

Influencers as Tools in Hybrid Operations Online

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Abstract: The study highlights the risks and threats that influencers pose to national security, as they serve as political role models and agenda setters for young people. Young people trust influencers and various digital platforms but do not view them as threats to national security. The digital revolution and information technology have reshaped power and legitimacy, and influencers can influence young people to turn against their own state, radicalize people, and make them distrust officials, politicians, and the military. They use digital platforms for their advantage, and young people trust influencers as truth-tellers more than traditional gatekeepers. However, the risks to national security cannot be tackled by simply banning or regulating platforms like TikTok and Meta.

Keywords: Information operations, Social media, Internet, Influencers, National security

1. Introduction

The influencer economy has significantly impacted the role of traditional media and other gatekeepers as truth-tellers, from entertainment, consumerism, news, and information to election results and national security. Various people rely on digital platforms (Internet, social media, and gaming) and influencers as sources of news and truths without trusting authorities, the military, politicians, news media, or journalists. Digital platforms have revolutionized the way people become celebrities, enabling them to build an audience and increase their status as political and social agenda setters on various platforms (Meriläinen, 2024; Harff & Schmuck, 2023). Among young people, influencers, who appear credible and share their values and beliefs, are powerful agenda setters. Actors within the influencer economy are not subject to strict laws. Often their backgrounds, agenda formulations, associations, and funding are unknown. This creates various possibilities for influencers to work for adversary states or be used as useful idiots in information operations online, with the aim to create discord and destroy resilience in democratic states.

In 2019, Finland was praised for its efforts against fake news, highlighting the importance of media literacy in combating fake news (Mackintosh & Kiernan, 2019). However, the news may have been too optimistic. Recent research tells us that young people do not consider themselves targets of information operations, false information, or fake news but rely heavily on influencers whose truths, backgrounds, motives, and funding cannot be verified (Meriläinen, 2023; 2024). Moreover, in the current political climate, influencers are used in political realms as agenda setters, which is lessening the power of traditional journalists and other actors as agenda setters (Bhattacharya & Whateley, 2024). After the 2024 US presidential elections, a debate began about the political power of influencers over the outcome of the voting. However, it is unknown explicitly if young people see national security risks in trusting influencers on various digital platforms. The relationship between critical media literacy, trust in influencers, content they create, and national security must be researched. Critical media literacy and trust in officials are essential for democracy and national security. Thus, this research focuses on the relationship between influencers, information operations, and national security.

The research questions for this study are:

RQ 1) Do influencers have political power among young people?

RQ 2) Are influencers regarded as threats to national security?

Next, the related works are presented briefly. This is followed by the introduction of empirical data gathering. Following this, the results, discussion, and conclusions are drawn.

2. Related Works

2.1 Digital Platforms and Information Operations

Various digital platforms are essential sources for information, belonging, news, entertainment, satire, friendships, consumerism, and participation in social and political causes. Stockemer & Sundstrom (2022) argue that young people aged 18-35 are underrepresented in national parliaments and cabinets, with a one to three representation ratio, indicating a democratic deficit. Digital platforms, however, feel increasingly owned by young people, but can be part of information operations. Digital platforms are fertile soil for misleading

information (Van Der Linden et al., 2020). Information operations may succeed online since young people regard their critical media literacy as strong while showcasing a lack of critical media literacy online, especially towards the power of AI (artificial intelligence), advertising, algorithms, and bots (Meriläinen, 2024; 2023). Digital platforms and affiliated items such as AI algorithms, bots, and digital advertisements may be seen to be a fact of modern life, something that young people cannot or do not care to doubt or think twice about.

The discussion of information operations stems from defense dialogue to modern digital platforms. Digital information operations are participatory (Starbird et al., 2019) and grow from the early start to exist on their own while people partake in shaping them. They are often discussed in the context of military and national defense (Turan, 2018; Thomas, 1998; Cox, 2006). Weedon et al. (2017) define them as actions taken by organized actors, such as governments or non-state actors, to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment to achieve strategic and/or geopolitical outcomes. Information operations are part of information warfare and utilize social and political movements from conservative and progressive agendas (Meriläinen, 2024). They are based on military doctrines (Munipalli, 1999; Smith, 1988; Arold, 2016; Darczewska, 2014; JCS, 2012). The doctrines describe tactical, strategic, and operational tactics and activities in peacetime and wartime. These operations utilize several digital platforms simultaneously. Young people are exposed to information operations and their content, for example, when searching for information, news, entertainment, gaming, or discussing and browsing for fun. Hostile parties modify their content to suit all of this and exploit influencers to spread information. Information operations are complicated and complex projects that aim to impose one's perception of reality on the other side of (Chochowski, 2022) and muddy the waters with alternative information and truths (Gil de Zúñiga & Chen, 2019). People are persuaded to doubt and to choose a reality and bits of it according to their values, beliefs, and personal confirmation biases (Chochowski, 2022; Meriläinen, 2024). Information operations can use a combination of methods, for example, misinformation and disinformation, styles of communication, or networks of fake accounts aimed at manipulating public opinion and behavior (Weedon et al., 2017; Meriläinen, 2024; Mozur et al., 2021). However, influencers should not be regarded as tools and means in information operations by adversary states to Western countries. The US military benefits from partnering with influencers, as these partnerships broaden their reach, enhance their positive military image, and boost the impact of their messaging (Knapp, 2024).

Information operations utilize existing divisions and infiltrate social movements, creating covert accounts and actors (Briant, 2022). Thus, information operations do not need to create new divisions but rather attach themselves to existing ones and utilize divisions and discourse that are present in society. They use influencers, online and offline activism, memes, hashtags, historical narratives, and humor in information operations (Eleferenko, 2023). They do not choose any particular political side but rather connect to all political affiliations that are beneficial to the desired outcomes (Briant, 2022). There have always been information operations. Yet, their intersection with digital platforms is not well understood (Arif et al., 2018), especially in relation to national defense.

2.2 Influencers and Information Operations

As Gatov (2018) explained, during the Cold War, the Kremlin jammed and censored foreign broadcasts. The author calls this process "white noise jamming," where no physical technological device is used to disturb foreign messaging, but the jamming is done on a mental level where all foreign criticisms are discredited as Russophobia. Information operations, where influencers are part of it, utilize this same process by creating doubt and distrust between people and democratic institutions and actors. In the more modern white noise jamming, the distrust towards the influencers and the truths they present is labeled as the usage of power against the truth-tellers, an attempt to silence the truth-tellers. Influencers are central in creating opinions and act as agenda setters (Aspen Institute Deutschland, 2023).

Hostile states can maintain plausible deniability by involving influencers to information operations (Fang, 2024). Influencers are political leaders globally with their easy-to-relate, casual appearance and attract their followers in large numbers (Sinha et al., 2023). Similarly, Balaban & Mustăţea (2019) and Meriläinen (2024) found that influencers communicate in ways that are understandable and relatable to young people. This may mean communication, for example, behavior, looks, the tone of voice, Internet slang, or visual styles ranging from entertaining to serious and everything in between. These affect their credibility positively. Consequently, this increases their power as actors in information operations when appealing to young people from various backgrounds and political ideologies (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019). In addition to entertainment, information operations may use rumors as weapons since rumors are one of the most effective ways of disseminating information with informational and psychological influence (Habro et al., 2020).

As Goodwin et al. (2023) argued, political influencers can be characterized as content creators who are paid or unpaid and who advocate for political and social concerns with their audiences. They are intricately linked to campaigns, politicians, influencer economy, political strategists, other influential people, both high and low in status, and their own social media followings. Influencers crave relevance, legitimacy, authority, and power and are experts in reaching people. They want credibility, visibility, or even simply personal wealth. These attributes can be exploited when drawing them into the axis of information operations and national security with the aim of influencing young people, to draw them into certain ideologies, even to turn against their own country. Influencers not only promote products but legitimize and amplify information, politics, and content on social media (Goodwin et al., 2023). They provide key information and online news media, helping them feel capable of participating in politics (Harff & Schmuck 2023). Political influencers with a large social media following and discussions on political topics can play a crucial role in raising political participation among young people but also in getting attached to political movements and ideologies that are connected to extremism. Thus, present direct threats to national security. Especially when influencers, by getting directives from outside forces such as adversary states, can create a reality in which young people feel that they are not respected or welcomed in their own country and political system.

3. Empirical Research Setting

Lazar et al. (2010) discusses the different ways to apply interviews and open discussion with young people in the realms of HCI (human-computer interaction) and multidisciplinary research. This research is qualitative and explorative in nature. Please see the in-depth look at the data gathering on Meriläinen (2024) and Meriläinen et al. (2023) for research settings that combine media, youth, and theoretical frameworks. Empirical research was conducted with schools in $n=8$ municipalities in Western, Central, and Eastern Finland during February 2021–February 2024. During this explorative empirical research phase, $n=387$ young vocational school students between the ages of 16 and 29 were invited to be anonymous and volunteer research participants. They are referred to as young participants. These young participants produced the empirical data for this research either in written or spoken form in $n=57$ research workshops. The results of this study are drawn from empirical data via qualitative content analysis to formulate an understanding of how young students regard national security, safety, information, news, actors, various digital platforms, and their perceptions of credibility and information operations. Research permits were granted by either schools or cities and by the anonymous research participants. The data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Meriläinen et al., 2023).

4. Results and Discussion

Based on this study, societies are polarized globally by using digital platforms. Societies' resilience is being tested and destroyed online and offline by diverse hybrid warfare. Online information operations are part of this warfare. This study highlights how influencers are perceived as more relatable and trustworthy than other actors in society. Influencers' ethos, pathos, and logos were appealing to young people, especially when these coincided with their values and beliefs. Influencers are regarded as truth-tellers and political agenda setters on the side of the youth, while teachers, defense forces & officials, news media, and journalists were not. Influencers are thus valuable advertisers and political agenda setters. This aspect was further reinforced when traditional gatekeepers laughed, discredited, and despised influencers and the credibility and information they communicated. This increased young people's belief that the traditional gatekeepers were against the youth and that influencers were on their side. Thus, similarly to Harff & Schmuck (2023), influencers and their content on various digital arenas have immense power over young people and their ideologies and political participation.

Based on the empirical data, none of the young participants admitted confirmation biases (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Malthouse, 2023) meanwhile always discredited actors, agendas, and communication platforms that were not deemed credible and aligning with those whose expectations and beliefs the young people shared. They trusted influencers and their content if 1) the influencer was credible, 2) the content appeared on credible platforms, and 3) the content was aligned with the young person's values and beliefs. Meanwhile, research participants always discredited actors, agendas, and communication that were not deemed credible. Confirmation biases guided the usage of digital platforms and the information and content creators they trusted. However, young participants believed they could not fall prey to fake news and information operations while trusting influencers without verifying their agendas, backgrounds, collaborators, funding, or motives.

Confirmation biases and distrust for traditional actors and institutions guided young people towards influencers whose truths, backgrounds, motives, and funding cannot be verified. For young participants, information operations seemed farfetched and impossible. Young participants claimed that adversary actors, such as Russia or China, or nameless trolls, do not target them. Rather, they target adults over 40 years old who do not have a strong know-how to operate on digital arenas or consume the content online via critical media literacy. Various young people mentioned Russia as an adversary state but were not concerned of being targeted by Russia with information operations. However, the possible invasion of Russia was seen as a threat. Young participants saw no national security risks in trusting influencers or using digital platforms. Young participants said they value the Nordic democratic state and used various digital platforms such as Instagram, Discord, Reddit, TikTok, YouTube, and other message boards and internet pages as sources of credible information and news and to participate politically. National security was not interesting unless a trusted influencer mentioned it. Information operations did not interest young people at all or was something to laugh about. At the same time, war itself and uncertainty regarding the Finnish state were issues that rose up in the discussions among youth in connection to a particular influencer. The connection between national security and influencers was noticeable.

For example, Russia and the war in Ukraine were seen as evil, but Russia was seen as rightful in pursuing its own national interests. When discussing Russia's influence, at times the discussion turned into how the Finnish government, officials, and, for example, healthcare providers are conducting mind control and psyops against its own people. These thinking patterns are strengthened by continuous consumption of similar content on various digital platforms. This is just one example of how states such as Russia can further utilize the already existing distrust and divisions in Finland by incorporating existing distrust into their information operations.

The white noise jamming (Gatov, 2018) was seen as an impossibility, while it is evident that various influences sow doubt and distrust between young people and democratic actors and institutions. Recently, arrests were made of right-wing influencers who were "duped" and paid to work as part of Russia's information operations (Suderman & Swenson, 2024; Becket & Quinn, 2024). Indeed, influencers are used as channels, next to Russia Today (RT), to spread information favorable to Russia and its agenda in Ukraine and in various elections (De Luce, 2024; Andrade, 2023). Moreover, young people can become accidental influencers, become active online, and have vast power in political debates while also facing various threats and sharing misinformation online (Spring, 2024). Various digital platforms spread misinformation and propaganda, and TikTok is marketed specifically to young people (Sackville, 2022; Meriläinen, 2024).

Adversary states do their research to find divisions in the target societies. They utilize influencers and purposely create new credible influencers who are placed right in the middle of information operations. Followingly, these influencers offer liberation for young people who may feel they have been silenced or othered or their ideologies are not respected in society. Various influencers can reach those who are on the sidelines or otherwise frustrated in the current society and feel unempowered and lonely. As many young participants said, Finland is a harsh place, but influencers offered the possibility of empowerment, help, and healing. What emerged strongly from the data was that both conservatives and progressives thought the same. In their opinion, Finnish society does not serve them. Instead, influencers create a safe place for them to consume truths. Thus, young people keep returning to the same influencers time and time again.

As seen in Figure 1, influencers can act as intermediaries between adversary states and young people. Young people can, at times, interact with the influencers, while influencers interact with the adversary states or their representatives.

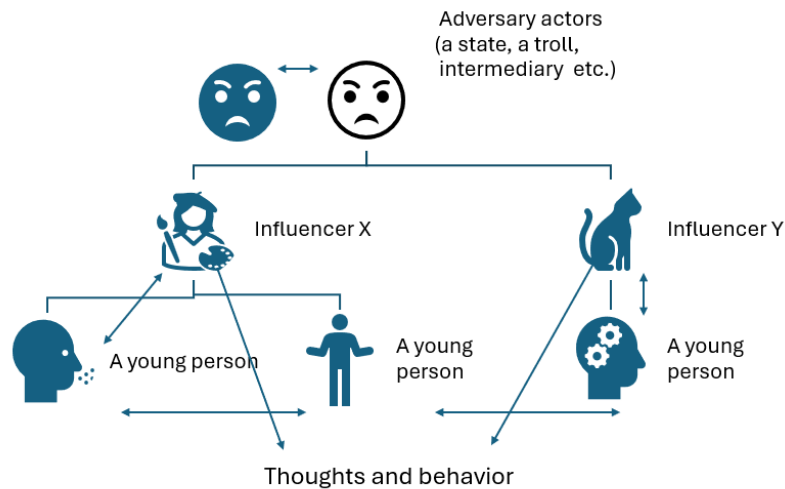


Figure 1: The relationship between states, influencers and young people

Among young people, influencers, who appear credible and share their values and beliefs, are powerful actors, but their backgrounds, agendas, and funding are often unknown. This study strengthens the understanding that young people do not regard influencers as liars or threats to national security. Possible fraud by influencers was seen as impossible. Meanwhile, small mistakes made by influencers or spreading false information did not affect the loss of trust. Faith in one's critical media literacy was strong. Confirmation bias was never discussed, but the believed truths were always aligned with existing personal values and beliefs. Similarly to the previous study (Meriläinen 2024), the power of AI, algorithms, advertising machine learning, and bots was rarely discussed. Young people certainly follow influencers for ideologies, thrusts, consumption, and lifestyle and their relatable content and communication styles (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Stewart et al. 2024). Young people are driven towards political ideologies that trusted influencers share. Young people also imitate their online idols (Sánchez, 2021), from looks to ideology and behavior, as is also evident from the data gathered from the young people. The battle over young people's minds and, consequently, behavior is waged on various digital platforms. As is evident, influencers are trusted as political agenda setters and can be used as tools in information operations. They can be used to create and sustain various information operations where alternative facts and realities are spread. Typically, right-wing influencers were tricked into working for Russian information operations (Suderman & Swenson, 2024) and had an impact on the presidential elections in 2024.

However, it must be acknowledged that not all influencers are interested in politics but maybe merely interested in financial gains. Thus, the question remains whether influencers are motivated to post about politics or if they are pressured into it, especially due to the pressure coming from the followers (Goodwin et al., 2023) who are active and look for political stance from influencers.

The results of the study speak of the evident risks and real-time threats that various influencers pose to national security. Influencers are political role models for young people and agenda setters also in relation to national security. Many young people feared that Finnish national security had weakened. They found the culprits for this through influencers. Various influencers directly said who is to blame for the deterioration of security and what young people should do about it; for example, blame the politicians, police, news media, or military, as well as the political opponents. These results align with previous results that highlight the power of influencers and how influencers are seen as valuable and trustworthy, making it easy for them to act as agenda setters among youth (Pereira, 2023; Schouten et al., 2019; Goodwin et al., 2023; Meriläinen, 2024; Melro & Pereira, 2023), also in issues related to national security online and offline.

However, the connection between influencers and national security remains largely understudied. Runciman (2017) states that there has been almost no discussion of how the digital revolution and the spread of information technology may be reshaping the ways in which power and legitimacy are to be understood. Because young people trust content and influencers, albeit based on their confirmation biases, and have distrust towards traditional media, officials, politicians, and states, this is a marvelous opportunity and highway for information operations. Influencers further feed into the distrust and attach themselves to

influence youth psychologically. As Habro et al. (2022) mention, informational and psychological influence is an important tool for conducting informational psychological wars and operations and is seriously detrimental to social consciousness.

To conclude, influencers are the new(er) agenda setters who can influence young people to turn against their own state. They can mobilize young people for good but also radicalize people, incite riots, and make young people distrust officials, media, politicians, and the military. They use various digital platforms for their advantage. Attributes such as fashion, behavior, collaborators, and formerly unseen ways of communicating are natural tools for the influencers. Their political agenda setting does not rely solely on the framing and priming of traditional news media. Influencers and young people are digital natives who habitually move between different platforms and utilize various communication styles and methodologies. Young people trust influencers as truth-tellers more than traditional politicians (BBC 2024). In addition, entertainment, personal value framing, and innuendos have a strong hold over young people and are used in information operations (Habro et al., 2020). Influencers offer young people freedom and legitimacy to say things out loud and believe in truths that previously were not possible.

The power of influencers is showing no signs of diminishing. The power of influencers is increasing as they are used directly in information operations, willingly or unwillingly. At least in the Global North, policymakers appear to ignore the global threat posed by information operations on digital platforms, merely condemning platforms such as TikTok or Meta. Instantaneously, companies continue to facilitate serious abuses of human rights, allow information operations, and make a handsome profit. Meanwhile, young participants laugh at entertaining content on digital platforms while consuming content tailored to them on the FYP (For You Page) via influencers, algorithms, and bots. However, the risks to national security cannot be tackled by simply banning or regulating TikTok, Meta, or condemning the influencer economy. There are always new platforms and influencers ready to be used in information operations. The harsh reality is that officials, schools, defense forces, the military, journalists, and politicians are losing young people. Perhaps, rightfully so, young people look for truths and belonging on digital platforms because societies have nothing to offer for young people. And here are the vast possibilities for numerous hybrid operations to destabilize countries and to break resilience on multiple fronts.

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