up-to-date cases which brings awareness about it. Usually, when such cases (up-to-date situations that happened in the country and everyone discussing it) happen, followers ask the opinion of the influencers according to it. Additionally, scholars contend that their inclusion of political content seems casual and easily accessible. This phenomenon was mentioned in the literature as a “Perceived Simplification of Politics” (PSP) (Schmuck et al. 2022), which is when opinion leaders simplify political discourse, while the communication strategies by traditional political figures may seem distant.

Participants mentioned that the information that is posted by influencers or nongovernmental groups, who post news and analyses of certain cases, is more informative and

includes proof which makes it easier to understand. Additionally, by posting within the context of a two-step flow of communication political information becomes more understandable for their audiences (Harff and Schmuck 2023). When discussing politics, influencers offer direction on political subjects, thereby drawing a distinction from official coverage by discussing cases of public significance. By these actions, they provide other users entry into the realm of politics.

In addition to acquiring political insights through Instagram stories shared by influencers, respondents highlighted that they also receive political information from their friends' stories and through direct messages, leading to subsequent discussions. The nature of the content shared by peers was noted to have an impact on respondents' opinions. When information is shared by people that you know, there is a heightened level of trust and engagement, even if the content contradicts their existing attitudes. This phenomenon emphasizes how important social impacts are in forming political beliefs and it also highlights the importance of interpersonal communication in promoting discourse and changing viewpoints in digital settings (Song et al. 2021).

### **Chosen posts**

In this part, I delve into the discourse observed through active observation in the community. Then I discuss the post and discussion that were shown to the respondents. According to the discussions in the community, it does correlate with the weak tie network phenomenon described in the literature, wherein individuals with diverse interests and relationships engage in discussions due to their varied viewpoints. Hence, during the one discussion in the community, which was shown during the interview, one side explained their viewpoint and persuaded the other user who started the debates. Individuals tend to moderate their viewpoints when faced with disagreement, as weak connections on social media platforms reduce the effort required to maintain relationships, thereby breaking down social barriers and broadening the scope for discussion (Halpern and Valenzuela 2017).

The materials presented to respondents varied significantly in terms of format and content. An Instagram post from a prominent nongovernmental organization featured well-explained information, supported by examples and evidence, and had only a single view. In contrast, the discussion involved multiple individuals engaging in debates, with each side attempting to justify their viewpoints, albeit with less thorough information and proof compared to the Instagram post.

In analyzing data from the interview regarding the aforementioned discussion, it is interesting to note that not all respondents with passive engagement were persuaded, while other participants, who are active observers and some passive ones, already knew and read it within the group. So, they tended to align themselves with the opinion that resonated with their own. Moving to the post from Instagram that was shown to the respondents, it showed different results compared with the discussion. Participants who are not actively engaged with politics stated that the post changed their opinion about the event, and some participants who are actively engaged stated the same since it was explained clearly with evidence and examples. But other respondents claimed that they already knew it, but the post confirmed it and the authority of the group that uploaded also played a role. Hence, it can be concluded that the post was more influential rather than the discussion and the discrepancy in influence can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the post's detailed information, coupled with its authoritative source which is likely contributed to its greater influence. Secondly, the fact that it consisted of only one view may have conferred a sense of credibility to the information it conveyed. While the discussion lacked the same level of clarity and authority, potentially diminishing its persuasive impact.

### **Strengths of the study**

The strength of this study lies in its comprehensive approach to understanding the impact of social media on individuals' perceptions of politics. The study's methodology, and



analysis contribute to its strength in providing valuable insights into the complex relationship between social media and individuals' perception of politics. By making digital ethnography, it allowed to access online spaces where social interaction occurs in order to observe social phenomena, including political discourse, practices of SMIs, users, and community dynamics. According to an in-depth interview, allowed me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of participants' behaviors and interactions within an online environment and categorization of social media users into active and passive observers based on their levels of engagement with political content. And also shows the important role SMIs in shaping political opinions, even non-political bloggers can influence political discourse through their incidental posts and stories, leveraging their authority and popularity to sway opinions. Finally, it highlights a notable difference in the influence of posts compared to the discussion in a weak-tie community. Posts containing one side argument, detailed information, and also credible respected sources tend to have a greater persuasive impact than discussions.

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## Appendix A

Interview guides:

Could you tell me about yourself? (interests, hobbies)

Which social media do you frequently use?

How many hours or minutes do you approximately spend on social media?

How often do you visit social media?

For what purposes do you use them?

If for entertainment, do you come across with “not entertaining videos” e.g., political topics?

On which websites do you spend more time?

If YouTube, do you watch videos from your search or from recommended?

If Instagram, do you follow personal blogs and bloggers?

Where do you usually read or watch the news?

Do you follow or watch nongovernmental groups and channels? For example, villagekazakhstan

If yes, does it show up in your feeds or do you deliberately search for it and read?

Have you ever reposted or forwarded those posts for spreading information?

Do you usually participate in discussions on social media websites?

What do you think about (the certain topic that was shared in the group) before reading it?

While reading (the certain topic that was shared in the group) did it somehow affect your opinion?