

# A Qualitative Research to Explore How Young Voters Perceive Politicians' Use of Social Media\*

(Research Article)

*Genç Seçmenlerin Politikacıların Sosyal Medya Kullanımını Nasıl Algıladıklarını Araştırmaya Yönelik Nitel Bir Araştırma*  
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## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

Social Media, Young Voters, Politics, Qualitative Research

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Social media has recently become a vital part of the political context and is actively used by voters and politicians. However, the current body of knowledge was generated around the politicians' use of social media because of the research subjects selected or the methodologies adopted in relevant papers. Thus, it does not reflect the voters' perspective. Accordingly, the current study explores young voters' perceptions of politicians' use of social media. To do this, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 participants actively using social media, interacting with politicians on social media, and following their posts. Then, the qualitative content analysis technique was utilized to analyze the data. Findings indicate that young voters regard politicians who use social media to be insincere, innovative, socially conformable, and well-versed in communication. Results contribute to the extant literature by filling the relevant gap by revealing how young voters perceive politicians' use of social media. Thus, the study encourages future researchers to offer practical implications in favor of voters rather than providing politicians guidelines on utilizing social media more effectively to influence and direct voter behavior.

## ÖZET

### Anahtar Kelimeler:

Sosyal Medya, Genç Seçmenler, Siyaset, Nitel Araştırma

Sosyal medya son zamanlarda siyasi bağlamın önemli bir parçası haline gelmiştir ve hem seçmenler hem de politikacılar tarafından aktif olarak kullanılmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, mevcut literatür, seçilen araştırma konuları veya ilgili makalelerde benimsenen metodolojiler nedeniyle politikacıların sosyal medya kullanımı etrafında oluşmuştur. Bu nedenle, seçmenlerin bakış açısını yansıtmakta eksik kalmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, mevcut çalışma genç seçmenlerin politikacıların sosyal medya kullanımına ilişkin algılarını keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunun için sosyal medyayı aktif olarak kullanan, sosyal medyada politikacılarla etkileşime giren ve paylaşımlarını takip eden 18 katılımcıyla derinlemesine görüşme yapılmıştır. Daha sonra, verileri analiz etmek için nitel içerik analizi tekniğinden yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular, genç seçmenlerin sosyal medyayı kullanan siyasetçileri samimiyetsiz, yenilikçi, sosyal olarak uyumlu ve iletişim konusunda yetkin olarak gördüklerini göstermektedir. Sonuçlar, siyasetçilerin sosyal medya kullanımının genç seçmenler tarafından nasıl algılandığını ortaya koyarak ilgili boşluğu doldurmak suretiyle mevcut literatüre katkıda bulunmaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, gelecekteki araştırmacıları, politikacılara seçmen davranışını etkilemek ve yönlendirmek için sosyal medyayı nasıl daha etkili kullanacaklarına dair kılavuzlar sunmak yerine, seçmenler lehine pratik sonuçlar sunmaya teşvik etmektedir.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has recently experienced a sharp increase in the number of users and has been the focus of academic research. 4.95 billion people are currently using social media worldwide. This number constitutes 61.4% of the world's population. Also, 215 million new user accounts were created in the last 12 months (Datareportal, 2023). Moreover, 68.5 million people are actively using social media in Türkiye. This constitutes 80.8% of the country's population. Additionally, the country's most active social media users are primarily individuals aged 25-34. Of all users, almost 30 million fall within this age bracket (Osga, 2023). Social media's exponential growth has led to a recent rise in its usage by politicians and voters in political contexts.

Social media is believed to be the best tool and information source to assess public opinion on issues and political viewpoints and foster support for politicians in the community (Zeng et al., 2010). In modern democracies, politicians have embraced social media with great enthusiasm to interact with their voters, have direct discussions with them, and enable vivid political discussions (Fujiwara et al., 2023). Therefore, they have profiles on popular social media platforms (e.g., X (Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube), enabling them to interact with voters directly, rally supporters, communicate campaigns, and affect the public agenda (Theocharis et al., 2023). Voters also use social media for many purposes, including learning about politicians' posts, engaging in political discussions, and making voting decisions (Newman et al., 2017).

Despite the active use of both parties, prior research primarily concentrates on how and why politicians use social media and how social media affects voter behavior (e.g., Wattal et al., 2010; Macnamara et al., 2012; Spierings & Jacobs, 2014; Stier et al., 2018; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020; Carney, 2022; Fujiwara et al., 2023). These studies mainly aim to enhance politicians' effectiveness on social media by suggesting practical guidelines on better directing and managing voters' behaviors through social media. This may turn voters into passive objects that can be influenced and manipulated by overlooking their point of view. Thus, the relevant studies need more reflection on the voters' perspective. Accordingly, the current study fills this gap by exploring how young voters (i.e., most active social media users) perceive politicians' use of social media. Also, the study encourages future research to shift its focus from politicians to voters and to offer practical implications in favor of voters.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

### 2.1. Politicians' Use of Social Media

The interaction between political behavior and social media use has recently attracted politicians' attention. Social media offers various unique advantages to politicians (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). For instance, they may use social media to share information and opinions with the public using their social networks. Some media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) may even form groups to directly dialogue with the citizens and stimulate further political discussions (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Moreover, politicians communicate politically on social media, particularly during election campaigns (Kalsnes, 2016). Social media provides essential information for assessing public viewpoints on policies and political positions and establishing support for politicians (Zeng et al., 2010).

Social networks developed through social media facilitate interactive communication between people, giving politicians an opportunity to communicate to a broader audience quickly and affordably. Furthermore, social media platforms are impartial spaces that do not allow censorship, making them an ideal place to begin political dialogues (Çildan et al., 2012). Young people's widespread and active usage of social media encourages politicians to get involved in this field since it provides a variety of ways for them to effectively market themselves and engage with voters (Vitak et al., 2011).

Politicians' adaptation to social media has also made them more dynamic and in tune with technological developments. In this regard, social media offers politicians innovative political communication beyond limited exchanges of rational discussions (Roginsky, 2014). As a contemporary vehicle, social media has the power to affect and direct society. Social media platforms such as X (Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube affect the political behavior and civic engagement of what is defined as online young citizens. Therefore, social media has as important a role in political campaigns as traditional media (Loader et al., 2014).

Social media-based marketing and advertising campaigns allow candidates to interact with voters transparently. Thus, politicians try to build sincere relationships with voters by adding information about their non-political hobbies and interests to the "About" section of their campaign pages on Facebook and by sharing personal photos of themselves with their families or showing themselves in an informal setting at non-political events in their free time. However, politicians' efforts to create a sincere media persona may yield different results. Investigating the role of genuineness in social media campaigns, Grow & Ward (2013) suggest that voters prefer to see a real candidate, not a carefully constructed media identity, and thus have a sense of insincerity rather than sincerity towards politicians.

Given the discussions above, politicians might be claimed to use social media actively. It is also vital to comprehend how their usage of social media is perceived by young voters actively engaging with political issues through their social media accounts. To do this, social media usage should be discussed in the context of relevant notions (communication, conformity, innovativeness, and insincerity) embedded within the extant literature.

## **2.2. Communicative Role of Social Media**

Politicians eagerly embrace social media to interact with their voters, communicate interactively with citizens, and facilitate lively political debates (Zaiter et al., 2023; Kocaman and Coşgun, 2024). In this respect, politicians in the US have a pioneering role. Politicians in other states have been inspired to embrace social media by Barack Obama's effective use of it during his campaign. (Wattal et al., 2010). Today, politicians increasingly acknowledge social media's ability to boost discussion and participation among citizens. Social media platforms allow users to disseminate information and express their political opinions through their networks (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). Young people, especially, actively use social media to engage in interactive communication with others on politics (Chen et al., 2009). Furthermore, prior research has shown that there is a need for political institutions and government agencies to continuously gather, mind out, analyze, summarize, and visualize the information that is politically significant using social media to enhance interactions with citizens (e.g., Zeng et al., 2010; Kavanaugh et al., 2011; Stieglitz et al., 2012). Accordingly, social media makes it possible to recognize patterns and difficulties that are just starting to emerge and anticipate future global issues. Thus, it enables decentralized connection between citizens and politicians without the need for intermediary institutions, helping to solve the problems of geographical distance and time efficiency in communication (Carney, 2022).

Politicians increasingly engage online politics to connect, communicate, set, mobilize, and influence the news agenda (Johnson, 2011). Accordingly, they develop strategies for communication not just for paid media (advertising) and mass media (TV, radio, newspapers, but also—and this is becoming more common—for social media platforms like YouTube, X, Instagram, and Facebook). In other words, they strive to combine old and new tools with social network platforms (Lilleker et al., 2015). People worldwide use social media as an effective means of communication to promote and intensify their demand for freedom and democracy. Through these platforms, people in developing or underdeveloped nations may learn about the standard of life and democracy in wealthy countries and become more globally integrated. Accordingly, these networks significantly improve communication between the public and politicians. Politicians may thus use these platforms to evaluate the public's expectations for democracy, freedom, and transparency (Çıldan et al., 2012).

## **2.3. Seeking for Conformity in Social Media**

Conformity is the majority's influence on an individual's ideas, emotions, and actions (Brauer & Chekroun, 2005). To lower the cost of obtaining the information required to participate in politics (e.g., party affiliation and voting), individuals may turn to more knowledgeable third parties (Huckfeldt, 2001) or gather information from trusted friends and family (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). Information seekers tend to share what they learn with others in their networks. In this process, individuals who worry about fitting in with the group tend to behave in a way that conforms to norms (Horne, 2001). Moreover, one's decision to support a relevant post online is influenced by peer comments (Neubaum, 2018). Some research indicated that a social media platform's disclaimer is less potent than other users' comments on a political issue. Individuals' tendency to modify their personal opinions to align with most of the group (i.e., social conformity) stems from their need for social approval (e.g., Wijenayake et al., 2019; Wijenayake et al., 2020a). Furthermore, in his investigation of how user comments on a Facebook news post affect conformance, Colliander (2019) investigated conformity only when unanimously critical or supportive comments exist. Any story, nevertheless, might receive a mix of favorable and adverse reactions (for example, most positive remarks mixed with a minority of negative remarks, and vice versa) (Wijenayake et al., 2020b). Since social life always involves a link between a sense of autonomy and social conformity, the relationship between social values and political tendency demonstrates that conformity is not meaningless within politics (Feldman, 2003).

## **2.4. Social Media as Innovative Tool**

The growing role of the internet in politics has also increased academic interest in how social media may influence politics. This has accelerated research on innovation within politics. Some research describe social media as a unique innovation, considered a virtual tool with relationship-building potential that may aid in marketing politics (e.g., Karlsson & Aström, 2017; Wijenayake et al., 2019). Others draw attention to the technological aspect of social media concerning the development of social networks to promote activities (e.g., Anim et al., 2019; Farkas & Bene, 2021). The innovative nature of social media offers the opportunity to utilize existing social networks to build trusted relationships, thereby increasing political participation and collective action (Zhang et al., 2013). Accordingly, social networking sites allow users to maintain personal relationships, discover potential relationships, categorize relationships, and share their knowledge and experiences (Kalsnes, 2016). Social media is increasingly used for organizational objectives, including operations and innovation management, and goes beyond personal or individual use (Kiron et al., 2012). According to Kane et al. (2014), 87% of established

businesses utilize social media to spur innovation, and 60% have integrated it into their daily operations. Within politics, especially political parties have adopted social media as an innovative tool to accomplish their organizational goals (e.g., attracting voters, interacting with citizens, and monitoring social behavior) (Wijenayake et al., 2019). The term 'innovation' emphasizes novelty. Regarding social media usage in politics, this discourse typically views social media as novel instruments for democracy rather than for work processes and organization. For instance, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) contend that social network platforms facilitate political discussions and provide an atmosphere for individuals to engage with political actors. The internet has been regarded as having the ability to reinvigorate democratic processes for a long time. With the emergence of social media, similar discourse is often heard (Yuan et al., 2023). Politicians need to describe themselves as innovators. This is because social media platforms are seen as cutting-edge political communication tools and their users as innovators (Boulianne, 2020).

### **2.5. Social Media as Insincere Medium**

Social media is an ideal medium for spreading false and misleading information. Also, it has recently gained popularity as a news source due to its low cost, simplicity of use, interactive nature, and widespread use. However, its credibility is again questioned because of the intentional spread of false information on social media (Khan et al., 2020). People might also find it challenging to disseminate accurate information. This is mainly because social media forces individuals to select and display events (e.g., crises, natural disasters, and catastrophes) in images detached from authenticity (Sutton et al., 2008). This aspect of social media has also been worth exploring in political science. In this sense, research focused on the extent to which the media behavior of politicians is authentic and trustworthy (e.g., Parry-Giles, 2014; Craig, 2016; Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Social media trust is frequently challenging to quantify because there is yet to be a universally accepted concept or metric for measuring trust (Fisher, 2016). Also, Enli & Rosenberg (2018) state that individuals perceive events differently and thus interpret what they see differently. Political trust is strongly positively correlated with exposure to political news on websites, whereas trust is negatively correlated with exposure to political news on social media (Ceron, 2015). However, politicians are also media producers in social media, making it harder to distinguish between media trust and political trust. This is especially evident on social media accounts where politicians act as informants, editors, and information providers (Fisher, 2016). Furthermore, social media lacks non-verbal cues indicative of insincerity or deception. This is often abused to misrepresent themselves or by insincere people (Hardaker, 2020). For example, Twitter trolls in Türkiye insincerely tweet false allegations about the government (Özsoy, 2015), or people deliberately post false tweets to create chaos (Petersen et al., 2018). Politicians are often seen as sincere by voters 60 and older. However, voters under 30 are more likely to assert that social media is the single media outlet they trust the most. However, most interestingly, they consider politicians insincere on social media (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Politicians are perceived as insincere when they share their own social responsibility activities on social media, even if they use social media to promote volunteerism. Furthermore, it is thought that politicians who actively pursue pre-election campaigns but only appear in formal settings following the election seem deceptive (Grow and Ward, 2013).

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. Method**

This study is exploratory because it aims to reveal how young voters perceive politicians' use of social media. By adopting quantitative research approaches, qualitative research methods are more powerful in determining the issues regarding the events that are more challenging to achieve. This is because researchers are more engaged with data and surrounding events in qualitative exploratory research (Sandelowski, 2000). Furthermore, qualitative research cannot be done in only one way. The current study, therefore, follows the general pattern of qualitative research (Spiggle, 1994). We have created a meaningful whole using an interpretative technique to acquire detailed insights into how people perceive their environment.

### **3.2. Sample & Data**

We collected the data by conducting in-depth interviews. We started the recruitment process by creating and disseminating a poster explaining the research goals and objectives to graduate students through personal contacts. This procedure is required to employ purposive non-random sampling (Miles et al., 2014) considering key characteristics (e.g., voting regularly, actively using various social media accounts, following politicians' posts, and interacting with politicians on social media). As illustrated in Table 1, a total of eighteen individuals were interviewed, ranging in age, gender, level of education, and professional experience.

**Table 1. Participants' Profile**

Participants*	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education	Profession
1	Gülenaz	25	Female	Master	Research assistant
2	Sedat	27	Male	PhD	Web designer
3	Kemal	28	Male	PhD	Insurer
4	Nazan	26	Female	Master	Research assistant
5	İlayda	29	Female	PhD	Official
6	Ebru	28	Female	PhD	Director
7	Derya	30	Female	PhD	Research assistant
8	Elif	24	Female	Master	Student
9	Serkan	31	Male	PhD	Manager
10	Ceyda	27	Female	PhD	Software developer
11	Serhat	26	Male	Master	Accountant
12	Bilal	28	Male	Master	Auditor
13	Hakan	27	Male	Master	Tradesman
14	Didem	26	Female	Master	Wedding organizer
15	Seçil	28	Female	PhD	Research assistant
16	Haldun	27	Male	PhD	Engineer
17	Ahmet	25	Male	Master	Student
18	Eda	32	Female	PhD	Marketing manager

\* Participants allowed their personal information to be disclosed.

There are 8 males and 10 females in the research sample, all of whom are between the ages of 24 and 32. Only two participants are students; the others are employed full-time. Eight of them are studying at the master's level, while others are pursuing PhD degrees. All participants confirmed their active usage of social media, keen interest in what politicians post, and ability to express opinions on politicians' use of social media.

Interviewees were informed at the outset of the process that participation was completely optional and that they might pause at any time and choose to ignore a question without explaining. They were also informed that the data was collected solely for academic use. They were thus not questioned for any personal information. Semi-structured interview scripts with some open-ended questions were used during the interviews. The questions are related to (1) experiences in social media (e.g., Which social media accounts do you have? How often and for what purpose do you use these accounts? Which media account do you like to use the most? Why) (2) social media behavior (e.g., Do you post about politics? What type of political posts do you react to the most (i.e., like, dislike, retweet, share, etc.)? Do political posts make you act? (i.e., action, protest, boycott, etc.) (3) Perception (e.g., how do you describe social media platforms? Do you think politicians' use of social media impacts you? Can their posts change your perception of any event? How? What do you think about politicians' use of social media? What would you say about why they use social media?). The fact that these questions were exploratory allowed participants to share their thoughts in detail. All interviews were recorded for a duration ranging from 45 to 100 minutes and then verbatim transcribed with the participants' consent. Many research concur that no documented recommendations demonstrate data saturation (e.g., Morse, 1995; Guest et al., 2006; Mwita, 2022). To prevent this, Braun & Clarke (2021) propose that when participants' comments start to sound the same, researchers may choose to stop trying to get further information. Accordingly, based on the repeated responses in the preliminary analysis, it was determined that the interviews could be completed for the current study.

There are criticisms that it is difficult to achieve sufficient validity, reliability, or credibility for research adopting a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, peer review was used during data analysis. In this process, peers checked whether similar things were understood from the codes, categories, and themes identified. It was decided to change or combine some codes by discussing the emerging meanings. Furthermore, a communication style that would allow participants to give sincere answers was adopted during the interview. The researcher tried to get the participant more involved by making reflective comments (Shenton, 2004). In addition, some precautions were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the research, such as conducting the interviews by the researchers themselves and providing direct quotes from the interviews (Karamustafa et al., 2021).

### 3.3. Analysis

We analyzed the data by employing qualitative content analysis technique. In this way, researchers may quantify and assess the frequency, importance, and connections between certain words, concepts, or topics (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Furthermore, the researcher may choose to perform this analysis manually or automatically using package programs. The manual method offers certain advantages for understanding the conceptual linkages in the text and is often dependent on data interpretation (Anastasiu & Georgescu, 2020). In the current study, we manually analyzed the interview transcripts employing the relevant technique (Spiggle, 1994). The study's primary focus was on trying to identify the key themes pertaining to the research question. This entailed the process of putting codes into place, creating categories, and finally developing themes (Lester et al., 2020). Accordingly, the

analysis started applying codes corresponding to the initial phase of the analytical process by considering how they related to each other. Next, categories were produced by the theoretically and analytically relevant grouping of individual codes. This procedure represented an essential phase in the theme-generation process. Following the creation of categories, relevant categories were combined by considering their linkages, similarities, and differences. Subsequently, some statements were allocated to these categories, which encompass underlying categories and provide a description of their content (see Pic. 1). By combining interpretative elements, the researchers could create a meaningful whole without feeling cut off from the topic at hand. This made it possible to understand the connotations associated with how young voters are perceived from various angles, enabling us to produce key themes that express their perceptions of the politicians' usage of social media.

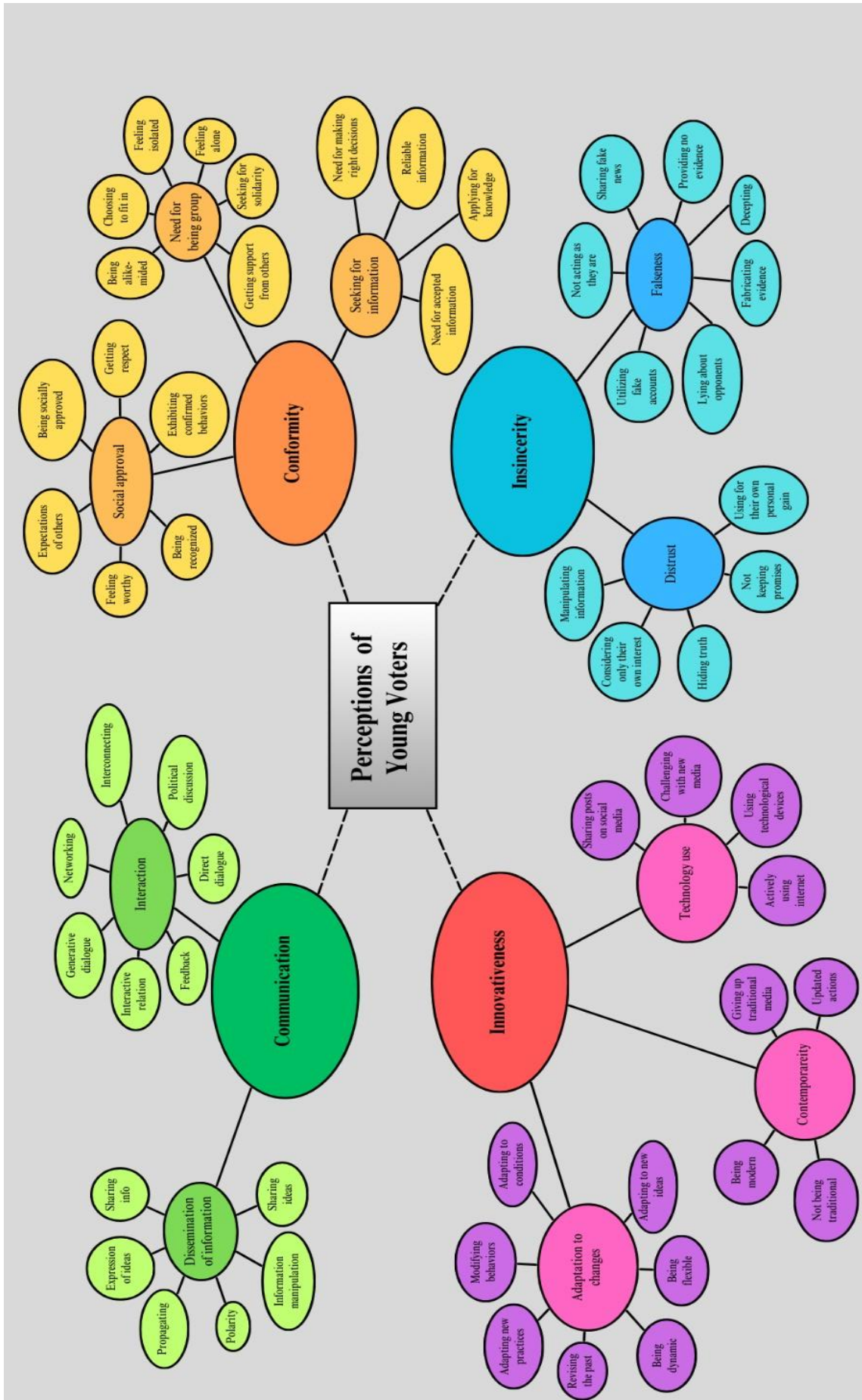
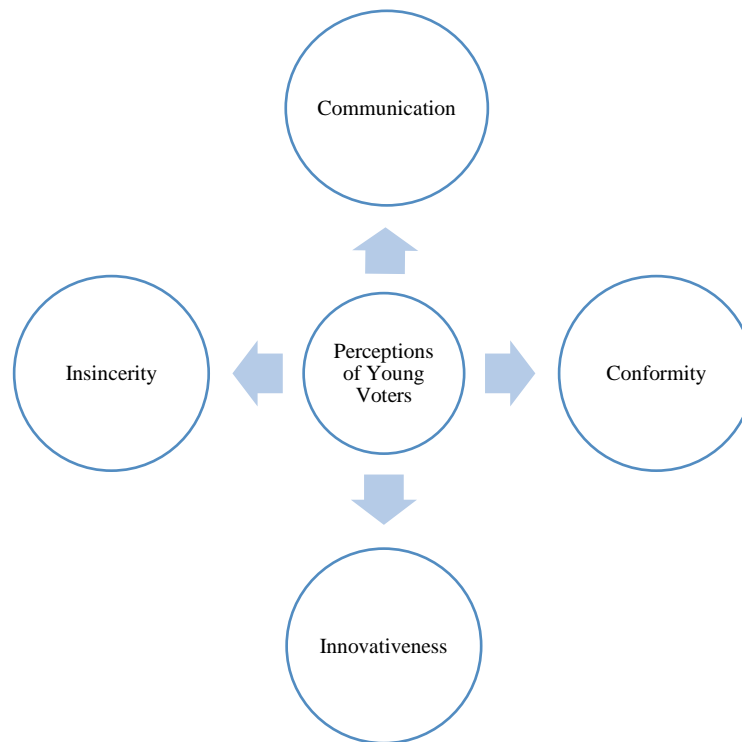


Fig. 1. Codes, Categories, and Themes Regarding the Perceptions of Young Voters Towards Politicians' Use of Social Media



## 4. RESULTS

This paper revealed that young voters perceive the politicians' use of social media in four different ways. Thus, we present the results using brief scenarios that situate the participants and their perceptions in their respective settings.



**Figure 1. Perceptions of Young Voters Across Politicians' Use of Social Media**

Figure 1 displays four emerging themes (communication, conformity, innovativeness, and insincerity) that constitute a set of young voters' perceptions about politicians' use of social media.

### 4.1. Communication

Participants report that politicians communicate well using social media. Derya (aged 30) narrates that political candidates can interact with many people on social media: 'Before the election, the interactions received by the posts of politicians who declared their candidacy have always attracted my attention. They can interact with almost more than half of the people in the country.' Some participants stated that many of these interactions may result in direct dialogue between politicians and voters: 'During the presidential election campaign, I commented under the post of a presidential candidate (...) regarding the immigration issue. His social media consultant reached me through the direct message box and said I could ask him my questions one-on-one after the (...) conference. Then, I went. I had the opportunity to meet and get answers to many important questions. (Serkan, aged 31). They also report that politicians' posts on social media, especially about their opponents, cause political discussions in comments and daily life: 'Every party naturally declares the superiority of its own opinion on social media. However, those who tightly adhere to their ideologies and those who oppose them are engaged in a deep debate in the comments.' (Haldun, aged 27) 'Social media is now in everyone's pocket. We can see the reflection of politicians' posts as political discussions in cafes and on the street.' (Didem, aged 26) Additionally, some participants claim that politicians use these social media-sparked discussions to disseminate their desired information: 'We play the role of information carriers. They share their ideas on social media. We, the folk, discuss among ourselves and disseminate this information consciously or unconsciously.' (Ahmet, aged 25)

### 4.2. Conformity

Participants narrate that politicians strive to be socially conformable through social media. Some participants state that politicians are keen to be a part of the social network among voters on social media: 'Politicians try to gain acceptance by acting like a member of the public on social media.' (Bilal, aged 28) 'We can see that they want to be included in the network among voters with their re-shares and likes on their social media accounts.' (Hakan, aged 27) Accordingly, some participants report that politicians consider some opinions and reactions on social media: 'Social media best reflects what the public thinks. Many politicians place trend topics in their election rallies or press releases.' (Gülenaz, aged 25) Therefore, it can be inferred that politicians are searching for social



conformity. However, some participants claim that politicians use social media to directly influence people's election decisions rather than allowing them to direct each other: 'Politicians are always among us through social media, but their posts receive the most interaction. This leads them to adopt the dominant view they impose.' (Ebru, aged 28) 'We often see them among us (on media) to prevent the public from influencing one another negatively to their detriment. (Sedat, aged 27)

#### 4.3. Innovativeness

Participants agree that politicians' social media use proves they are innovative. Some view social media as a technological opportunity that offers many unique advantages for users and argue that politicians take advantage of this opportunity in many ways. For instance, Eda (aged 32) describes social media as a medium for interaction that transcends geographical boundaries and states that politicians utilize social media to interact with voters abroad: 'People living abroad generally follow the TV channels and news of the country they live in. It is not possible to reach them through traditional media tools. Almost all politicians interact with people there via social media. This is an opportunity to share their promises and ideas with people abroad. Some participants report that politicians adapt well to rapidly developing technology and digital transformations: 'Using social media effectively requires many skills. It is necessary to know how to use both applications and the internet on mobile phones, tablets, and computers, which are often developed by adding new features. Additionally, each social media platform has distinctive, occasionally intricate characteristics of its own. (...)Despite all this, politicians who want to interact with voters successfully use social media.' (İlayda, aged 29) Similarly, Elif (aged 24) narrates with astonishment that older politicians, especially, can use social media effectively: 'I actively use almost all social media tools. This is normal because I grew up with these. However, it is truly surprising and inspiring those politicians of the same age as my father and even my grandfather use technology so well.'

#### 4.4. Insincerity

Participants often emphasize that politicians behave insincerely on social media. Nevertheless, some participants acknowledge that social media posts are deceptive and don't fairly depict reality: 'To be honest, I post my photos after filtering them. I do this partly to attract attention, partly to be liked and approved by society, and partly to feel good.' (Gülenaz, aged 25) 'Sometimes I get furious about a daily event and post it on Twitter. I only do that, though, when I'm furious. I don't think so.' (Ahmet, aged 25) 'Traveling in the car with my child is difficult. Sometimes, I even cry out of anger. I have a tiny daughter, and she often cries in the car. Nevertheless, I can share photos from a well-designed choltry with the lake scene as if my entire trip was going great.' (Eda, aged 32) Moreover, Didem (aged 26) argues that politicians spread misleading information about their opponents on social media. She states: 'Many politicians share posts about their opponents without evidence or claiming they will reveal the evidence to win the election. However, we never see that evidence. They can sometimes contradict what they say.' Similarly, some participants are skeptical about how much of the posts about themselves by politicians willing to spread fake news about others are true: 'They post about others during elections without providing evidence. This prevents me from having a definitive opinion about them.' (Seçil, aged 28) 'A person who lies about someone else today will also lie to make herself look good tomorrow.' (Nazan, aged 26) Participants also stress that the fact that fake accounts on social media always positively remark on politicians' posts and perform as the catalyst for interactions causes insincerity: 'There can often be accounts with nicknames under politicians' posts that praise them. This, unfortunately, makes them insincere.' (Ceyda, aged 27) 'I sometimes see that a politician's posts are shared across all social media platforms by the same phony account. This makes us less trusting of politicians, which hurts them during election campaigns.' (Serhat, aged 26) In addition, some participants reported that politicians' social media posts about the social services they offer harm voters' perceptions of their sincerity: '(...)After a natural disaster, politicians share all the services provided on social media. This seems very insincere to me.' (Kemal, aged 28) 'Politicians' sharing photos of visiting a low-income family and helping them on social media indicates that they are insincere. Additionally, this causes embarrassment to those receiving aid.' (Derya, aged 30)

In brief, results indicate that young voters regard politicians who use social media to be insincere, innovative, socially conformable, and well-versed in communication.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study revealed four themes that constitute how young voters perceive the social media usage of politicians. Accordingly, it provides some contributions to the relevant literature. Prior research primarily focuses on why and how politicians use social media and how social media affects voter behavior (e.g., Macnamara et al., 2012; Spierings and Jacobs, 2014; Stier et al., 2018; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020; Zaiter et al., 2023). These studies are aimed at increasing politicians' effectiveness on social media. Thus, their practical implications center on better changing and managing voter behavior through social media. However, the relevant studies do not reflect the voters' perspective. The current study addresses this gap by exploring how young voters perceive politicians' use of social media.

Some of the study's results align with those of prior research focusing on the viewpoint of politicians. Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan (2012) argue that social media can increase political participation and discussion among citizens. Similarly, the results of this study indicate that politicians demonstrate their communication skills on social media and disseminate information by creating the opportunity to discuss their political views. Thus, as noted by Stieglitz et al. (2012), such a communicative role enables them to continuously gather, analyze, summarize, and visualize the information that is politically significant using social media to improve interactions with citizens. In this regard, they can also communicate and affect the news agenda. However, there are many social media platforms that can help achieve such objectives. In line with Whiting & Williams's (2013) research, young voters may have many social media profiles, but their usage patterns and goals might differ. Therefore, this study recommends that future researchers carry out research on social media platforms to communicate more effectively and efficiently with this group of voters. This might help classify social media platforms based on their usage patterns and purposes. Therefore, politicians can effectively plan their posts. For example, they can share social messages on X, a photo of a crowded rally area on Instagram, and their responses to queries from voters on YouTube. Moreover, Karlsson & Aström (2017) suggest that politicians can follow changing trends on social media and thus adapt to change immediately. Similarly, this study found that politicians' use of social media proves they are innovative. They often utilize this innovative tool for various reasons, including monitoring social behavior, interacting with citizens, promoting election campaigns, and attracting voters. Social media can be considered an important tool, especially for collecting and analyzing information about the voter market and segmenting voters (Mochla et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study recommends future research focus on social media as a significant tool with relationship-building potential within the political marketing context. On the other hand, people can connect with more knowledgeable individuals on social media to reduce the cost of gathering information required to engage in political behavior (Wijenayake et al., 2019). Accordingly, they often seek social conformity, and thus, they tend to adjust their personal opinions to fit the majority of the group (Wijenayake et al., 2020b). This study also found that politicians, like other individuals, tend to become part of social conformity through social media. Politicians often participate in social media networks composed of individuals with their own ideologies. However, based on the participants' narratives, they also tend to adapt to groups with different views. Accordingly, many politicians share the evidence (photos and videos) of their conversations with people (shopkeepers, neighborhood residents, etc.) who obviously have opposing views on their social media accounts. To the best of our knowledge, there is no research in the existing literature on politicians' attempts to fit in with society. However, social values and political tendencies in social life primarily imply a relationship between a sense of autonomy and social conformity, indicating that social conformity is not a worthless notion in politics (Feldman, 2003). In this regard, this study suggests that future research should examine politicians' efforts for social conformity, how this is perceived by society, and especially the impact of social media on this subject. Also, future research might examine how voters seeking social conformity change their views on politicians through social media, what factors affect this, and which social media platform is more effective in this regard. Furthermore, the study argues that this does not occur due to their search for knowledge or social approval but rather to manipulate shared information. Political science has widely studied voter trust (e.g., Ceron, 2015; Abid et al., 2021; Ceron & Carrara, 2023). This indicates that political trust is crucial, but it is declining. Accordingly, some studies suggest that politicians may use social media to build trust among the public (e.g., Jakob, 2010; Warren et al., 2014; Tsfatı & Ariely, 2014). On the contrary, this study revealed that voters believe politicians using social media to be insincere. Accordingly, participants described social media as deceptive and manipulative and noted politicians' self-serving use of social media. As noted in Gilpin et al.'s (2010) research, this study found that politicians' social media identities are not authentic but rather generic identities created by many politicians. Therefore, participants believe that their identity is different from the real one, which is a deceptive behavior. Given this, it is worth examining the behavioral change (e.g., party membership, participation in advocacy groups, and voting) that arises when voters view their social media identities as identical to their real identities, as well as the actions taken by politicians to make this happen. Politicians should not adopt new social media personas and instead utilize their real identities on the social media platforms they own. This provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate their sincerity and win over voters' trust. It is also recommended that they follow through on the promises they made during the pre-election campaigning period and post them on social media accounts following the election. Regardless of the emerging themes, this study also found that few participants perceived politicians' use of social media as unserious: 'Politicians must be serious because of their job. They are in official positions and state officials. For whatever reason, I find it odd that a statesman or political figure would be active on such an informal site as TikTok.' (Seçil, aged 28) Such behaviors of politicians on social media may lead young voters to have negative attitudes toward voting or political participation (e.g., joining and supporting political parties) (Macnamara et al., 2012; Martin, 2015).

The extant literature mainly concentrates on why and how politicians utilize social media to affect voter behavior effectively and efficiently. Therefore, relevant studies often put politicians at the center of the research. This suggests that voters have a passive role and are likely to be influenced and manipulated by other parties. However, voters are at least as worthy of research as politicians within the political context. Accordingly, this study

contributes to the current body of knowledge by exploring the voters' perceptions about politicians' use of social media. The study's results encourage future research to shift its focus from politicians to voters. Thus, they may offer practical implications in favor of voters rather than providing suggestions for developing guidelines on utilizing social media more effectively to influence and direct voter behavior.

## 5. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the fascinating outcomes of this exploratory study, it's critical to comprehend the conclusions in light of several limitations. Firstly, generalizability is limited by the qualitative nature of the research. Additionally, this study utilized purposive sampling, which has the risk of sample bias and margin of error. This technique does not employ random selection; participants are likely to refer people like themselves. This may lead to a generalizability problem as the results might not fully represent the population. Young voters made up the research sample because they were adept at using social media. To improve generalizability, it is advised that future research include more young people or individuals of different ages who are competent users of social media. Secondly, the study is restricted to the time and context, even with great efforts to find research participants of various ages, genders, occupations, and educational backgrounds. However, it's also possible that many people's opinions differ significantly from those covered in this study. Last, the study only explored how young voters perceive politicians' use of social media by adopting a qualitative research approach. Future research is recommended using quantitative research methodology to test the current results on models (through dependent, independent, and control variables).

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