

**THE LEGITIMACY AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF
SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL INFLUENCERS**

Paschalis Seran /

s2929341

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Supervisors:

Dr. Adam Henschke

Dr. Michel Bourban

**Faculty of Behavioural,
Management & Social
Sciences**

University of Twente

P.O. Box 217

**7500 AE Enschede The
Netherlands**



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ABSTRACT

The use of social media as a communication and marketing tool has contributed to the upsurge of social media content creators who endorse social and political agendas, which are called social media political influencers (SMPIs). This thesis mainly examines how SMPIs can responsibly influence people. To address those questions, this thesis employs a conceptual analysis by clarifying and relating what influencers are, the legitimacy of political authority, and moral responsibility.

By considering the idea of SMIs in marketing, I define SMPIs as social media content creators who endorse social and political agendas to influence people. People listen to them because they are perceived as authentic, knowledgeable, attractive, trustworthy, and credible. As they exercise their power in the political arena, I discover that some SMPIs are legitimate political authorities, and some are effective authorities. As the first one is subject to legal law, my concern is the latter, which must attribute some moral responsibility to the fact that they may responsibly influence people.

Considering some types of moral responsibility, this thesis advocates moral responsibility as a virtue where being responsible, particularly in exercising and mobilizing political power through social media, should be upheld through caring for others.

Keywords: Social media, SMPIs, Legitimacy, Moral Responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

On May 18, 2019, a German YouTuber and music producer named Rezo, who had 600,000 followers, posted a video on YouTube before the EU parliamentary election. In the video, he opposed the conservative party (Christian Conservative Union in Germany and Christian Social Union in Bavaria). Within four days, his video went viral and reached 3.4 million views (Connolly, 2019). He was concerned about the parties that neglected climate issues. As many young people watched the video and engaged in such political polemics, it turned out that the conservative party's loss in the election was perceived as the "Rezo Effect" (Desirée Schmuck, 2022).

On April 7, 2023, Bima, an Indonesian student and TikToker living in Australia posted a video criticizing the local government of Lampung under his TikTok account *@awbimaxreborn*. He was concerned with the deprivation and stagnation of road infrastructure and the terrible education conditions in that province. His video went viral on TikTok and other social media platforms (SMPs) and even was broadcast on some Indonesian National Television. Following the viral video, other SMIs reported that the government had begun constructing the regional road. This has been termed the "Bima effect," highlighting the impact of Bima's viral video in prompting the government to address road infrastructure issues (Tri Purna Jaya, 2023).

These two cases represent numerous instances that exemplify the impact – or perceived impact - of SMIs on the political realm. SMIs are opinion leaders who harness social media (SM) to gain followers and popularity. The upsurge of SM has transformed opinion leaders into SMIs (Suuronen, 2021).

Many scholars realize that SM's emergence as a communication tool is significantly effective in connecting people. SM has evolved into a platform for communication, social-political interaction, and economic activity. Realizing how SM plays a pivotal role in marketing strategy (Colin Campbell, 2020; Daniella Ryding, 2023; López, 2023; Desirée Schmuck, 2022), opinion leaders and many more people use SM as a platform to "market" their social and political agendas (Anastasia Goodwin, 2023; Martin J. Riedl, 2023). This shift gave birth to social media political influencers (SMPs) (Muth, 2023).

SMPs can endorse their social and political agenda and shape and influence public opinion and perception (Suuronen, 2021). Realizing that they have such considerable power,

particularly in a democratic society, I wonder how they acquire and mobilize their power and how they should adequately exercise it, which can be formulated in my research question.

How do social media political influencers acquire, mobilize, and responsibly influence people?

I can break down this research question into three sub-questions:

1. What are Social Media Political Influencers?
2. How do they acquire and mobilize their political power?
3. How should they responsibly influence people?

These three sub-research questions will be answered in three chapters.

Chapter 1: Social Media Political Influencers

In this chapter, I will explain what social media political influencers (SMPIs) are, drawn from the definition of SMIs. SMIs can be understood as social media users who gain many audiences on their platforms due to their expertise and authenticity (Riedl, 2023). This underlines that SMIs are social media users who grow their social media accounts by focusing their content on topics or interests such as fashion, food, and sport. Due to their perceived expertise (knowledge and skills), people trust their credibility and see them as references in those content-related topics.

However, based on my first attempt to understand it, SMIs are always attributed to marketing activity. What kind of commodity do they market as political influencers? This will lead me to explore the concept of SMPIs. SMPIs are content creators who endorse political positions in social media. They can be categorized as those who endorse political positions due to their concern or those who do it because they get paid (Anastasia Goodwin, 2023). Apart from those preliminary definitions, this chapter mainly aims to delve into the concept of SMPIs, such as defining what they are and how they become SMPIs. Having these solid theoretical grounds will help to set up the next chapter about legitimacy regarding how they acquire and mobilize political power as one of the political authorities.

Chapter 2: Legitimacy of Social Media Political Influencers

In this chapter, I will explore the notion of legitimacy in political philosophy. After understanding what SMPs are in Chapter 1, I will identify what SMPs are in a democratic society. By doing so, I will situate the SMPs as political actors and authorities. Since they have the power to influence people and thus be followed by people, are they legitimate authorities exercising such power? Can we regard them as political authority? How can they become a political authority? In order to answer these questions, I employ legitimacy and political authority in the concept of political philosophy, and by so doing, the outcome of this chapter is to present an understanding of the position of SMPs as political authorities in democratic society regarding how they legitimately acquire and mobilize power.

Chapter 3: Moral Responsibility of Social Media Political Influencers

After understanding how they acquire and mobilize political power to influence people, the next challenge is how SMPs should influence people responsibly. As responsibility is a broad concept and considering that this work is mainly philosophical, I will take ethics of responsibility to attribute moral responsibility to the SMPs. This can be realized by presenting moral responsibility, how to morally influence people, and how to attribute moral responsibility to SMPs.

The methodology I used to work on those chapters was conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis in philosophy means making ideas clear and clarifying their relations. In other words, conceptual analysis starts with ideas and tries to relate one idea to another to make it reasonable. As this method starts with an idea, the first idea being analyzed is the concept of SMPs. What are they? This idea comes from curiosity to know them, which leads to the definition of SMPs, which I draw from the definition of SMIs rooted in marketing and political communication to define them.

Having presented and clarified the concept of SMPs, the second idea, covered in Chapter 2, questions their legitimacy in the political realm according to the political philosophy approach. I start with the definitions of political actor and political authority by looking at the history of political philosophy theory, starting with Ancient Greeks, modern political philosophy, and modern democracy. I dive into these historical concepts and relate them to one another to establish an understanding of the legitimacy of SMPs.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to addressing the responsibility of SMPs. However, considering responsibility is a broad concept, I focus on attributing moral responsibility to the SMPs. To work on this, I draw from the ethics of responsibility. I also ethically assess the acts of SMPs, whether those acts are morally right or wrong, and lastly, present how to hold SMPs responsible for their actions. These ideas are clarified and related to one another and constitute Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 1

SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL INFLUENCERS

1.1 Introduction

Many scholars have discussed social media (SM) and the role of influencers in marketing (Colin Campbell, 2020; Daniella Ryding, 2023; López, 2023). This is understandable since the notion of social media influencers (SMIs) conceptually stems from the concept of opinion leadership. This notion introduces opinion leaders as those concerned about a particular issue and bringing it to the surface. They influence people's opinions, perceptions, and beliefs (Suuronen, 2021; Elihu Katz, 1995). The power to influence is one of the key concepts in marketing, where marketers are expected to influence and persuade audiences (López, 2023). Such capabilities are relevant to digital marketing.

The upsurge of SM has transformed opinion leaders into SMIs, that is, those who potentially and capably persuade and influence the audience through social media platforms (SMPs) (Suuronen, 2021). Since SMPs have become increasingly accessible, the use of SM is open not only to opinion leaders but also to typical individuals. Many ordinary people now use social media to share their ideas (Suuronen, 2021). This underlines that SMIs encompass opinion leaders and ordinary individuals using SMPs to influence people.

Considering the prevalence of SMIs in marketing and the aim of this writing to understand social media political influencers (SMPIs), I will draw the theoretical approach of SMPIs from the discourse of SMIs in marketing. To work on this topic, I present what SMIs are, the actors of social media marketing, the perceived characteristics of SMIs, and the general notion of SMPIs.

1.2 What Are Social Media Influencers?

The coming definitions stem from a marketing perspective and are relevant to setting the ground for understanding what SMIs are. Martin J. Riedl (2023) defines SMIs as social media users who gain followers/audiences on their platforms due to their expertise and authenticity. This definition highlights SMIs as those with followers on their SMPs and possess

professional perceived characteristics¹, such as expertise, authenticity, and credibility. Nevertheless, it does not sufficiently address how the influencers gain followers through power to influence. Lopez (2023) addresses this power to influence by defining an SMI as “*An individual who creates content on social media and has a significant power of influence and reach that may be of interest to brands.*” SMIs are seen as content creators who possess the power to influence and thus become attractive to brands. Still, there are many more definitions of SMIs in the marketing field, yet taking these two definitions as representation is sufficient for me to grasp what SMIs are. Thus, based on the abovementioned definitions, I define SMIs as *individuals who create content on SMPs and have the power to influence others through their perceived authenticity, expertise, and credibility, thus gaining more and more audiences/followers and attracting the brands.*

1.3 Actors of Social Media Marketing

The given definition of SMIs implies that SMIs are the content creators who gain people's trust as they are perceived as authentic, credible, and expert. As they gain trust, they are perceived by the brand/company as a helpful actor, making SMIs more popular as part of marketing strategies (Martin J. Riedl, 2023; Singer, 2023). They are perceived as more effective than traditional marketers in promoting a brand and reaching consumers (López, 2023; Caruelle, 2023). Therefore, brands utilize SMIs to endorse their products to consumers. This indicates three main actors: brand/company, influencers, audience/followers/consumers. The brand/company pays SMIs to endorse their brand (products/services), the influencers as endorsers (either endorsing the brand or their products), and the audiences/followers who engage with the content and the influencers (Caruelle, 2023).

A brand is “*a product or a business that has a distinct identity in the perception of consumers* (Kenton, 2024).” A brand is a product or service that customers perceive as distinct from others. A brand may belong to a company or an influencer. The latter can be seen in the influencers with expertise, such as Kylie Jenner, who owns the brand Kylie Cosmetics and endorses it herself on social media (Colin Campbell, 2020).

¹ The term perceived here is essential since the characteristics the SMIs possess stem from audiences'/followers' perceptions.

Influencers are those who endorse a brand by creating content on SMPs (Caruelle, 2023). As content creators, they have direct access to the brand/company and the audience. This situation has placed them as mediators between what the brand/company wants and what the audience/followers/consumers expect from the brand/company.

The last one is audiences/followers. Audiences are those who enjoy the content, while followers are audiences who enjoy the content but subscribe to or follow the SMIs' accounts. In other words, the followers are the audiences, yet the audiences may not always be the followers. Regardless of the difference between the audience and the followers, in marketing, the target is to reach as many people as possible (Colin Campbell, 2020).

After briefly explaining the three actors, I will turn to the relationship between influencers and the two other actors. The aim is to see the role of influencers in the relationship with other actors, which is drawn from a triadic relationship concept (Caruelle, 2023). The triadic relationship concept is the dynamic relationship between three main actors in SMI marketing: the brands-influencers, brands-audiences/followers, and influencers-followers. Understanding the relationship between these three types of actors will shed light on what and how SMIs play their role as endorsers in impacting and influencing audiences/followers. Therefore, I will elaborate on the relationship between the influencers and the followers, between the influencers and the brand, and the relationship between the brand and the followers.

-The relationship between influencers and followers.

Considering that many people use SMPs, influencers are believed to be more effective in reaching more and more people than traditional media (Colin Campbell, 2020; Desirée Schmuck, 2022; Henley, 2020), particularly in reaching millennials and Gen-Z (Singer, 2023). As the influencers gain followers, they have a parasocial relationship with the influencers, where their followers feel intimate with them, such as they perceive the influencers as credible figures (Jonas Colliander, 2011). It is called a parasocial relationship because the followers feel intimate with the influencers, although they do not know each other. The relationship between the influencers and the followers here is built upon emotional intimacy, though inaccurate (Caruelle, 2023). To the followers, the influencers are perceived by the followers as trustworthy, credible, and authentic (Szambolics, 2022; Daniella Ryding, 2023;

Singer, 2023). However, parasocial relationships occur and become more robust due to influencer feedback. Parasocial relationships occur due to two ways of communication: from the followers toward the influencers and vice versa (Caruelle, 2023).

Conversely, influencers may be happy to interact with their followers by sharing their content, asking questions, or communicating via Instagram Live. By so doing, the followers may improve their engagement rate with the influencers, which is crucial for their existence as influencers (Caruelle, 2023). In other words, the more interaction and engagement the followers have with the influencers, the more successful the influencers are.

-The relationship between the influencers and the brand/company

This dynamic relationship leads to two roles: endorser and content creator. Influencers may endorse a brand they are paid to endorse, and at the same time, they become the content creators who create and post the brand on their SMPs (Caruelle, 2023). As mediators, influencers are believed to be capable of bridging the interests of the company and the audiences/followers. For instance, the customers are interested in the products because they see the influencers use them and promote them on their SMPs (Jonas Colliander, 2011; Caruelle, 2023; Colin Campbell, 2020). However, there is a possibility that any brand does not pay the influencers. They can endorse their brand, as seen in influencers with expertise who own and endorse their brand, as in the case of Kylie Jenner (Colin Campbell, 2020).

Since influencers have many followers and are perceived to be credible and trustworthy, the content shared is also perceived to be credible. To some extent, the audiences/followers trust the influencers more than the product (Singer, 2023) because what they see is the product the influencers use. As a result, the brand/company that realizes such a relationship between the influencers and followers utilizes the influencers to promote their products (Caruelle, 2023).

-The relationship between the brand/company and the followers.

This relationship can be seen as the brand and the follower's relationship as mediated by the influencer. As mediators, influencers act as a bridge between the brand and their audiences/followers (Singer, 2023). The brand pays influencers to post their products to attract followers' attention. This may result in the followers' curiosity to visit the brand's

website and buy the endorsed products (Caruelle, 2023). The brand may respond to the follower by replying to the comment or the content created by the follower that features the brand (Caruelle, 2023).

Since audiences/followers trust influencers more than brands (Singer, 2023), the content created and influencers' capabilities are at stake in bridging the brand and the audience/followers. Also, the brand can take this chance to establish a loyal customer. By utilizing influencers, the brand expects the audiences/followers to become buyers/customers (Caruelle, 2023).

Understanding influencers as mediators, actors who bridge the brand and the audiences/followers, will help us understand how the SMPs, as part of SMIs, are set in a relationship with the "political brand" and the audiences/followers/citizens.

1.4 The Perceived Characteristics of SMIs

Influencers' role is becoming more crucial in marketing. They can influence audiences/followers because they are perceived as authentic, expert, attractive, trustworthy, and credible (López, 2023). Because these characteristics stem from the audiences' perceptions, they are called perceived characteristics².

1.4.1 Perceived Authenticity

SMIs are generally perceived as authentic content creators, which leads to their trustworthiness and, in turn, becomes the source of credibility (López, 2023). However, what is the authenticity here? It often relates to something authentic, genuine, and honest (López, 2023; Singer, 2023). Regarding SMIs, authenticity encompasses two factors: authentic self-awareness and self-expression. Self-awareness refers to the efforts to build a personal brand, meaning that someone who wants to become an influencer should be authentic and make himself/herself genuine (Szabolcs, 2022). Authenticity relates to influencers' genuine disposition, which manifests in the content creation, leading to a genuine commitment with the followers.

² Whether the influencers are genuinely authentic, credible, and knowledgeable is an independent topic to scrutinize. Yet in this work, I will stick to the perceived characteristics.

Nevertheless, how do we know that influencers are authentic? Singer (2023) draws a six-factor model of authenticity from Josep C. Nunes (2021), which states that to be authentic, influencers should possess six factors: originality, accuracy, legitimacy, connectedness, integrity, and proficiency.

Originality underlies a person or a product standing out from others within the market. The more authentic influencers are, the more they stand out. *Accuracy* emphasizes influencers' transparency in representing themselves and the services or products they promote. *Legitimacy* implies that the influencer's promoting actions should adhere to their group's standards and norms. *Connectedness* underlies the familiarity of the audience/followers with the influencers. This may be due to the influencers' personalities or the brands they endorse. *Integrity* emphasizes the independence of the influencers as a people with no profit-interest in themselves or endorsing the brand. Lastly, *proficiency* implies that the influencers have the expertise to endorse the brand. Influencers are authentic if they have these six factors altogether (Singer, 2023).

This elaboration underlines that authenticity closely relates to expertise (proficiency), as someone's authenticity can be seen in how knowledgeable/skilled she is. It relates to attractiveness, where an authentic influencer who cultivates a personal brand seems to attract followers (Jung-Kuei Hsieh, 2023). Authenticity also contributes, where the audiences/followers perceive them as honest and truthful (not faking themselves or the products they endorse). As the influencers are perceived as trustworthy, they are also perceived as credible (López, 2023; Patricia Baudier, 2023).

1.4.2 Perceived Expertise

Expertise is a necessary perceived characteristic for influencers. Expertise refers to knowledge, experience, qualification, competence, or skill (Patricia Baudier, 2023). The more expertise the influencer has in a particular topic, the more likely they are to reach and influence the followers because they are perceived as knowledgeable figures (López, 2023). Influencers' expertise will boost the content's engagement (Christian Hughes, 2019).

Expertise contributes to influencers' authenticity. As perceived experts in particular domains, influencers seem to be authentic in influencing audiences/followers, which can be found in one of the six authenticity factors. This implies that followers perceive influencers as

authentic endorsers when they have expertise in a related field (Singer, 2023). Expertise also contributes to attractiveness, where knowledge as part of influencers' characteristics may attract followers (Ohanian, 1991). Along with authenticity, expertise contributes to trustworthiness since people trust those with the knowledge to speak about particular domains (Stephen W. Wang, 2017; López, 2023). As influencers are perceived as trustworthy, they are perceived to be credible (Singer, 2023; Patricia Baudier, 2023).

1.4.3 Perceived Attractiveness

Influencers are perceived to be attractive when they show similarity, likeability, and familiarity (Daniella Ryding, 2023). Attractiveness applies not only to the attractive content but also to the influencers' physical features and virtuous attitudes, such as beauty, personality, intellectual skills, and wisdom (Ohanian, 1991; Kian Yeik Koay, 2022). This indicates that influencers endorse brands and cultivate their branding as influencers (Jung-Kuei Hsieh, 2023).

Although attractiveness may lead to authenticity (familiarity between influencers and followers (Singer, 2023)), trustworthiness, and credibility (Kian Yeik Koay, 2022), it does not contribute to the influencers' expertise since the antecedents of attractiveness are similarity, likability, and familiarity. In contrast, expertise emphasizes knowledge, experience, qualification, competence, or skill (Patricia Baudier, 2023).

1.4.4 Perceived Trustworthiness

Influencers are trustworthy if they are perceived as honest, believable, sincere, and dependable/reliable figures (Stephen W. Wang, 2017; López, 2023; Kian Yeik Koay, 2022). If the endorsers are perceived as reliable and honest, followers will likely believe in them (Daniella Ryding, 2023). Thus, when the endorsers are perceived as trustworthy, the followers are more likely to accept the endorsement (Kian Yeik Koay, 2022). In marketing, Influencers are perceived as trustworthy because they use the products and thus recommend them to their followers (López, 2023). For instance, millennials would be more likely to trust influencers and use the recommended products if they demonstrate honesty (Daniella Ryding, 2023).

Trustworthiness is the most essential source of credibility (Patricia Baudier, 2023; Ohanian, 1991). Trustworthiness stems from authenticity, expertise, and attractiveness, as influencers are trustworthy when perceived as authentic, knowledgeable, and attractive (López, 2023; Patricia Baudier, 2023). In other words, authenticity, expertise, and attractiveness are derivative characteristics of trustworthiness.

1.4.5 Perceived Credibility

Credibility is believed to be the main characteristic of influencers, and it shows why influencers are impactful (López, 2023). Perceived credibility is a judgment made by the followers that influencers are reliable and believable (López, 2023). This shows that influencers can affect followers' beliefs, opinions, and attitudes because they are perceived as credible (Ohanian, 1991).

Influencers are perceived as credible because they are trustworthy (Patricia Baudier, 2023). As trustworthiness consists of authenticity, expertise, and attractiveness, perceived credible influencers are believed to be authentic, knowledgeable, and attractive. For instance, Influencers are credible because they have expertise in related domains and, thus, are qualified to persuade the audience to buy certain products (Stephen W. Wang, 2017).

In summary, influencers are effective in marketing because they have perceived characteristics: authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and credibility. However, the most critical factor is credibility. Credibility is earned when influencers are perceived as trustworthy. For the influencers to be trustworthy, they should demonstrate authenticity, expertise, and attractiveness. All these characteristics have turned the influencers into practical tools for marketing.

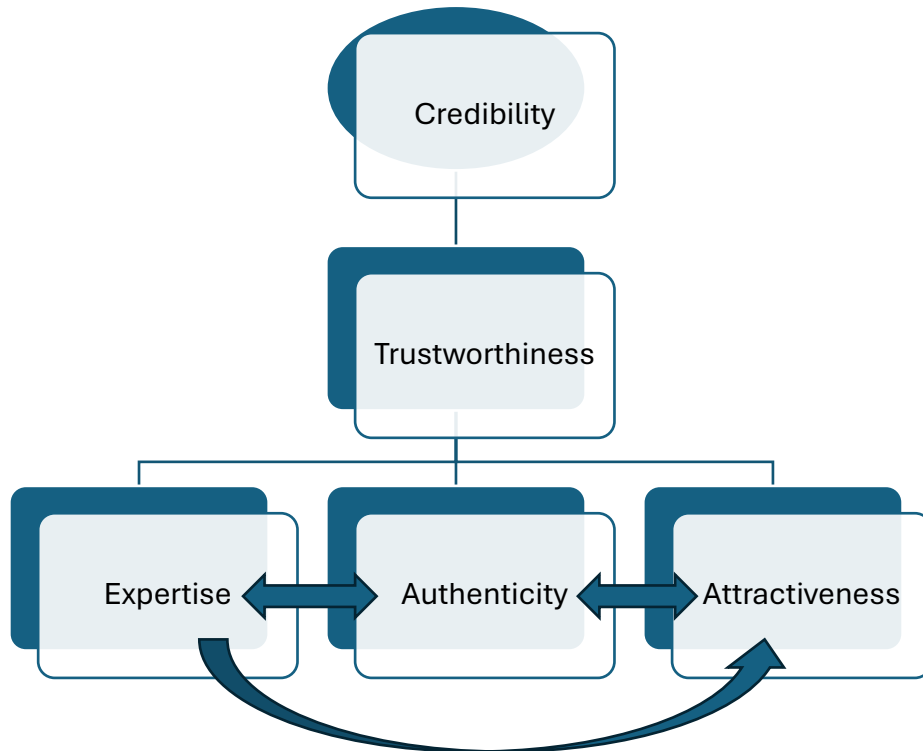


Figure 1. The relationship among the perceived characteristics.

1.5 Social Media Political Influencers

After providing theoretical grounds for SMIs, I will use them to elaborate on SMPIs, their actors, and perceived characteristics. To ground such an analysis, I will bring up some real cases, such as those of YouTuber Rezo, Donald Trump, and Instagrammer Ky'Wuan Dukes, to see how SMPIs influence people in the political arena.

1.5.1 Definition of SMPIs

The definition of SMIs in section 1.2.2 has helped me understand what SMIs are. SMIs can shape audiences' opinions, which brands/companies see as positive. Marketing, then, takes advantage of SMIs as tools to boost their marketing strategy (Singer, 2023).

By reflecting on the enormous benefits of SM for marketing, some people use it to market their social and political agenda (Suuronen, 2021; Tang, 2023). This can be well explained by referring to the content and intention of SMIs encompassing food, cosmetics, sports, health, and wellness influencers (Wellman, 2022; Magdalena Riedl C. S., 2021). SMPIs

are those who intentionally promote and create content about social and political issues (Anastasia Goodwin, 2023; Martin J. Riedl, 2023; Suuronen, 2021).

Such elaboration resonates with Martin J. Riedl (2023), who argues that SMPs are *“content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform.”* This definition covers the concepts of content creators, endorsing social and political causes, and producing and sharing content on SMPs. However, it lacks the concept of motivation or the objective of why SMPs do so. Tang (2023) answers it by stating that SMPs do so to influence public opinion. She sees SMPs *“exert influence on public opinion and political agendas through online personal influence, such as government officials, Congressmen and Congresswomen, and political commentators.”*

Nevertheless, this definition mainly focuses on SMPs as politicians, and later, I will present that some SMPs are not politicians. Anastasia Goodwin’s (2023) definition completes Tang’s definition by underlining the presence of audiences as the target group of endorsement from whom the SMPs expect support. She argues that this endorsement often involves many influencers. It is a massive movement called Political Relational Influencers. Thus, she portrays influencers as political relational influencers, *“content creators who promote political and social causes toward their audiences by expressing support for them and endorsing them implicitly or explicitly.”* However, this definition is more inclined to emphasize relational influencers, where influencers are perceived to work together. In contrast, in some cases, influencers can be stand-alone individuals, such as TikToker Bima. Nevertheless, considering and reflecting on the merits and demerits of each definition, I will define SMPs as ***social media content creators who endorse social and political agendas to influence public opinion.***

However, clarifying the social and political agendas/issues the SMPs endorse here is necessary. Social agendas/issues here refer to concerns certain community members face as individuals or as a community (Chwialkowska, 2019). Social agenda relates to the life of individuals within the society/community. Take sustainability and environmental awareness as an illustration. Promoting these issues as social concerns suggests a lifestyle that mitigates and minimizes negative actions toward the environment (Chwialkowska, 2019). Furthermore, political agendas/issues contain a broad spectrum encompassing formal political topics, such

as political campaigns and policies, and lifestyle-based topics, such as health, family, and housing (Suuronen, 2021).

I found out that there is an overlap between social and political issues. For instance, environmental activists and influencers in Indonesia recently posted a video regarding the *Citarum River*, which is polluted by trash (Henry, 2024). On the one hand, this may be seen as a social issue as it harms the environment and the people living near the river (particularly concerning their health). On the other hand, it can also be seen as a political issue as the government has failed to manage the trash. Therefore, saying that SMPs endorse social and political issues as one interwoven agenda makes sense due to such an intersection.

1.5.2 Actors of SMPs

By definition, SMPs are those creating content on SMPs to endorse their social and political agenda and influence the audiences/followers so that the audiences/followers may support them (Anastasia Goodwin, 2023; Martin J. Riedl, 2023). This definition reveals some actors of SMPs: the brand (social and political agenda), the SMPs, and the audiences/followers/citizens.

The brand here is the social and political agenda, the content the SMPs promote on SMPs, such as social or political campaigns and candidates. The social and political agendas the SMPs endorse can be a lifestyle topic, such as environment, housing, and health, or political practices, such as policies or political campaigns (Chwialkowska, 2019; Suuronen, 2021). Reflecting on Youtuber's case, the brand he endorsed was a social-political campaign that suggested young people not elect the conservative party (political agenda) as it was not concerned with climate issues (social agenda).

Furthermore, the SMPs themselves may encompass a wide range of individuals. They might be the politicians who use social media to promote themselves³, SMI who act as opinion leaders⁴, influencers who become politicians⁵, or journalists who act as SMPs⁶(

³ Barack Obama used Twitter/X to endorse his political opinion before the US presidential election 2008 (Shafaq Fatema, 2022).

⁴ Youtuber Rezo who are known as music producers, but also concerned about social and political issue.

⁵ Donald Trump is a perfect example of this type. He already became an influencer before he ran for the presidential election (Concha Pérez-Curiel, 2019).

⁶ The actual case can be found in Brazil from 2018 to 2020. Due to political restrictions on journalism, the journalists became influencers who used various SMPs to voice their social and political concerns (Peres-Neto, 2022).

Martin J. Riedl, 2023). Reflecting on Youtuber Rezo’s case, he seems to fall into “SMIs who act as opinion leaders.” He is a YouTuber who is usually reserved for music, mishaps, fashion, or pets. However, he was concerned with the political situation and voiced his opinion to influence young German people (Connolly, 2019). Despite the wide range of influencers, either those who just occasionally or regularly promote social and political issues or those who have many or fewer followers, as long as they endorse social and political agendas on SMPs, they are SMPs (Martin J. Riedl, 2023).



Figure 2. Youtuber Rezo, in his YouTube video, addressing the conservative party (Connolly, 2019)

Lastly, the audiences/followers/citizens are the target of political influence. This resonates with the definition of audiences/followers in the marketing strategy. Both aim to establish a loyal fanbase: SMIs will turn the audiences/followers into customers, while SMPs will turn the audiences/followers into supporters. Reflecting on YouTuber Rezo’s case, the audiences/followers/citizens the YouTuber targeted were young people in Germany (Desirée Schmuck, 2022). The YouTuber seemed to address this targeted group as they were about to join the EU parliamentary election, and the YouTuber believed that influencing the youth’s

political opinion was a way to prevent the undesirable party from being elected. By targeting the youth, Youtuber Rezo expected to gain support for them.

Although influencers in the marketing and political arena aim to influence audiences/followers, both result in two different orientations, as seen in Figure 1. Marketing uses influencers to boost marketing strategy, which leads to profitability (the economical-oriented), while the political arena uses influencers to gain mass/group of supporters (the political-oriented)

Fields	Brand	Endorser	Audience	Expected Outcome
Marketing	Company: Goods and Services	Content Creators (SMIs)	Customers/buyers/followers/audiences	Profitable (economic- oriented)
Political Arena	Politicians, Government, Institution: social and political campaign	Content Creators (SMPs)	Followers/audiences/ Citizens/Supporters	Supporters (Political- oriented)

Figure 3. The Transformation from SMIs to SMPs

After identifying the actors of SMPs, I will analyze the relationship among actors based on the triadic relationship concept.

-The relationship between SMPs and followers

The SMPs are the content creators who endorse social and political agendas to the targeted audiences/followers/citizens, for which the SMPs expect support from the targeted group. Take YouTuber Rezo's case, where he expected his videos to reach the youth and gain their support (Desirée Schmuck, 2022).

Furthermore, the audiences/followers/citizens may support the SMPs and follow their opinions as they trust them. They perceive SMPs as authentic, credible, and trustworthy figures, although this may be a parasocial relationship. The young German people exposed to the YouTube video posted by YouTuber Rezo trusted him. They perceived him as an authentic influencer who offered valuable movement to take climate issues into account (Desirée Schmuck, 2022).

-The relationship between SMPs and brand

In this relationship, SMPs may act as content creators and endorsers. They create content on SMPs and endorse social and political agendas; either they are paid to do so or want to voice their concerns. Take Ky'Wuan Dukes, a student and lifestyle Instagrammer paid by NextGen America, a Democratic political action committee and advocacy group, to endorse a political campaign (Lai, 2022). Here, Ky'Wuan Dukes exemplifies the SMPs who are paid to endorse social and political campaigns. YouTuber Rezo, in contrast, illustrates the SMPs who voice their concerns.

These two distinct SMPs also indicate different brands. Ky'Wuan Dukes represents the SMPs who endorse political stakeholders' social and political agendas. The political stakeholders (governments, political institutions, or political officials) are third parties. In contrast, YouTuber Rezo represents the SMPs who endorse their social and political agendas. Here, SMPs are the political stakeholders.

-The relationship between the brand and followers

SMPs mediate this relationship. Political stakeholders can utilize SMPs to endorse a social and political agenda to influence the target's opinion and gain support. The SMPs' content will help the brand reach audiences/followers/citizens. Conversely, the audiences/followers can reach the political stakeholders or follow the political campaign when the SMPs are perceived as trustworthy and credible. As the audiences/followers/citizens perceive SMPs as possessing those characteristics, they can become loyal political campaign supporters.

Discussing the actors and the relationship among them helps understand how SMPs play a pivotal role in influencing and bridging both social and political agendas and the citizens.

1.5.3 The Perceived Characteristics of SMPIs

Referring to section 1.4, I defined SMIs as those perceived as authentic, knowledgeable, attractive, trustworthy, and credible. Since they are perceived to have these characteristics, their content is more likely to be credible and thus is accepted by the audiences/followers. Since SMPIs are part of SMIs, we can say that SMPIs are also perceived to have these characteristics, which leads to the acceptance of their social and political endorsement. The audiences/followers are perceived as authentic, knowledgeable, attractive, trustworthy, and credible.

SMPIs can influence audiences/followers because they are perceived as authentic. The audiences/followers see their authenticity articulated in their genuine disposition to create content and their commitment to their followers. Recalling YouTuber Rezo's case, he is perceived to feel that the conservative party's lack of concern with the climate issue must be addressed. This implies that he believed that neglecting climate issues was wrong. He then addressed such carelessness by creating content on his YouTube channel to target the youth not to vote for this party. This illustration shows the genuine disposition of YouTuber Rezo about the significance of climate issues, which manifested in the content he created and delivered by himself. He also mainly addressed the young German people and his subscribers to support his political campaign. This implies that he committed himself to the audience and that the audience will support him.

Audiences/followers may also believe in SMPIs because they are perceived as knowledgeable or skilful. Regarding social and political endorsement, Donald Trump is a perfect example⁷. His political slogan, "Make America Great Again," flooded Twitter before the presidential election and influenced public opinion. This political propaganda has been perceived to have contributed to his win in 2016 (Concha Pérez-Curiel, 2019). The main point here is not to analyze whether Donald Trump is a political expert but to see how public opinion/perception is formed, that is, to make people believe that Donald Trump knows how to "Make America Great Again."

⁷ Donald Trump as a chosen illustration is intentional since I do not see YouTuber Rezo as an environmental expert. This implies that Youtuber Rezo got support from citizens due to other perceived characteristics, such as authenticity and attractiveness.

Perceived Attractiveness underlines the physical and virtuous attitude of the SMPs. Youtuber Rezo is perceived as attractive since he cares about environmental issues. Here, he is perceived to have a virtuous attitude: care. Such an attitude has enabled him to attract young German people, particularly those concerned about climate issues. Not only did he influence the audiences, but some influencers also raised the same concern due to his video” (Desirée Schmuck, 2022). This implies that other people and influencers have a similar concern and feel familiar with the issue Youtuber Rezo raised. People perceived him as a caring figure and could relate to his concern, so they saw him as an attractive influencer.

When people perceive influencers as authentic, knowledgeable, and attractive, they can see them as trustworthy figures. They perceive the influencers as honest, sincere, and reliable. YouTuber Rezo is perceived as an authentic and attractive influencer, and thus, people see him as a sincere figure because he voiced the environmental issue. Alternatively, Donald Trump is perceived as reliable since he (assumably) knows how to “Make America Great Again.” These SMPs are perceived as trustworthy because they show authenticity, knowledge, and attractiveness. Since these SMPs demonstrate that they are reliable and believable, people perceive them as credible figures. The credibility of SMPs reveals how they affect public opinion through their social and political endorsement.

I would like to summarize what I have found in this chapter. SMPs are social media content creators who endorse social and political agendas to influence people. This definition underlines three main actors: the social and political agendas (brand), the SMPs (influencers), and audiences/followers/citizens. Understanding the dynamic relationship among the three actors has shed light on what SMPs do. Nevertheless, the most exciting part is how they do it. Exploring the perceived characteristics of SMPs reveals that they can influence people because people perceive them as authentic, knowledgeable, attractive, trustworthy, and credible. However, the most critical characteristic is credibility. In other words, the reason why people listen to SMPs is because they are perceived as credible.

However, how can they acquire power and mobilize it in the political arena? Are we obliged to listen to them? These typical questions will lead us to the legitimacy of the SMPs, which will be addressed and discussed in the coming chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LEGITIMACY OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL INFLUENCERS

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I elaborated on social media influencers (SMIs), from which the idea of social media political influencers (SMPIs) is drawn. SMPIs are those SMIs who use social media to endorse social and political agendas. If they can raise and mobilize social and political agendas, how do we situate them in the political arena? As they have the power to influence public opinion, can we consider them as political authority? And if they are political authority, are they legitimate authority?

This chapter aims to answer such questions. In this chapter, I will start by explaining who the political actors are by presenting the concepts of political actors, political legitimacy, and democracy. The concept of political actors will help set the foundation for SMPIs as political authorities with the power to mobilize public opinion. The analysis and discussion of political legitimacy are constructed by understanding the SMPIs' foundation as political authorities. This will be accomplished by revisiting some concepts of (legitimate) political authority in the history of political philosophy. The concept of political legitimacy, then, becomes the ground for the understanding of political legitimacy in a democratic system. The context of democracy here is vital since the political system may vary from country to country. By borrowing these concepts, I aim to analyze whether SMPIs can be categorized as legitimate authorities in a democratic political society.

2.2 Political Actors and Authority

SMPIs have the power to influence people by creating social and political content on SMPIs. SMPIs can endorse specific candidates running for political office, impacting audiences'/followers' decisions in the voting (Shafaq Fatema 2022). Realizing their capability to influence people, how do we understand SMPIs as political actors?

Firstly, I will borrow the concept of a political actor from the perspective of political philosophy by Hannah Arendt. Hannah Arendt defined the political actor by understanding what political action is. She traced the idea of political action back to ancient Greece. She argues that according to Aristotle, humans are *zoon politikon* (political animals) and *zoon*

logon ekhon (living beings capable of speech). These two terms are the fundamental understanding of what a human is and what he does in the *polis*, the city-state. Humans are political animals living in the polis and talk to each other (speech). The *Polis* is where people come and talk together equally for the common good (Arendt, *The human condition* (2nd ed.), 2018). In the *polis*, everyone plays his role as a person in the political realm through his speech and actions. Therefore, political action is the transaction of words (the speech) by finding the right words at the right moment (action).

Political action, as defined by Hannah Arendt, is realized in a modern democratic society. This can be seen in the idea of the public sphere and political deliberation (also discursive democracy defined by Dryzek (2002)), where discussion, decision making, and participation of equal citizens in society are central (Rousseau, 2004).

Participation is one among other core principles of current democracy: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, deliberative, and egalitarian (Michael Coppedge, 2020). Yet, this section focuses more on participation since this concept is relevant to SMPs. Endorsing social and political agendas on social media can be considered part of political participation.

Reflecting on the definition of political action in Athenian and modern democracy, I can define political action *as equal participation of different individuals in society which is expressed in discussing and making decisions regarding how to organize personal and communal life in order to achieve a common good*. From the definition of political actions, I can draw the definition of political actors *as equal individuals who are involved in political action, in which they talk and act for a communal concern to achieve a common good*. This definition is crucial for later examination of whether SMPs are political actors. Yet, it does not finish here, as SMPs have the power to influence people. The term “power” is closely related to authority. Therefore, it is necessary to present the notion of authority, particularly political authority, to see whether SMPs have political authority.

The SMPs have power over others, manifesting in their ability to affect public opinion. Power can be understood as the probability an agent in a social relationship carries out his own will, regardless of any resistance (Weber, 1978). One source and form of power is authority (Haugaard, 2017). Haugaard (2017), following Weber (1979), defined authority as *“the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group*

of persons.” This definition underlines that authority is a command someone gives to others within a scope of authority, resulting in the obedience of those who receive the command.

Derived from this definition, regardless of the distinction of many forms of political authority⁸, I would like to draw the definition of political authority in a more general sense. Political authority can be defined as a command that someone imposes duties on individuals and compels them to act in certain ways to maintain public order and governance (Christiano T. , 2024). To say that someone has political authority means that she has the ability to impose duties on people to maintain public order, and people are entitled to obey. This definition highlights some essential points, such as the ability to impose duties, for the sake of maintaining public order, and obedience of the people, which are relevant to the political authority SMPs have in the latter discussion.

2.3 Legitimacy of Political Authority

The definition of political authority underlines that it is a command someone gives to other people to be obeyed. Yet, how can someone have the right to impose on others, and others are entitled to obey?⁹ This relates to the legitimacy of political authority. The definition of political legitimacy is complex, with people formulating it differently in different places and times (Beetham, 1991). This complexity draws in part from the fact that it is used across diverse disciplines and professions, such as legal experts, moral and political philosophers, social scientists, etc (Beetham, 1991).

Acknowledging different concepts of legitimacy, I will borrow the definition of legitimacy from political philosophy since this aligns with the thesis. According to Beetham (1991), legitimacy in political philosophy is the justification for political power and the creation of authority. When political actors claim legitimacy in holding authority or having power over others, their claims seek to justify them as legitimate power holders. Legitimacy, on this view, is, thus, concerned with the interweaving of power, authority, and justification.

⁸ There are some different concepts of authority, such as descriptive, normative, theoretical and practical authority (Christiano T. , 2024).

⁹ This question reveals the distinction between *de facto*/effective and legitimate political authority. All types of political authority are *de facto*/effective, including legitimate ones. Yet, the concept of the legitimacy of political authority focuses more on the justification of such political authority (Christiano T. , 2024).

The concept of legitimacy in philosophy is more inclined to the justification of the established and exercised law and power (Beetham, 1991). Legitimacy is concerned with how the law is based on moral and political philosophy, such as who the individuals are, how their consent is attained from the individuals, and the moral and political obligation toward the authority and the law the individuals have consented to (Beetham, 1991).

As the legitimacy of political authority implies the justification of having power over others, the legitimacy of power here encompasses three factors: its compliance with the established rule or rules, the justifiability of the established rule shared by both the power holder and the subordinate, and the evidence of consent by the subordinate (Beetham, 1991). In other words, to say someone has legitimate political authority means she follows the rules for obtaining power and exercising it according to justified rules. This authority must also be justified through the evidence of the consent that they are in the position and have power over others. This elaboration will be beneficial for the later discussion of the legitimacy of the political authority of SMPs.

After providing a brief definition of political legitimacy, I will trace the idea of legitimate authority in the Western world, starting in Ancient Greece.

2.3.1 Ancient Greece

Political philosophy in the Western world largely started with Greek Moral and Political Philosophy in 5-4 BC, after the pre-Socratic naturalists (7-5 BC) (Coleman, 2000). We can find different political systems in ancient Greece, such as democracy, tyranny, and oligarchy (Arendt, *Between Past and Future Six Exercises in Political Thought*, 1961; Coleman, 2000). Here, I will focus on the democratic society in Athena around 7-4 centuries BC to see how one of the earliest democracies perceived (legitimate) authority. Therefore, I will only take the Athenian democracy and some famous (political) philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, whose ideas are still relevant, to represent the legitimate authority of this era.

2.3.1.1 Athenian Democracy

In Athenian democratic society, all citizens¹⁰ directly participate in the decision-making process regarding communal issues by attending the public debate and raising their hands for the decision they favor (Coleman, 2000). This means that participation and deliberation justify the political system. The outcome of the deliberation is determined by the majority voice (Coleman, 2000).

Although it upheld deliberative democracy, not all citizens could speak in the public sphere, as it required personal skills, such as sufficient knowledge regarding related topics and the ability to deliver the argument (public speaking) (Coleman, 2000). This implies that in such a deliberative democracy, reasoning, and public speaking skills were necessary to participate actively in the decision-making process and also to hold political authority.

When it comes to people who hold authority in such a democratic society, Athenian officers are elected by a lot (Coleman, 2000). This implies that all citizens, as long as they are eligible, have equal rights to hold authority. Eligible here refers to male citizens over thirty years of age, either rich or poor (Tamanaha, 2004). This underlines the role of law as justification for holding authority.

Apart from the lottery system, the procedure for someone to hold authority may also involve direct election from the Assembly. Particular officers, such as military officials, are elected by the Assembly (Coleman, 2000). Nevertheless, as the assembly is a public sphere where citizens attend and actively examine and decide who is eligible, this political procedure reflects a deliberative model of democracy in which the candidates are directly elected.

Therefore, in the Athenian Democracy, legitimate political authority results from equal participation, public reasons, and electoral procedure enacted based on established law. For someone to hold authority, she is required to have knowledge and public speaking skills. Apart from Athenian democracy, the idea of legitimate political authority can be found in Greek Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, whose ideas regarding legitimate authority still resonate with current democracy.

¹⁰ Citizens here are only selected people. Children, slaves, women, etc., were not considered citizens.

2.3.1.2 Plato (427-347BC)

Plato held that living harmoniously in society and having an education helps everyone sharpen and mold their self-potential. Education results in knowledge of oneself. Knowing himself is not only an intellectual activity but also an ethical practice that leads him to possess a good character and be a good man (Coleman, 2000). Thus, individuals and society should be grounded in reason and ethical characters (Plato, 2000, Book IV, 518c-518d)¹¹. This implies that reasoning and moral excellence are the basis of legitimate political authority. Society should be run with knowledge and wisdom (which entails justice).

To achieve this condition, the political authority must be held by someone knowledgeable and morally excellent. He argues that the ruler should master the three elements of the psyche (soul): reason, spirit, and appetite. Mastering reason leads to mastering socio-political knowledge; mastering spirit leads to managing passion and emotions and pursuing noble goals; mastering appetite leads to managing desires. The just rulers are the ones who are knowledgeable and, by that knowledge, guide the spirit and appetite to work together in harmony to pursue virtue and the common good (Coleman, 2000). This ability is found in the philosopher king, who possesses scientific knowledge and dialectical reasoning and justly runs the society in harmony (Hueglin, 2008). Therefore, the true ruler who holds political authority is the one who knows himself. A ruler must be someone who loves knowledge and wisdom (Plato, 2000, Book II, 276b-376c)¹², and philosophers are the most suitable figures (Plato, 2000, Book IV, 484b-487a)¹³.

2.3.1.3 Aristotle (384-322BC)

According to Aristotle, humans are political animals, underpinning their existence in the polis and their presence among other humans (Aristotle, 1999) and being political means organizing communal life to achieve the common good (Hueglin, 2008). This implies that first, political and ethical life become one as ethics provide a moral standard for living a good life in the city. Second, the political authority is justified based on practical wisdom (entails justice and equality), and for the common good.

¹¹ This is a translation from Tom Griffith (Plato, 2000).

¹² This is a translation from Tom Griffith (Plato, 2000)

¹³ This is a translation from Tom Griffith (Plato, 2000).

Practical wisdom here refers to deliberation in political practice as portrayed in the Athenian Democracy and the good life as political justice, translated into equality in ruling and being ruled (Hueglin, 2008). It seems that Aristotle put more emphasis on justice and reciprocity in collective life. Aristotle (1999) argues, *“Justice is the body of men in states, for the administration of justice, which is the determination of what is just, is the principle of order in political society.”* Living in the polis should be organized to reflect justice among citizens, meaning that the politics should be established under a just principle that everyone is free and equal.

Aristotle does not seem to favor particular individuals or factions for authority. He just hinted at the authority that fits his polity. He believed that everyone has the potential to hold authority as long as he is intelligent and wise and promotes the common good, and the candidate may follow the democratic system of acquiring and exercising power. In other words, anyone can hold political authority as long as she possesses practical wisdom (Aristotle, 1999).

After briefly elaborating on Ancient Greece, represented by Athenian Democracy and Plato’s and Aristotle’s notions of political authority, I will summarize what kind of legitimate political authority I have learned from Ancient Greece. Athenian Democracy suggests that a legitimate authority stems from equal participation, public reasons, and electoral procedures. To hold such an authority, someone must be eligible and follow the election procedure. Nevertheless, candidates must at least have reasoning and public speaking skills to be elected. Furthermore, Plato suggests that political authority is justified when it upholds reasoning and moral excellence. Plato seems to favor the philosopher king as the most suitable figure to hold legitimate political authority because philosophers have knowledge and wisdom. They know how to run society with justice. Aristotle argues that political authority is justified when it upholds practical wisdom (justice and equality) and for the common good. Unlike Plato, Aristotle argues that anyone can hold political authority as long as she knows practical wisdom to run society with justice and equality and achieve a common good. Overall, some important points I take from Ancient Greece regarding legitimate political authority are based on election procedure and reasoning/knowledge. Thus, someone with political authority is justified when she follows the electoral procedure and has knowledge. These characteristics will benefit the discussion of the legitimacy of SMPs later.

Now, I will move to more recent political philosophy. I admit I will exclude the political concept from Roman and Medieval philosophy as neither reflects a democratic polity. Roman Empire was mainly totalitarian, ruled by the emperor (Hueglin, 2008). Also, the Pope, Bishop, Emperor, or King ruled the Medieval (Hueglin, 2008). It is hard to see the equality, participation, and freedom which are fundamental to a democratic society. Therefore, I believe that the legitimate authority in ancient Greece sufficiently contributes to this writing as a foundation for understanding the legitimate authority in political philosophy and provides a solid foundation for understanding the political authority in modern political philosophy.

2.3.2 Modern Political Philosophy

This section is dedicated to modern political philosophy¹⁴, which inherits some relevant concepts from ancient Greece and lays fundamental political concepts for modern democratic society. These concepts and ideas are necessary to analyze the legitimacy of SMPs in our current era. In this section, I will only cover three pioneer and most popular philosophers who ground modern political philosophy: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

2.3.2.1 Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

As Individuals are always engaged in the conflict, “war of all against all,” Hobbes argues that it is helpful if individuals voluntarily establish a sovereign power, a ruler, that helps them secure and protect their natural rights (self-preservation) (Hobbes, 1994; Riley, 1982). As a result, individuals voluntarily “transfer” their rights to the ruler. Consequently, the individuals are obligated to obey the ruler. This situation of transferring rights to the ruler and, thus, the individuals being obliged to obey the rulers is called the social contract.

The social contract entails individuals transferring their natural rights to the given authority, what Hobbes called the Leviathan. This centralized government has power over its people, and the hope is that the authority will maintain peace and solve the social problems in the state of nature (Hobbes, 1994). Although Hobbes’ concept of authority here can lead to Authoritarian¹⁵ (Nagel, 1987), authority is acquired along with the power over individuals

¹⁴ The term “modern” here refers to the period after the Medieval, around the 16th-18th century, when political authority shifted from divine right (church) to human consent (social contract), from the rule of God and the king to the rule of the people (Näsström, 2007).

¹⁵ Hobbes advocates an absolute sovereign authority to prevent returning to the state of nature.

gained from transferring individual rights. On the one hand, for individuals who establish authority, the establishment process stems from consent and voluntary agreement, and thus, they are only obliged to obey the authority to whom their rights are transferred and to his command, which manifests in the law (Riley, 1982). On the other hand, the authority is obliged to provide security and protection. This elaboration underlines that political authority is rooted in the people's consent to rulers who hold legitimate authority.

Furthermore, the validity of the law is also rooted in consent. Law is the command or will of the legitimate sovereign, the command that comes out of the sovereign who already obtained the consent from the ruled, and it is only valid for both the ruler and the ruled (Riley, 1982). Legitimate political authority, thus, is based on consent and established law. Consequently, for someone to hold authority, she must attain consent and comply with the law.

2.3.2.2 John Locke (1632-1704)

Locke sees that the state of nature is uncertain and constantly exposed to the invasion of others (Locke, 1980). This situation threatens the enjoyment of property, freedom, and equity. To escape this situation, one decides to join the formed society (the commonwealth), and under the government, his property is preserved (Locke, 1980). This is how the social contract is established.

The social contract is established based on consent. There are two types of consent here: explicit and tacit (Locke, 1980). Explicit consent refers to the individuals' expression of agreement on society's establishment, along with its government and laws. This can be found in the individual's participation in the decision-making process. In contrast, tacit consent regards the individuals who live under certain territories and jurisdictions and enjoy the protection and services being considered to have consented. Yet, legitimate authority is achieved through explicit consent, where explicit individual expressions guarantee their full membership in society (Tuckness, 2024).

The social contract aims to secure the state of nature by establishing an authority that will protect it (rights, freedom, and equality). Thus, the presence of authority is legitimate because it derives from the consent of individuals and is bound by the rule of the law (Locke,

1980). This elaboration also implies that for someone to hold authority, she must attain consent and comply with the law.

2.3.2.3 Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

Rousseau argues that people lived peacefully in the state of nature. Everyone was free and equal, with no domination and self-dependent. People live independently, not in an organized society, and focus on fulfilling basic needs like food and shelter (Rousseau, 2004). However, this state of nature has been disrupted since civilization, marked by agricultural advances. People were engaged in the claiming of private property, domination, and slavery, which led to inequality. The establishment of society is for the sake of protection from external threats and internal discord (Rousseau, 2004). The clashing of particular interests triggers the agreement to establish a society that upholds the common good/common interest based on the general will (Rousseau, 2004). This agreement, where society is established, is realized in a social contract.

In Rousseau's work, the 'general will' is different from the will of all because it is impossible for everyone to will the same thing. Yet, this difference will come into play when people agree on the shared will (Rousseau, 2004). The general will is always good because it reflects the shared will and the collective interests that aim for the common good. General will is the basis of society, communal lives, and laws.

According to Rousseau, authority is legitimate because it is based on and upholds general will acquired through citizens' consent¹⁶ (Bentham, 2000). For someone to hold authority means she must attain consent and comply with the established law, which reflects the general will.

I will briefly summarize legitimate authority according to Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. According to Hobbes, legitimate political authority is a sovereign authority (authoritarian) that rules society. Such power is acquired through consent and the established law. Locke believes that legitimate authority is the authority that has the consent of the ruled to protect natural rights (freedom, equality, property). The political maneuvers of the authority are tied to the established law. Lastly, Rousseau suggests that legitimate authority

¹⁶ The consent here is ongoing consent that enables individuals to consent to the authority continuously (Rousseau, 2004).

reflects the general will to achieve a common good. It is attained through the ongoing consent of every individual in the social contract. These three philosophers generally underline that for someone to hold authority, she must attain consent and follow the law regarding acquiring and ruling society. Consent and established law are relevant to the later discussion of the legitimacy of SMPs.

2.3.3 Political Legitimacy in Current Models of Democracy

I have presented the political legitimacy in ancient Greece and modern political philosophy. As this work aims to establish legitimate authority in a democratic political society, this section explores the relationship between legitimacy and democracy. Therefore, to investigate such a relationship, I will provide three possible approaches to view how democracy may claim its legitimacy, and then I will draw the legitimate political authority in a democratic society. There are three approaches to viewing the legitimacy of democracy: instrumentalism, proceduralism, and a mix between the two.

2.3.3.1 Instrumentalism

According to instrumentalism, democracy is legitimate if it leads to better outcomes, though to some extent, it undermines the decision-making process (Christiano, 2004). Due to its focus on the best outcome, the decision-making process should incorporate more knowledgeable participants, which is believed to result in a good or just outcome (Peter, 2023).

As the outcome results from the majority of the correct people¹⁷ through a democratic process, democracy is more likely to be legitimate (Estlund, 2003). This also resembles Plato's idea of the polis, where the decision-making must be at the hands of the intelligent so that the outcome is based on reasoning (Plato, 2000).

The favor of rationalism underlies the legitimacy of political authority. As a result, for someone to hold authority, she must have knowledge and political decisions.

¹⁷ Correct people refer to people who have knowledge of politics and political decision-making. Because they have knowledge, they are more likely to be correct in their political decision

2.3.3.2 Proceduralism

Unlike instrumentalism, proceduralism emphasizes the legitimacy of a fair democratic process. Legitimacy is attained if a decision-making process is democratically fair, though, to some extent, its outcome may not be appealed (Peter, 2023). In other words, regardless of how good or bad the result of the discussion deliberation is, as long as it is attained through a democratic deliberation procedure, those processes, along with their results, are legitimate.

As opposed to the instrumentalists, the proceduralists believe that legitimate democracy upholds the equality of the participants and fairness in the decision-making process. This reflects the participation of all in decision-making since no one can represent the will of others (Rousseau, 2004). This can be found in democratic-republican and aggregative democracy. For Republicans, democracy is legitimate if it involves equal and free people in policymaking without any representation (Habermas J. , 1994). Also, for aggregative democracy, legitimate decisions depend on the fair aggregation decision-making process (Peter, 2023). This elaboration underlines that legitimate political authority stems from a democratic process. As a result, for someone to hold authority, she must comply with the democratic process of acquiring political authority.

2.3.3.3 Mixed Instrumentalism-Proceduralism

The former two approaches, which aim to ground democracy's legitimacy and authority, face some challenges. The instrumentalist undermines the political process, whereas the proceduralist neglects the quality of the decision. Thus, political scientists and philosophers try to conflate both approaches, which results in mixed instrumentalism-proceduralism.

The example of the mixed instrumentalist-proceduralist is rational proceduralism. This approach emphasizes democratic decision-making procedures go through a discursive structure of opinion to attain the quality of the outcome. Two elements can be found here: rational decision-making, which guarantees the quality of the outcome that favors the instrumentalist, and a democratic procedure through deliberative opinion and will-formation that favors the proceduralists.

This process can be found in deliberative democratic decision-making, where public participation in the public sphere is central to the legitimate decision-making process. This public sphere also enables people to discuss and force the best argument to win (Habermas

J. , 1979; Habermas J. , 1994). By upholding deliberative democracy, the legitimacy of democracy lies in participation and rationality.

Since deliberative democracy upholds participation in political practice, every citizen can become a candidate to hold the authority as long as he/she is eligible. The legitimate authorities here are elected by the majority participation through an election mechanism based on the established laws.

Common across all three approaches, someone who holds legitimate political authority should have knowledge about politics and, as such, know how to run society justly and equally.

2.3.4 Legitimate Political Authority

Overall, I will summarize the conditions for someone to hold legitimate political authority on the views covered so far. The first condition is knowledge. In Athenian Democratic Society (section 2.3.1.1), for someone to hold authority, she must have reasoning and public speaking skills. Plato (section 2.3.1.2) adds one more condition, that is wisdom. A legitimate authority is someone who has knowledge and wisdom. Aristotle (section 2.3.1.3) also emphasizes that someone must have **knowledge** of practical wisdom. Such epistemic capability also upsurged in the instrumentalists and mixed instrumentalists-proceduralists (sections 2.3.3.1 & 2.3.3.3), which emphasize the significance of rationality in decision-making. Not only should someone be knowledgeable, but all the relevant decision-makers are required to have political knowledge.

The second condition is **consent**. To hold authority, someone must attain consent. This can be found in Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (sections 2.3.2.1-2.3.2.3). In a democratic society, the election is one of the forms by which citizens consent to choose the authority.

The third condition is **law**. In Athenian Democratic society, the law examines a candidate's eligibility (section 2.2.1.1). Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (sections 2.3.2.1-2.3.2.3) also underline the legitimacy of the authority under established law. In a democratic society, the eligibility of candidates, elections, and procedures are examined under the established law.

I now have three legitimate authority conditions: knowledge, consent, and law. I will take knowledge as a precondition for anyone to step up and hold authority since the

epistemic capacity of the candidate can be seen in all political philosophy theories, starting from Ancient Greece to Modern Political Philosophy and Modern Democracy. So, I have two distinct conditions defining legitimate authority in the current democratic society: consent and law.

These conditions resonate with the legitimacy definition in political philosophy addressed in earlier section 2.3. The legitimacy of authority encompasses three factors: its compliance with the established rule or rules (law), the justifiability of the established rule shared by both the power holder and the subordinate, and the evidence of consent by the subordinate (Beetham, 1991). The first factor underlines that to hold legitimate authority, someone must comply with the rules (laws). This perfectly fits with the third condition: law. The second factor underlines that such a law must be achieved through the agreement of the ruler and the ruled. This partly shows that legitimate authority is attained through both law and consent of both sides. Someone can hold legitimate authority if she shares the same rule with people. The third factor underlines that a legitimate authority is proven through the evidence of consent. This perfectly fits with the second condition: consent, where consent is required to become an authority. From this elaboration, I may conclude that *for someone to hold legitimate political authority, she must comply with the established law regarding how to acquire and mobilize political power, and she must have the consent of those to whom it serves.*

2.4 The Legitimacy of SMPs

After grounding theoretical explanations about political action, political authority, and political legitimacy, I will now move on to attributing those grounds to SMPs. I will start by analyzing SMPs' acts as political actions, including the fact that SMPs have political authority and legitimacy.

2.4.1 Political Action of SMPs

In section 2.2, I highlighted political action as participation in discussing and making decisions. This poses the question—how can we understand that what SMPs do (act) on social media is considered political action, considering that political action occurs in real life, not in a virtual world?

The concept of digital citizenship asserts that online activity on social media, such as posting, commenting, and sharing posts, is also considered political action. Online participation employing digital tools for online campaigns and community-building is part of political participation. (Arne Hintz, 2019). This definition underlines that digital acts on social media, where people endorse social and political agendas, are considered political actions. Consequently, social and political acts frequently mediated by social media and participation in the virtual world are also part of democratic participation¹⁸.

SMPs are real humans (just like those who attend public discourse in the public sphere), but the medium shifts from discussion in the room or office to a virtual forum. The impact is similar as the boundary between the offline and online worlds has become more transparent (Tapscott, 2009). This can be seen in the way that public discourse in virtual forums may influence the electability or political campaign; for instance, political parties use social media to communicate and mobilize their political campaigns (Calderaro, 2014), or regional and global social movements possible due to the use of technology and social media (Romero, 2014; Rosa, 2014) or YouTuber Rezo who influence the young German political opinion through his YouTube Video (Desirée Schmuck, 2022).

2.4.2 SMPs and Political Authority

Understanding that SMPs perform political actions in the virtual world will help me define them as political actors. This understanding will later help explain why SMPs have political authority.

In the analysis of political actors in section 2.2, I scrutinized the presence of political actors in the democratic system. This idea can be traced back to ancient Greece, where citizens formed the polis, and those citizens freely and equally came together to discuss collective concerns for the common good (Arendt, *The human condition* (2nd ed.), 2018). The definition of political actors here is those who are free and equal to express themselves through speech and acts for the common good in the community.

In modern society, the idea of participation and deliberation is brought back to the stage (Dryzek, 2002). Deliberative democracy emphasizes the participation of all people in the

¹⁸ Social media also has become a new venue for people to engage more actively in communicative political action and beyond the national boundary (Elena Ziliotti, 2023).

public sphere, for instance, to discuss or debate what is necessary for the common good (Habermas J. , 1979; Habermas J. , 1994). Thus, political actors are those who participate in a democratic political society to discuss and generate the best arguments for collective interests.

With the internet and social media, political actions, such as speech and participation, are brought to the virtual world (Helena Knupfer, 2023; Arne Hintz, 2019). As a result, those who discuss and bring social and political concerns to the virtual world can be categorized as political actors. SMPs are those who are concerned about social and political issues and bring them up on social media through posting, commenting, and replying to the audiences/followers/citizens. Hence, SMPs are political actors.

Considering SMPs as political actors will help set the ground for SMPs who have political authority. In Chapter 1, I defined SMPs as social media content creators who endorse social and political agendas to influence public opinion. This definition underlines one important element that is vital to authority, that is, the power to influence. Their power comes from their perceived capabilities. As SMPs are perceived to be authentic, knowledgeable, attractive, trustworthy, and credible, the audiences/followers/citizens follow and support them. Such a tendency to follow and support resonates with the idea of authority. Authority is the power to give command, make decisions, and enforce obedience (Arendt, *Between Past and Future Six Exercises in Political Thought*, 1961; Haugaard, 2017).

Reflecting on this definition, SMPs have political authority because, by definition, they have the power to mobilize their social and political agenda. This implies that they give commands through endorsement, make decisions about their political movement, and “enforce” obedience through persuasion in their content. The audiences/followers/citizens follow them because they have perceived characteristics. However, is their political authority justified?

2.4.3 SMPs: Legitimate Political Authority?

The legitimacy of political authority must comply with three factors: established rules, justifiability of the established rule, and the evidence of consent (Beetham, 1991). By confronting these three factors with four types of SMPs: politicians who use social media to promote themselves, SMPs who act as opinion leaders, influencers who become politicians,

or journalists who act as SMPs (Martin J. Riedl, 2023), I found that two groups of authority are considered legitimate and effective.

The legitimate SMPs are politicians who use social media and influencers who become politicians. Given the definitions above, these SMPs are categorized as legitimate authorities as they are politicians who have followed the rules to acquire the authority that complies with the law. A politician in a democratic country should obey constitutional law, which is also justified by the values and beliefs of that country, and gain consent by voting in the election. For instance, for someone to run for the presidency in the U.S., he must be “*a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution...*” (Article II, Section 1, Clause 5 of the U.S. Constitution)¹⁹. This constitution underlines one of the qualifications for someone to run for the presidency. The law states that for someone to be a legitimate president, she must be a natural born Citizen or a Citizen of the United States at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution. Only those who are eligible can run for the candidate. Through the election, where the candidate obtains consent, someone can become a legitimate authority. As politicians comply with the three factors of legitimacy, they hold legitimate political authority.

In Martin J. Riedl’s typology of SMPs, he underlines two types of SMPs that are politicians: politicians who use social media to promote themselves and influencers who become politicians. As politicians, they have met the criteria of holding legitimate political authority, and so they can be considered legitimate SMPs. This elaboration underlines how SMPs acquire power to hold political authority.

Furthermore, to mobilize their power, they are subject to the legal law as politicians, and if they transgress the law, they can be overthrown or impeached from their political positions and status (Coleman, 2000). Consequently, if their power exercised through social media transgresses the law, SMPs can be impeached or overthrown from their political status. For instance, Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s former president, was considered to have disseminated fraudulent information regarding COVID-19 on social media broadcasts in October 2021. He was reported by a senior federal police investigator to the Supreme Court and suggested to be charged with the crime of incitement, which could send the alleged

¹⁹ Retrieved from <https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/article-2/section-1/clause-5/#:~:text=No%20Person%20except%20a%20natural,been%20fourteen%20Years%20a%20Resident>

criminal to prison for six months (Phillips, 2022). If proven, the president can be impeached from his political status, as by 23 July 2021, there have been 129 impeachment requests against the president (Ferraz, 2021)²⁰. This case, however, is still under investigation, and Jair Bolsonaro has already stepped down from his presidency after losing the election. Even though the former president did not lose his political status during his term due to such fraudulent information, my point is that such action is susceptible to impeachment.



Figure 4. Jair Bolsonaro on his social media channel (Julie Ricard, 2020)

As political authority is justified, legitimate political authority entails obligating citizens to obey it (Christiano T. , 2024). This can be seen in the social contract, where consent is attained. As seen in modern political philosophy (section 2.3.2), citizens are obliged to obey the ruler due to consent. This point also underlines the difference between legitimate authority and effective authority.

Besides legitimate SMPs, there are two illegitimate SMPs: influencers who act as opinion leaders and journalists who act as SMPs. They are called illegitimate as they do not comply with three legitimacy elements. They are just ordinary citizens or celebrities who

²⁰ Also, the president was allegedly violating Article 132 of the Penal Code regarding exposure of another person's life and health to risk, Article 268 of the Penal Code regarding breach of a preventive sanitary measure, Article 78 of the Constitution regarding a political-administrative offense, and article 286 regarding incitation to crime (Ferraz, 2021).

endorse their social and political agenda. They do not acquire power from the law or go through an election. Instead, they voluntarily claim authority to influence. These typical SMPs are considered to have effective authority²¹.

Effective authority refers to authority that influences people to act according to the reasons it proposes (Peter, 2023; Martin, 2024). It amounts to the capacity of a person to maintain public order (Christiano, 2024). These non-politician SMPs have this authority and acquire power as they comply with normative reasons (Peter, 2023). This can be seen in how SMPs organize social and political campaigns/movements that reflect collective concerns (Romero, 2014). Although they will not lose any political position or status, if they deliver hate speech on social media; they are considered to be transgressing the law. As their power comes from their perceived characteristics, delivering hate speech may diminish their social status as influencers. Elle Darby, a lifestyle and fitness influencer, has delivered her apology for her old racist tweet to certain minor groups. Though she was not reported to the police for such an act, some followers expressed disappointment and anger toward her, hoping she could have respected people more (Shovelin, 2022) this shows that when non-politician influencers make a mistake, they lose some respect as the fans are disappointed, meaning that they become less authentic and credible.

Furthermore, unlike legitimate authority, effective authority may impose duties on citizens, but the citizens do not owe any obedience to the authority (Christiano, 2024). In other words, citizens are not obliged to listen to non-politician SMPs. Yet, citizens may voluntarily listen to them since they can raise issues regarding social and political causes.

I will sum up what I have learned in this chapter. The concept of political action, where people participate in discussing and making a decision in a deliberative democratic society, supplemented by the digital citizenship concept, where online participation is also considered political participation, has helped me understand what SMPs do (endorsing social and political agendas) on social media as part of political action. Consequently, SMPs who perform political actions online are also considered political actors. However, as SMPs have the power to influence others, they can be seen to have political authority as political authority. SMPs can give commands through endorsement, make decisions about their

²¹ All types of authority are effective, including legitimate authority (Peter, 2023). Yet, due to this academic pursuit of the political legitimacy of SMPs, I distinguish between effective and legitimate authority.

political movement, and “enforce” obedience by persuading people through their content. Yet, do they hold legitimate political authority?

For someone to hold legitimate authority, she must have knowledge, as underlined in Ancient Greece, represented by Ancient democratic society, Plato, and Aristotle. The current model of democracy also favors epistemic capacity. Second, for someone to hold legitimate authority, she must gain consent. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau emphasize consent as a condition for holding legitimate authority. Lastly, law is compulsory for someone to hold legitimate authority. This can be traced back to ancient democratic society, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and the modern model of democracy. By taking epistemic capacity as a precondition, consent and law are two distinct conditions to hold legitimate authority. Legitimate authority can impose duties on citizens as they gain consent and comply with the law. Yet, effective authority can do so due to their perceived characteristics.

Furthermore, confronting these two conditions with four types of SMPs, I found two groups of SMPs: legitimate authority and effective authority. Legitimate authority is held by politicians who use social media and influencers who become politicians, while effective authority is by influencers who act as opinion leaders and journalists who act as SMPs. Both authorities may impose duties (mobilize power) on citizens by endorsing social and political agendas. Yet, legitimate authority entails an obligation, while effective authority does not.

Authority	Acquiring	Mobilizing	Implication
Effective	Perceived characteristics	Endorsing social and political agendas	No moral/ political obligation, but can be considered
Legitimate	Consent, Law	Endorsing social and political agendas	Moral and political obligation to obey

Figure 5. The distinction between effective and legitimate political authority

We already see that SMPs have the authority to mobilize their power and influence people. Yet, we cannot deny that some SMPs, such as Jair Bolsonaro, can abuse this power by disseminating fraudulent information on social media. Realizing this possibility, I think it is

appropriate to attribute some moral responsibility to SMPs so that they may influence responsibly. This concern will become the main topic in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL INFLUENCERS

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I distinguished the difference between legitimate and effective authority. Effective authority comprises all types of authority that effectively influence society, including legitimate authority. However, not all effective authority is legitimate since legitimacy refers to who has the right to rule based on how they acquire the authority (Bentham, 2000). Reflecting on the legitimacy of SMPs, I found two groups of SMPs: non-politician SMPs (effective authority) and politician-SMPs (legitimate authority).

The presence of these two groups in the political arena requires a different approach. When legitimate authorities fail to function, they can be voted out or removed from office; there is some political process that negates their political status as rulers. Non-politician SMPs, however, are not impeached or stripped of their political authority to influence people. This is due to how they acquire their power through perceived characteristics.

Reflecting on this situation, I think, first, it would be appropriate to attribute some responsibility to non-politician SMPs, considering that less established law or social norms regulate their presence as political authority in society. Second, as legitimate SMPs are subject to the established law and thus held responsible for their actions, non-politician SMPs should be attributed to certain responsibilities that guide them in influencing people. Yet, how should non-politician SMPs be held responsible?

Reflecting on the influencing power of SMPs, particularly non-politician ones, this chapter aims to ground and attribute moral responsibility to them. Attributing moral responsibility to SMPs is intentional, considering that responsibility is broad and complex, and thus, it is impossible to cover all responsibility concepts in this chapter. Second, I admit that attributing responsibility to SMPs can be done through social and legal approaches. However, considering this work is an ethical analysis, the concept of morality perfectly aligns with this academic endeavor. In other words, this chapter is dedicated to answering the question: ***“How do we attribute moral responsibility to SMPs?”***

Therefore, in this chapter, I will define moral responsibility in section 3.2.1, where I address the definition, the ethical theories for assessing moral actions, and the meaning of

being responsible and being held responsible. After understanding and building upon the theoretical grounds of moral responsibility, I will dedicate section 3.3 to the attribution of moral responsibility to SMPs.

3.2 Moral Responsibility

As moral responsibility becomes the main framework for attributing the responsibility of SMPs, I will first define it. I will then present ethical theories for assessing moral action and clarify what it means to “be responsible” and “hold someone responsible.” Lastly, I will provide five types of moral responsibilities.

3.2.1 Definition of Moral Responsibility

Responsibility is a common aspect of our daily lives, including in social media. For example, consider the case of Ella Darby as I mentioned in chapter 2, when she tweeted a hate speech to a certain minor group. People and her followers were disappointed and hoped she could have respected people more (Shovelin, 2022) Or consider Jair Bolsonaro, who spread fraudulent information regarding COVID-19 on social media podcasts. Some people blamed him for his actions (Phillips, 2022; Ferraz, 2021). Such disappointment and blame are negative reactive attitudes that stem from the idea that the SMPs should have assumed some moral responsibility.

There are many concepts of responsibility in the literature, such as responsibility, social responsibility, corporate responsibility, virtue responsibility, etc. (Gunnar Björnsson, 2017; Poel, 2015; Zimmerman, 1997; Vincent, 2011). However, my focus is on moral responsibility. Moral responsibility refers to a responsibility that is morally assessed in terms of blameworthiness or praiseworthiness (Zimmerman, 1997; King, 2012). Van de Poel (2015) defines moral responsibility as “*responsibility that is grounded in moral considerations, rather than legal or organisational considerations and rules.*” A moral responsibility aims to see whether a moral agent is praised or blamed.

However, this definition alone does not capture all the meanings of moral responsibility, as responsibility may take different forms and have slightly different meanings from one form to another (Vincent, 2011; Poel, 2015). Thus, the definition of moral responsibility should be based on which type of moral responsibility. Therefore, addressing

the different types of moral responsibility will shed light on the different meanings of moral responsibility, which will be addressed in section 3.2.4.

3.2.2 Ethical Theories for Moral Responsibility

Before discussing the types of responsibility, I will first present the ethical assessment of what action is morally good and bad, which is based on three theoretical approaches: Consequentialism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics.

Consequentialism is part of the ethical approach to evaluating a human action based on the consequence of an action. A morally right action depends on the consequence of such an action or something related to it (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2023). This means that an action is good or bad depending on the consequence of the action. One of the most popular forms of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which emphasizes the right action is to augment total happiness. Jeremy Bentham, one of the most popular utilitarian theorists, suggests the utility principle, which aims to approve or disapprove any action based on whether such action augments or diminishes happiness (Bentham, 2000). As utilitarianism focuses on happiness as an outcome, a morally right action aims to augment happiness (Goodin, 1995).

The deontological approach underlines that a morally right action is determined by the right choice someone makes that reflects the conformity of moral norms (Moore, 2021). This means that an action is right because it complies with the moral norm. Emanuel Kant, one of the most prominent deontologists, argues that a good action is determined by a moral duty. A moral duty always suggests doing what is right and can be universalized. Moral duty is based on the categorical imperative, which underlines that *“you act only according to the maxim that you would want to become a universal law (AK 4: 420-1)”* (Kant, 1997). Moral duty suggests that someone’s action is right because her maxim²² conforms with the universal law²³. This implies that some actions are inherently good and bad regardless of their consequences.

Virtue ethics emphasizes moral character, whether someone is virtuous. Acting virtuously means acting based on justice, veracity, fidelity, respectfulness, and beneficence

²² Maxim is a subjective principle that guides someone’s action (AK 4: 399) (Kant, 1997).

²³ Universal law is a principle that can be constantly willed and applied to all rational beings (AK 4: 421) (Kant, 1997).

(Audi, 2009). To act justly means considering the retribution of goods and evils. To own veracity means to act based on knowledge of proportionally weighing what is appropriate. To act with fidelity means showing a promise or commitment to family, friends, or community. Respectfulness means acting virtuously and respectfully to persons. Beneficence means to act by considering and weighing other people's well-being (Audi, 2009)

Among these elements, I am more intrigued with beneficence, which considers others' well-being. This resonates with virtue ethics in responsibility, which is to care about others by taking care of our actions (Fahlquist, 2015). To act virtuously in relation to responsibility entails assuming responsibility to care about others. This implies that the actions someone performs should consider caring about others. Section 3.3.5 will elaborate more on the relationship between virtue ethics, care, and responsibility.

After grounding these three ethical approaches to assess someone's act, I realize each has its drawbacks. Consequentialism overemphasizes the outcome and overlooks the right action; deontology, in contrast, has been criticized for emphasizing the right action and overlooking the consequences (Moore, 2021); virtue ethics neglects the context-dependent of virtuous acts (MacIntyre, 1985). Realizing each has drawbacks, relying on one ethical approach will be biased and partial. Therefore, I will take the pluralist position to assess someone's action ethically.

The pluralist theory of moral responsibility is a theory that finds various reasons to hold someone responsible (Poel, 2015). This means that comprehensive factors should be taken into account when assessing someone's action, such as her moral capacity, intention, freedom, causality, and wrongdoing. For instance, consequentialism in moral responsibility focuses on the desirability of a particular state of affairs (the outcome) and advises the moral agent on what to do in a given situation. However, since consequentialism only emphasizes the particular desirability of a state of affairs without pointing out who is responsible for ensuring such a state of affairs occurs, consequentialism should be supplemented by pluralist theories to attribute responsibility to a moral agent (Poel, 2015). Therefore, I will assess moral action based on a single or combined ethical approach.

Now, we have the ethical theories to assess someone's action, and thus, we can hold her responsible. Yet, what does it mean to hold someone responsible?

3.2.3 Being Responsible and Being Held Responsible

To say that someone is responsible aims to address the outcome of an event, which comes from her action. Yet, to hold someone responsible goes beyond this description. It touches upon the moral evaluation of such actions, that is, whether due to such an outcome of an event, she gets praised or blamed for having performed her actions (Smith, 2005).

Someone is responsible for her acts because she has power and capacity (Talbert, 2023). Power and capacities here refer to at least epistemic capacity and volition/free will that grounds someone as a moral agent (Mihaela Constantinescu, 2022; Loh, 2017). Cognitive and mental capacities and free will are necessary for someone to be considered a moral agent (Zimmerman, 1997). This, in turn, leads to the moral judgment of whether someone is morally responsible for her actions.

Thus, someone is responsible for having done something can be formulated as

A is responsible for φ

A refers to a moral agent, and ϕ refers to the action/situation/outcome/task/realm of authority. 'A is responsible for ϕ ' can be understood as a moral agent is responsible for the action she has performed (Poel, 2015).

In contrast, holding someone responsible (someone is held responsible) for her acts means morally attributing or judging someone. The outcome of such judgment is whether someone is morally praised or blamed (Talbert, 2023). To hold someone responsible means to attribute someone responsibility (Smith, 2005). In other words, holding a moral agent responsible means that a person or a group is held to a demand, expectation, or requirement by another person or group. Holding responsible involves two people and a demand, and this is called the triadic relational concept because it involves three elements in the concept of responsibility (Smith, 2005; Poel, 2015). This implies that she owes some responsibility to another agent (Poel, 2015), which can be formulated as

A is responsible for φ to J

A refers to a moral agent, and ϕ refers to the action/situation/outcome/task/realm of authority, and J refers to mostly another agent²⁴ to whom A is accountable. This is where

²⁴ Van de Poel (2015) also noted that J is another agent to whom A has particular relationship with (such as employee – employer relationship). Yet, can be A or J is humanity in case of morality.

the phrase “holding someone responsible (being held responsible)” is clearly seen. The J, as another agent, is in a position to hold A responsible for having done something.

Departing from the attribution of responsibility to someone, Van de Poel (2015) tested such a formula in the forward-looking responsibility and backward-looking responsibility. The forward-looking responsibility is followed.

A is forward-looking responsible for φ to J means that A owes it to J to see to it that φ

A refers to a moral agent, φ refers to the action/situation/outcome/task/realm of authority, and J refers to another agent to whom A owes, so A has forward responsibility to see to φ . When A is held forward responsible, A owes responsibility to J to ensure that φ occurs. This typical formula is also applied to the backward-looking responsibility as follows:

A is backward-looking responsible for φ to J means that it is appropriate for J to hold A responsible for φ

A refers to a moral agent, φ refers to the action/situation/outcome/task/realm of authority, and j refers to another agent to whom A has a specific relationship, and thus A has backward responsibility to see to φ . This means that someone is held backward responsible (blameworthy, for instance) because she has a relationship with another agent to whom she is accountable. Such responsibility implies that J fairly/fittingly/reasonably holds A responsible for φ ²⁵.

I have argued that when A is backward-looking responsible to another agent J for what she has done, this means that it is appropriate for J to hold A responsible. Also, when A is forward-looking responsible for something that occurs to another agent (J), this means that A owes J, ensuring that something occurs. This concept is important for elaborating on attributing moral responsibility to SMPs in section 3.3.

3.2.4 Types of Moral Responsibility

I already mentioned in section 3.2.1 that responsibility has many forms. We recognize legal responsibility, social responsibility, corporate responsibility, moral responsibility, capacity/competency responsibility, virtue responsibility, and so on (Gunnar Björnsson, 2017;

²⁵ Smith (2005) argues that only authority can legitimately hold someone responsible. This aligns with what van de Poel (2015) argues, that only a reasonably/fairly/fittingly person can hold someone responsible.

Poel, 2015; Zimmerman, 1997; Vincent, 2011). Considering different scholars may name and categorize responsibility differently, I will mostly utilize the concept of responsibility from van de Poel (2015), particularly the moral/normative responsibility, as it aligns with the objective of this writing in the scope of moral responsibility of SMPs. Also, I favor van de Poel's (2015) concept of moral responsibility because he already sorts, specifies, and organizes the typology of responsibility in ethics, which is easy to follow. Van de Poel (2015) divides moral responsibility into five types: blameworthiness, accountability, liability, obligation, and virtue.

3.2.4.1 Responsibility as Blameworthiness

Responsibility as Blameworthiness is part of backward-looking responsibility, which refers to evaluating past actions (Sand, 2018). This responsibility aims to see whether someone can be blamed or praised for their past actions. Most of the time, the negative form of judgment is to blame (Poel, 2015). Blame is a negative reactive attitude consisting of indignation, resentment, and guilt (Carlsson, 2017).

Someone can also be praised when they have done the right thing. The moral judgment attributed to someone who has done good things in moral responsibility is called being praiseworthy. Yet, praiseworthy as part of this responsibility has become less prominent. When people make a moral judgment about particular acts, they are more inclined to see whether someone is morally blamed rather than praised since moral judgment partly aims to see a liability to sanction (Poel, 2015; Wallace, 1994)²⁶. Regardless of a positive or negative judgment, once again, someone is blameworthy for her actions if and only if it is appropriate to blame her for her actions (Carlsson, 2017).

Drawing from the meaning of responsibility as blameworthiness, at least there are four conditions²⁷ to hold someone responsible: capacity, causality, freedom, and wrong-doing (Poel, 2015).

The **capacity** refers to whether someone who is held responsible for her actions has the capacity as a moral agent (Poel, 2015; Smith, 2005). The capacity of a moral agent relates to whether she has knowledge of what she has done (Mihaela Constantinescu, 2022; Loh,

²⁶ Referring to Van de Poel (2015: p. 15), Wallace (1994: p. 64)

²⁷ Van de Poel (2015) divides the conditions into five: capacity, causality, knowledge, freedom, and wrongdoing. However, I rearranged these conditions into four since capacity already captures and includes the knowledge condition. Also, these four conditions will be revisited in other types of responsibility.

2017). However, Mason (2015) deepens the concept of epistemic capacity through the lens of moral ignorance. She argues that for someone to be blameworthy, she must fully understand what she does. She believes that sometimes someone knows something, yet she may understand it wrongly (Mason, 2015). In contrast, Vincent (2011) refuses this full knowledge requirement. She argues that we should acknowledge that some people are less intelligent; thus, full responsibility for their actions should be reconsidered. This means that a certain threshold²⁸ should be applied in moral judgment. Regarding these notions, I believe that both actually address the same issues where someone is blameworthy to a certain degree as their capacity.

Another moral capacity that needs to be considered is mental capacity. For instance, children, even though they can freely act, cannot be held responsible for what they do as they lack mental capacity (Zimmerman, 1997).

Based on the given elaborations, we can see that epistemic and mental capacity constitute a moral agent's capacity. Therefore, to say that someone is held responsible for actions implies that she fulfilled these elements of capacity when she performed her actions.

The second condition for someone to be blameworthy is **causality**. Causality refers to a harmful case/outcome where someone causally harms someone or something, including whether she did it voluntarily or could have foreseen it (Poel, 2015). Sometimes, we cannot attribute moral responsibility to someone because she is ignorant or has no intention to cause a certain harm. As someone is ignorant, holding her moral responsibility is inappropriate (Zimmerman, 1997). This, however, does not mean that she is not blameworthy (Poel, 2015). We still may blame her ignorance for not having foreseen the detrimental impact of what she has done. This implies that as long as someone causes harm to others, regardless of the absence of intention, it is appropriate to hold her responsible for such actions.

Freedom is also a condition to hold someone responsible. Someone can be held responsible for what she did when she performed such actions freely, without coercion or external intervention. Freedom implies exercising free will, which takes the form of acting voluntarily and deliberately. Acting voluntarily here refers to the absence of force, ignorance, or driven by compulsion, meaning that if someone acts voluntarily, her action is not forced by

²⁸ Vincent (2011) argues that such a threshold is context dependent. In certain societies, someone who is 18 years old and above is considered fully responsible.

an external factor and without any relevant knowledge or forced to do something that is against her will (Mihaela Constantinescu, 2022). Furthermore, acting deliberately refers to an action that is based upon aforethought. This implies that only a rational agent can deliberately decide a voluntary action, and thus, only an agent who can deliberately make a decision can be held responsible (Mihaela Constantinescu, 2022).

The fourth condition is **Wrongdoing**. Wrongdoing is a condition for holding someone responsible when their act is perceived as wrong based on the three ethical theories covered in section 3.2.2. People perceive that someone has done something wrong, and it was acted upon voluntarily (freedom) and knowingly (knowledge) (Poel, 2015). As van de Poel (2015) only briefly explains wrongdoing, I need to draw some ideas from other scholars.

Sometimes, someone can be blameworthy if her acts are perceived as morally bad/wrong despite her ignorance. For instance, although someone has taken all the reasonable precautions to secure her dog at home, and when it went out and bit a neighbor, there is a sense that she is responsible for the injury (Rosen, 2004). It is perceived wrong when a dog bites a human. The owner is also questioned whether she knew the possibility of such potential harm (Henz, 2021). Has the owner anticipated the worst case of petting a dog? In this question, the owner is held responsible for the injury as she does not care enough to anticipate the worst case of breeding a dog. As her dog causes harm to another human being, and for her insufficient care for the worst outcome of breeding a dog, she is blameworthy.

The attribution of responsibility as blameworthy aims to settle a retribution. As someone is morally responsible for her action, blameworthiness aims to see whether she deserves or merits the negative reactive attitude (Poel, 2015).

3.2.4.2 Responsibility as Accountability

Responsibility as accountability, as part of backward-looking responsibility, refers to someone being blamed or praised due to the actions she produces (Sand, 2018). Someone is responsible if they are obliged to account for her action (Poel, 2015). This aims to see the free will and intention of the agent, whether she freely and intentionally acts in such a way without coercion or external intervention. In other words, someone is held responsible if he/she meant it. However, as freedom can be an excuse for someone who is accountable not to be

blameworthy, van de Poel (2015) suggests only three conditions for someone to be held accountable for her actions: capacity, causality, and wrong-doing.

Van de Poel (2015) argues that we cannot hold someone accountable if they do not have the capacity as a moral agent to act responsibly. Capacity here refers to cognitive, mental, and physical capacities, as has been elaborated in section 3.2.4.1 (Mihaela Constantinescu, 2022; Loh, 2017; Smith, 2005). Also, regarding causality, someone is held accountable if she is at least suspected to be causally involved in the actions, meaning that someone cannot be held accountable if she is not involved. However, someone who is accountable for her action may make an excuse that she was not free or under external intervention while acting, which would lead her not to be blameworthy. Therefore, suspicion is necessary until it is proven otherwise. This is also applicable to the wrongdoing. In order for someone to be held accountable, there must be any suspicion that what she did/does is wrong.

The attribution of responsibility as accountability is to maintain a moral community. It implies that by holding someone accountable, it is confirmed that the accountable agent is a moral agent who belongs to the moral community. Also, it implies restoring the moral rules that the accountable agent transgresses that the moral community is tied by such moral rules (Poel, 2015).

3.2.4.3 Responsibility as Liability

Responsibility as liability, as also part of backward-looking responsibility, refers to an obligation to compensate for damage caused by an agent (Sand, 2018; Poel, 2015). This signifies that an unfavorable outcome occurred due to the agent's actions. Consequently, the agent is liable for addressing the damage caused by her previous actions or omissions. Responsibility as liability is more apparent in the legal responsibility where someone who has harmed others is punished²⁹ (Poel, 2015; Vincent, 2011). However, it does not mean that it is less clear in the moral responsibility. Vincent (2011) illustrates liability in terms of moral scope. Suppose a vase is broken by someone; she is expected to make up for it.

²⁹ Vincent (2011) also argues that to hold responsible (liability) which aims to compensate is context dependent. Certain societies in certain lifetimes may punish, for instance, a theft, differently, as such punishment may take fine, incarceration, amputation of hand and so on.

Van de Poel (2015) argues that moral liability implies that someone is blameworthy. Therefore, the blameworthiness conditions also apply to liability, meaning that to hold someone morally liable for her past conduct or omissions, she must fulfill the responsible conditions, such as capacities, causality, freedom, and wrongdoing as elaborated in section 3.2.4.1.

The attribution of responsibility as liability is thus a remediation and doing justice to the victim, which is to set things right. Someone who is liable for the damage she caused connotes that she is responsible for paying for the damage and, by so doing, bringing justice to the victim (Poel, 2015).

3.2.4.4 Responsibility as Obligation

Responsibility as obligation is part of forward-looking responsibility. Forward-looking responsibility refers to the prescription to do something, to see to something, or to take care of something in the future (Sand, 2018), meaning that someone is responsible for something that has not occurred yet (Poel, 2015) or to prevent something from happening, particularly an undesirable outcome. Following van de Poel (2015), there are two types of forward-looking responsibility: responsibility as obligation and responsibility as a virtue (discussed below).

Responsibility as obligation refers to the responsibility to see to it that something is the case (Poel, 2015), meaning that someone is responsible for ensuring that something occurs. Unlike duties in responsibility as role, which aims to hold someone responsible for what she ought or should not do (Vincent, 2011), responsibility as obligation goes beyond that. Its concept includes such a duty. Yet, obligation can be delegated to other agents while duty cannot (Poel, 2015). Duty implies that something will happen, and Agent A is the person who will do it. While obligation can be delegated to other agents, someone is not always the person who will execute it.

The conditions to attribute responsibility as obligation are wrongdoing, causality, and capacity³⁰. However, the wrongdoing condition is assessed under three ethical theories:

³⁰ Van de Poel (2015) argues that two conditions (causality and capacity) are the same for the three ethics theories. Either consequentialism, deontology, or virtues suggest that in causality condition if someone properly fulfills her supervisor's duties to ensure a state of affairs occurs, under normal circumstances, it will occur. Also, regarding capacity conditions, it is clear that for someone to be responsible (obligation) for something to happen, she must have the capacity as a responsible moral agent.

consequentialist, deontologist, and Virtue (Poel, 2015), which I have presented in section 3.2.2.

Furthermore, the attribution of responsibility as obligation aims to assess the efficacy of a task where someone is responsible for a state of affairs. If she properly fulfills her supervisory duties, she will ensure that it occurs under normal circumstances.

3.2.4.5 Responsibility as Virtue

Responsibility as virtue refers to a virtuous person who shows initiative and judgment in assuming some responsibilities. The initiative here relates to a willingness to take responsibility with judgment (Poel, 2015). Vincent (2011) described this type of responsibility as a responsibility that focuses on a person's good character, reputation, and intention, which has been tested over time and manifests in commitment to do the right things. Someone is responsible for her acts as she has always assumed some responsibility as obligation that she will eventually make things right, and this disposition has been tested over time, which shapes her to be a virtuous person. In other words, someone is deemed responsible because she is virtuous.

This type of responsibility does not require any conditions, as it does not evaluate someone's conduct or actions but instead focuses on her trait characteristics to assume some responsibilities (Sand, 2018). Furthermore, the attribution of responsibility as a virtue entails caring for others. For someone to assume this responsibility, she must feel that she should take the initiative to assume responsibility. And to achieve such a state of "feel", she needs to care (Fahlquist, 2015). In other words, caring is the manifestation of being virtuous (Audi, 2009).

Before moving to the next part, I would like to recall the definition of moral responsibility based on its types. Backward-looking responsibility, which consists of blameworthy, accountability, and liability, defines moral responsibility as an agent's responsibility toward past action, whether she is morally blamed or praised, accountable or liable. In contrast, forward-looking responsibility, which consists of obligation and virtue, emphasizes an agent's responsibility toward future events to be responsible for something that has not occurred yet. By examining the theoretical grounds for these types of responsibilities, I can later establish the moral responsibility of SMPs.

3.3 Attributing Moral Responsibility to SMPs

After elaborating on the definition, ethical theory, and types of moral responsibility, I now want to answer this chapter's research question, as I stated in section 3.1: ***“How do we attribute moral responsibility to SMPs?”*** By identifying five types of moral responsibility (blameworthiness, accountability, liability, obligation, and virtue), I will address the moral responsibility of SMPs by engaging with the conditions, the ethical assessment of their actions, implications (how to hold someone responsible), and aims of attributing SMPs moral responsibility.

For the backward-looking responsibility (blameworthiness, accountability, liability), I will analyze the case of Jair Bolsonaro, who represents the politician SMPs. For the forward-looking responsibility, I will take the cases of Youtuber Rezo and Belle Gibson, who represent non-politician SMPs. The selection of the case's analysis is intentional, first, to show how to attribute moral responsibility to the politician SMPs and non-politician SMPs. Second, all types of moral responsibility can be attributed to politicians (Jair Bolsonaro) and non-politician SMPs (YouTuber Rezo and Belle Gibson). The attribution of moral responsibility to each case, backward-looking responsibility to Jair Bolsonaro, or forward-looking responsibility to Youtuber Rezo and Belle Gibson, is based on practical and intentional reasons. My practical reason is that it will be redundant and require a lot of words if I attribute all types of moral responsibility to both politician and non-politician SMP. After all, the objective of this chapter is to answer the question of “how” to attribute moral responsibility to SMPs instead of determining “which” case applies to what type of moral responsibility. Second, my intentional reason is that I am more interested in analyzing how to attribute moral responsibility as a virtue to non-politician SMPs, which will be covered at the end of this section.

3.3.1 Responsibility as Blameworthiness of SMPs

Someone is blamed or praised (responsibility as blameworthiness) as long as she meets four conditions: capacity, causality, freedom, and wrongdoing. SMPs are responsible if they have cognitive, mental, and physical capacities, enabling them to influence people. In terms of cognitive capacity, they know what they do. A good illustration is Jair Bolsonaro's case. As a former president, he knew the politics in his country, including how to handle COVID-19 at that time. He stated on social media broadcasts and official government channels denying the

risk associated with COVID-19. He denied the symptoms, the risk, and the cures for the virus and urged people to neglect social distancing and go back to normal life (Julie Ricard, 2020; Phillips, 2022). Regardless of the upsurge of COVID-19 cases in his country, he encouraged people not to care about it and treated it as influenza (Julie Ricard, 2020). This illustration underlines that Jair Bolsonaro has the cognitive capacity and thus is morally responsible for his actions.

Moreover, the second condition for SMPs to be responsible is causality, meaning SMPs are responsible if they cause harm, regardless of whether they do it voluntarily or not. Jair Bolsonaro delivered his speech to influence public opinion so that people may neglect COVID-19 in his country. However, such a political agenda denied the fact that thousands of people were exposed and died of the disease (Julie Ricard, 2020). Therefore, such action provokes people and casually harms people's lives. Therefore, Jair Bolsonaro is causally responsible for his action.

Regarding freedom, SMPs are responsible for their actions if they act voluntarily and deliberately. Acting voluntarily means an action is freely done without external intervention or ignorance. Jair Bolsonaro, on many occasions, through social media podcasts or government official channels, denied the risk of COVID-19. He acted voluntarily to influence people and was against those who stood against him. Acting deliberately, furthermore, means that action is taken based on aforethought. The denial of COVID-19 risk by the former president is seen as his deliberate action to avoid the recession in his country (Julie Ricard, 2020). Thus, quarantine and social distancing that result from the COVID-19 policy should be diminished and even neglected (Julie Ricard, 2020). This description underlines that the denial of Covid-19 results from aforethought to save Brazil's economy. Consequently, Jair Bolsonaro is responsible for such an action.

Lastly, the wrongdoing condition underlines that an action is perceived as wrong. People perceive that certain actions are performed voluntarily and knowingly wrong. Jair Bolsonaro's denial of COVID-19 risk is perceived as wrong because it led to avoidable deaths. For instance, social media companies, government officials, and the WHO blamed him for such denial (Phillips, 2022; Julie Ricard, 2020; Ferraz, 2021), indicating that they perceived what Jair Bolsonaro did was wrong. Was it wrong? This leads me to the ethical assessment to

see whether his action is morally wrong. Following van de Poel's (2015) approach, I will consider consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics.³¹

Based on consequentialism, a morally right action is one that brings a good outcome, such as maximizing happiness/well-being. Addressing the issue of disseminating fraudulent information regarding the risk of COVID-19 is morally wrong because such action will influence public opinion regarding the risk of COVID-19, which is counterintuitive to citizens's well-being. As a politician, Jair Bolsonaro was supposed to encourage his citizens to protect themselves from the virus, considering that the virus has killed hundreds of thousands of his citizens (Phillips, 2022). Since disseminating fraudulent information regarding COVID-19 risk is against the maximization of happiness/well-being, such action is morally wrong,

A right moral action, according to deontology, is a maxim that conforms with universal law. Dissemination of fraudulent information (equals telling a lie) is a maxim that does not comply with universal law because such a maxim cannot be willed to become a universal law. It is logically and morally wrong that telling a lie can be a universal law. If telling a lie is a universal law, meaning that everyone can do it, it is hugely against moral duty. Therefore, according to deontology, such action is morally wrong.

Lastly, the virtue of ethics emphasizes caring about the world, including considering others' well-being. Disseminating fraudulent information about the risk of COVID-19, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, is morally against caring for people's lives. As a legitimate authority, Jair Bolosonaro was supposed to care for his citizens' lives by following the medical protocols regarding COVID-19. Yet, he seemed to have acted against such protocol and endangered many people's lives. Since disseminating fraudulent information about COVID-19 risk is against the moral principle of caring for others, such action is morally wrong.

Based on these three ethical theories, we have proven that Jair Bolsonaro's action was wrong. Jair Bolsonaro can then be held responsible (blameworthy) for such action, formulated³² as follows.

³¹ These three ethical assessments apply to all types of responsibility.

³² The formula to hold someone responsible: A is responsible (blameworthy) for ϕ to J, means that it is appropriate for J to hold A responsible for ϕ . A= Jair Bolsonaro; ϕ =disseminating fraudulent information; J= political stakeholders

Jair Bolsonaro is responsible (blameworthy) for disseminating fraudulent information to political stakeholders³³, which means that it is appropriate for political stakeholders to hold Jair Bolsonaro responsible for disseminating fraudulent information.

As Jair Bolsonaro meets all the conditions to be responsible (blameworthiness), and is proven to have acted ethically wrong, the implication is that Jair Bolsonaro can be held morally responsible for the actions. Since attributing responsibility as blameworthy is to settle retribution (Poel, 2015), Jair Bolsonaro deserves or merits a negative reactive attitude, such as indignation, resentment, or guilt (Carlsson, 2017).

3.3.2 Responsibility as Accountability of SMPs

Responsibility as accountability emphasizes the moral agent's intention and free will, whether she has intention and is free when she performs her action. Attributing responsibility as accountability to SMPs means SMPs are accountable for what they did by examining whether they have the intention and are free to endorse their social and political agenda. Reflecting on Jair Bolsonaro's case, he stood against the isolation policy that the WHO and the Department of Health recommended. He seems to have denied the COVID-19 risk due to his economic agenda (Julie Ricard, 2020). This description shows that the denial of the risks of COVID-19 that Jair Bolsonaro adopted was free and intentional, as he prioritized economic and political stability. Therefore, Jair Bolsonaro is accountable for his actions.

As argued, in order for someone to be accountable, she must meet three conditions: capacity, causality, and wrongdoing³⁴ (Poel, 2015). This implies that SMPs must have cognitive, mental, and physical capacity when they act. Jair Bolsonaro is accountable as long as he understands what he did; he is not mentally ill or physically incapable. By disseminating fraudulent information against the pandemic health protocol, it is obvious that he understood what he did.

³³ J is translated into political stakeholders since Jair Bolsonaro held a legitimate authority. Thus, he was subject to moral and legal responsibility due to such political status. Stakeholders here can be a government institution that can charge him for such an action (Phillips, 2022; Julie Ricard, 2020), international organization (WHO) who disagreed with Jair Bolsonaro (Julie Ricard, 2020), social media company is against Jair Bolsonaro, who was perceived as violating the content policy (BBC, 2021), and the citizens who were disappointed (Phillips, 2022).

³⁴ These conditions mainly have been elaborated in the previous section (section 3.3.1).

Furthermore, the causality condition highlights that someone is accountable as long as such action is performed by herself, not others. Jair Bolsonaro is accountable because he disseminates fraudulent information by himself, not others. Lastly, the wrongdoing condition emphasizes the suspicion of an act as blameworthy until proven otherwise, meaning that for Jair Bolsonaro to be accountable, his action of disseminating fraudulent information must be proven wrong. In section 3.3.1, I have proven through the ethical assessment what Jair Bolsonaro did, and based on three ethical theories, disseminating fraudulent information is morally wrong.

As Jair Bolsonaro fulfills the three conditions and has been morally proven wrong, he can be held responsible (accountable) for such action as formulated³⁵ as follows.

Jair Bolsonaro is responsible (accountable) for disseminating fraudulent information to political stakeholders, which means that it is appropriate for political stakeholders to hold Jair Bolsonaro responsible for disseminating fraudulent information.

The attribution of responsibility as accountability aims to maintain the moral community. SMPIs are influencers who mostly work with others to endorse social and political agendas. They are often not individuals who work alone but as a community of influencers who are subject to community rules. Rules can be imposed by social media platforms, for example, in the case of YouTube taking down Jair Bolsorano's video (BBC, 2021), or by government regulation not to use official channels to disseminate fraudulent information (Julie Ricard, 2020)³⁶. Regardless of the source of the rule, the responsibility as accountability aims to restore a moral community that SMPIs transgressed.

3.3.3 Responsibility as Liability of SMPIs

Attributing responsibility as a liability to SMPIs aims to set compensation for the damage due to their actions, particularly the undesirable outcome of the content they created, meaning

³⁵ A is responsible (accountable) for ϕ to J means that it is appropriate for J to hold A responsible for ϕ .
A= Jair Bolsonaro; ϕ =disseminating fraudulent information; J= political stakeholders

³⁶ Community rules take form in legal law. Since Jair Bolsonaro is a politician, he is mostly subject to legal law or officials' ethics. Yet, such a rule is less applicable to non-politician-SMPs. Take Loomer Laura's case, for example. This far-right activist is only subject to Social Media Companies' user guidelines, which banned her for violating such guidelines (Palmer, 2022).

they are obliged to pay for the damage they cause as remediation and do justice for the victim. Reflecting on Jair Bolsonaro's case, disseminating fraudulent information regarding COVID-19 risk may lead people to distrust and neglect the risk of the virus that has killed many people in his country.

For someone to be liable, she must be blameworthy. This implies that the conditions for Jair Bolsonaro to be blameworthy also apply to liability: capacity, causality, freedom, and wrongdoing, which can be seen in section 3.3.1. As he fulfills all the conditions, he must be ethically assessed by referring to three ethical theories in section 3.2.2

We can see the conditions and the ethical assessments for liability are the same as blameworthiness. However, there is a difference in the objective of these two types of responsibilities. Blameworthiness aims to settle moral retribution to see whether someone deserves negative reactive attitudes, such as resentment, indignation, or guilt. Yet, liability also includes the analysis of whether someone deserves negative reactive attitudes, but it goes beyond that by focusing more on the obligation to pay for the damage (Poel, 2015). To pay for the damage someone causes, Vincent (2011) argues that someone can take negative reactive attitudes and take responsibility to set things right.

Nevertheless, based on the conditions and ethical assessment, Jair Bolsonaro can be held responsible (blameworthy) for his actions. This means that he can also be held responsible (liable), as formulated³⁷ below.

Jair Bolsonaro is responsible (liable) for disseminating fraudulent information to political stakeholders, which means that it is appropriate for political stakeholders to hold Jair Bolsonaro responsible for disseminating fraudulent information.

Since Jair Bolsonaro's action is morally wrong and liable to be held responsible, it is appropriate for the political stakeholders to ask for compensation. The compensation and the pursuit of justice for the victim as the objective of responsibility as liability may take different forms depending on the regulation in a certain context. In Jair Bolsonaro's case, it is appropriate for the political stakeholders, first, to ask Jair Bolsonaro to deliver a deep apology

³⁷ A is responsible (liable) for ϕ to J means that it is appropriate for J to hold I responsible for ϕ . A= Jair Bolsonaro; ϕ =disseminating fraudulent information; J= political stakeholders

to the victims influenced by fraudulent information (political stakeholders). The second form of compensation can be a legal punishment, as many political stakeholders have done, for instance, the possibility of Jair Bolsonaro being charged for committing an incitement crime (Phillips, 2022; Ferraz, 2021). Of course, as stated above, the compensation is context-dependent; in this case, Jair Bolsonaro at least pays for the damage he causes.

3.3.4 Responsibility as Obligation of SMPIs

While the former types of moral responsibility focus on evaluating a moral agent's past action, responsibility as obligation focuses on seeing something happen in the future. Responsibility as obligation underlines that someone is obliged to ensure that something will happen or prevent something from happening. For instance, YouTuber Rezo felt obliged to influence the young German people's opinion regarding the conservative party. He believes that such a party is inappropriate to be elected in the parliamentary election as it neglects the climate issue. Therefore, the voters should be told not to vote for a conservative party.



Figure 6. People are cleaning the Citarum River, which was initiated by the Pandawara group. (Fadillah, 2024)

However, unlike duty, it is not necessary for people who assume this responsibility to execute and make things happen. For instance, on 13 June 2024 in Indonesia, a group of environmental activists and social media influencers called the *Pandawara* group posted on their Instagram *@pandawaragroup* how polluted the Citarum River in West Java was³⁸. They aimed to encourage people to join them in cleaning the river on 14 June 2024. With more than 2 million followers, this video immediately went viral. Many people joined them in cleaning the Citarum River, some from the government, interest groups/communities, and

³⁸ This is not the first time this group has mobilized people to clean the beaches and rivers.

individuals (Henry, 2024). Regardless of a successful movement, this group has been criticized for not fully contributing to cleaning the river. They just helped clean for a few hours, took a video, and left, while others worked cleaning the river the whole day (Solutions, 2024). Reflecting on this illustration, this is what responsibility as obligation entails. The *Pandawa* group was concerned with the polluted river and encouraged people to join them in cleaning it. According to responsibility as obligation, whether they worked the whole day cleaning it or not, they just need to ensure that the river is cleaned.

Furthermore, a responsible agent must meet normative conditions (wrongdoing), causality, and capacity. Van de Poel (2015) argued that since this responsibility is to ensure something happens in the future, its normative conditions are determined by three ethical approaches that advise a moral agent on what to do in a given situation: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. These three ethical approaches will guide a moral agent in choosing a particular act in a given situation.

Consequentialism emphasizes the right action depends on the desirable outcome that maximizes happiness. This outcome dictates what action to take in the given situation. Reflecting on YouTuber Rezo's case, the outcome is that climate issues should be considered in any political agenda, as it regards people's happiness. This outcome dictates what action should be taken. Thus, he prevented the careless party from stepping up and holding authority. With his clout, YouTuber Rezo created a video and influenced the youth's political opinion. By so doing, according to consequentialism, such action is morally right.

However, attributing responsibility as obligation means distributing responsibility to ensure that the desirability of a state of affairs and its realization are under the responsibility of those who can see that something ought to happen (Miller, 2001). As a result, the responsibility for endorsing the political agenda to address climate change doesn't rest solely on YouTuber Rezo. It is an obligation for all moral agents who are concerned about the environment to ensure that climate issues are addressed. These agents may include governments, environmental activists, environmental institutions (NGOs), and citizens who care about the climate.

Deontology, furthermore, underlines the right moral action should conform to moral duty: to act according to the maxim that can become a universal law. As the maxim to consider climate issues (caring about the environment) can be willed to become a universal law,

endorsing such social and political agenda is morally right. How does this right morally right action relate to responsibility as obligation?

Responsibility as obligation departs from a (un)desirable condition. As a result, an obligation manifests in a promise and commitment to desire something that should not be morally objectionable (Poel, 2015).. Reflecting on YouTuber Rezo, he voluntarily committed himself to endorsing the matter of climate in his video because he believes that saving the planet (through caring for climate) is a moral duty (that everyone desires to save the planet, and thus, it is not morally objectionable). Therefore, YouTuber Rezo is responsible for ensuring that the climate issue is addressed.

Virtue ethics, furthermore, emphasizes the moral character of an agent to act virtuously. To act virtuously entails caring about/for something or someone. YouTuber Rezo, who created the video to address climate issues, is perceived as having acted virtuously because he cares about the environment and people. As he shows caring by creating content and endorsing social and political agendas, such actions are morally right. Then, how can a virtuous person be a responsible moral agent?

Virtue ethics encourage people to make promises and commitments and assume responsibility as obligation. Attributing responsibility to the SMPs means advising the SMPs to take the initiative and judgment on assuming responsibility as obligation to set things right (Poel, 2015).. Reflecting on Youtuber Rezo's case, he is responsible if he promises and commits to set things right. This can be seen in how he endorses his social and political agenda, starting with his motivation, executions, and outcome. He can be perceived as virtuous if he is motivated to care for the planet/people, appropriately deliver endorsements, and anticipate the negative impacts of his political endorsement. Once SMPs disregard motivation, decisions, and outcomes of endorsement, they fail to be virtuous. TikToker Bima, for instance, is perceived to purely care about Lampung's poor infrastructure, but how he delivered his speech using harsh words and thus hurt some people's feelings (Janti, 2023), has failed him to be virtuous.

As YouTuber Rezo fulfills all the conditions and his action is morally right, he can be held responsible (obligation), which means that he owes humanity³⁹ a responsibility to prevent the conservative party from being elected, which can be formulated⁴⁰ as follows.

YouTuber Rezo is responsible for preventing the conservative party from being elected to humanity, which means that YouTuber Rezo owes morality to seeing to it that the conservative party is not elected.

The attribution of responsibility as obligation aims to assess the efficacy of a task to ensure that a particular state of affairs occurs. In order to ensure that a certain state of affairs occurs (or not), moral agents must have capacity, freedom, and wrongdoing. YouTuber Rezo fulfills all the conditions, and his action is morally right; therefore, he can be held responsible.

3.3.5 Responsibility as Virtue of SMPs

In sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.4.5, I have theoretically grounded what responsibility a virtuous person is and what responsibility as virtue entails, respectively. A virtuous person acts with justice, veracity, fidelity, respectfulness, and beneficence (Audi, 2009) ; thus, responsibility as virtue underlines that someone with a virtuous character can hold and be held responsible.

Moreover, possessing a virtuous character relates to many virtuous characteristics; I focus more on beneficence, which entails caring for others' well-being. This characteristic fits perfectly with what responsibility as virtue entails, that is, taking initiative and assuming some responsibility as a manifestation of care. In other words, being responsible means caring.

Attributing responsibility as a virtue to SMPs means encouraging the influencers to (take the initiative) and care about what they do so that they may do things right. This implies that endorsing social and political agendas through social media platforms should be based on a virtuous disposition, particularly caring that what they do is right, assuming some responsibilities to make it right, and caring about the impact of their content on society.

³⁹ For forward-looking responsibility, J (another agent to whom A is accountable) can be A or humanity or morality in a particular case (Poel, 2015). Therefore, since YouTuber Rezo endorsed social and political campaigns to address the negligence/carelessness of climate issues, J can be translated as morality.

⁴⁰ A is responsible (obligation) for ϕ to J means that A owes it to J to see to it that ϕ . A= YouTuber Rezo; ϕ for preventing the conservative party from being elected; J=humanity

Caring implies two aspects: reaching out to something other than the self and suggesting the self to do something. It aims to maintain, continue, and repair the “world⁴¹” (Tronto, 1993). In other words, caring is reaching out to someone/something to maintain and repair, implying that not caring is an act not to reach out to someone/something (can be called self-centered) and not to maintain or repair something or someone.



Figure 7. Belle Gibson was interviewed after being exposed to fraud. (Fear, 2024)

Consider, for instance, the Instagrammer Belle Gibson. She disseminated fraudulent information about her cancer. She told her followers on social media that she got diagnosed with cancer, and she successfully cured herself through wellness and a healthy diet (Fear, 2024). Just like Jair Bolsonaro’s case in section 3.3.1, disseminating fraudulent information is morally wrong according to all three ethical theories. Furthermore, as she disseminated fraudulent information, she might have acted to reach out to others, but it turns out that such action has caused a detrimental impact on his followers and those who believed and followed her lead (Fear, 2024). As she acts to manipulate others, she becomes a careless SMPI. As she is careless, she is not a virtuous person who assumes some responsibility to set things right. Consequently, I can say that Belle Gibson is an example of irresponsible (virtue) SMPs, and thus, can be held responsible for her action, which is formulated⁴² as follows.

⁴¹ The world here includes humans and non-human objects.

⁴² A is responsible (virtue) for ϕ to J means that A owes it to J to see to it that ϕ . A = Belle Gibson; ϕ = caring for others; J=humanity/morality

Belle Gibson is responsible (virtue) for caring for others to humanity/morality, which means that Belle Gibson owes humanity/morality to ensuring that caring for others.

In the introduction of section 3.3, I have revealed I am more in responsibility as virtue. I have two positive points to say here. First, considering that SMPs are influencers who can mobilize people, what they say and do influences people. We already see this in the given examples, such as Jair Bolsonaro, YouTuber Rezo, and Belle Gibson. As they can actually influence people, holding them responsible as a virtue will help to remind them that apart from the power they have, they should always act virtuously, that is, through care about the world (human and non-human objects). They should consider their motivation to influence others, the content, and how they deliver content, and, more importantly, care about undesirable outcomes.

Second, I agree with van de Poel (2015) that acting virtuously always implies assuming all types of responsibility. Following up on my first argument, acting virtuously first is to set things right consistently. The SMPs should always assume an obligation (responsibility as obligation) to ensure that the right things happen. When things go wrong, they should take responsibility as an accountable agent for what they have done (responsibility as accountability), be ready to make things up if proven wrong (responsibility as liability), and acknowledge their fault (responsibility as blameworthiness). As responsibility as virtue encompasses all types of moral responsibility, I think this type is the most important moral responsibility to attribute to SMPs.

Now, I will summarize what I have found in this chapter. This chapter aims to answer the following question: ***“How do we attribute moral responsibility to SMPs?”*** Considering that there are five types of moral responsibility, we should address each separately.

To attribute SMPs moral responsibility as blameworthiness, SMPs must fulfill four conditions: capacity, causality, freedom, and wrongdoing. We then assess their action based on three ethical theories. If proven wrong, they are blameworthy, and we can hold them responsible for such an action. Moreover, to attribute moral responsibility as accountability, we should ensure that SMPs fulfill three conditions: capacity, causality, and wrongdoing. We then assess their action based on three ethical theories; if proven wrong, we can hold them responsible for their actions. A similar scenario also occurs with responsibility as a liability.

Since the conditions for blameworthiness also apply to liability, we should ensure that SMPs fulfill those four conditions. We then employ three ethical theories to assess their actions. If proven wrong, we can hold them responsible for their actions. These three types of responsibility aim to evaluate past actions. These responsibilities (obligation and virtue) aim to ensure a future event occurs.

To attribute moral responsibility as an obligation, we should ensure that SMPs fulfill three conditions: capacity, causality, and wrongdoing. We then employ three ethical theories to assess whether the desirable events are morally good or bad. If it is good, we can hold SMPs responsible to ensure that such desirable events occur. Lastly, attributing moral responsibility as virtue does not require any conditions as it encourages SMPs to assume some responsibility and be virtuous persons. This responsibility resonates with my concern about SMPs mobilizing their power as it encourages SMPs to care about their motivation, content, how they deliver the content, and the anticipation of undesirable outcomes. Therefore, I believe responsibility as virtue is the most essential moral responsibility SMPs should cultivate. So, how can they responsibly influence others? By showing care through their actions.

Moral Responsibility	Conditions	Ethical Assessment	Outcome
Blameworthiness	Capacity, Causality, Freedom, Wrongdoing	Consequentialism Deontology Virtue Ethics	Blameworthy/Praiseworthy
Accountability	Capacity, Causality, Wrongdoing	Consequentialism Deontology Virtue Ethics	Accountable
Liability	Capacity, Causality, Freedom, Wrongdoing	Consequentialism Deontology Virtue Ethics	Liable

Obligation	Capacity, Causality, and Wrongdoing (normative)	Consequentialism Deontology Virtue Ethics	Obligation
Virtue	-	-	Care to others

Figure 8. Summary of Attributing Moral Responsibility

CONCLUSION

I will return to my research question: ***How do social media political influencers acquire, mobilize, and responsibly influence people?*** To answer this question, I have divided this thesis into three chapters corresponding to three sub-questions: What are Social Media Political Influencers? How do they acquire and mobilize their political power? How should they responsibly influence people?

In Chapter 1, I describe and analyze what SMPs are by borrowing the idea of SMIs from marketing. Reflecting on what they are, including social media actors and the perceived characteristics of SMIs, I established a solid ground to discuss the SMPs. I conclude that SMPs are SMIs who endorse social and political issues through social media, such as YouTube, Instagram, X, and TikTok. They can influence people as people perceive them as authentic, knowledgeable, attractive, trustworthy, and credible. However, since they endorse social and political agendas and have the power to influence others, I questioned how SMPs acquire and mobilize power and whether people should listen to them. In other words, I wondered about their legitimacy as influencers in the political realm, particularly in a democratic society. This academic curiosity led to the second chapter of this work.

Building upon the theoretical analysis in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 looked at SMPs and political power, drawing from the recognition that SMPs can influence others. This means that they play a political role in a democratic society. Therefore, I question how this is possible as most are ordinary citizens (though I realized that some are also politicians). I analyzed their social status in the political arena. I started by briefly grounding the idea of political actors and political authority in philosophy. Established upon this idea, I scrutinized the concept of political legitimacy in political philosophy. I drew from discussions in political philosophy that started with Athenian democracy, Plato, and Aristotle. I then looked at Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, J.J. Rousseau, and modern democracy. I discovered that to be a legitimate authority, individuals or groups/institutions must fulfil three factors: the established law, the justifiability of their position, and the consent of the ruled. These factors determine whether authority is legitimate or effective. While legitimate authority complies with three factors, the effective authority claims its power through the reason it proposes. Consequently, though both authorities may impose duties, legitimate authority entails a moral and political obligation to the people, effective authority does not.

Building upon the SMPs definition in Chapter 1 and the legitimate standards established in Chapter 2, I found out that there are two groups of SMPs: legitimate SMPs encompass politicians who use social media to endorse social and political issues and influencers who become politicians, and effective SMPs which encompass influencers who act as opinion leaders and journalists who act as SMPs. This finding has made me more concerned about the non-politician SMPs. My point is that if legitimate SMPs (primarily politicians) do something wrong, for instance, by delivering fraudulent information on SMPs, they are subject to the legal law as politicians and can be held responsible for their actions. However, non-politician SMPs may not be subject to legal law or norms if they disseminate fraudulent information. Since they can influence people, I think it is also appropriate for this group to be held responsible. Reflecting on the necessity to hold SMPs responsible, I attribute moral responsibility.

To attribute moral responsibility to SMPs, I began by defining the concept of responsibility. To attribute moral responsibility to SMPs, I briefly discussed the conditions to hold someone responsible. At least there are four conditions to hold people responsible: capacity, causality, freedom, and wrongdoing. Also, I provided ethical assessments drawn from three ethical theories: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics.

I mainly adopt Poel's (2025) idea of moral-normative responsibility, which consists of five types of moral responsibility. Those are responsibility as blameworthy, responsibility as accountability, responsibility as liability, responsibility as an obligation, and lastly, responsibility as a virtue. Attributing moral responsibility to SMPs means attributing five different moral responsibilities to SMPs along with their condition to be a responsible moral agent. My finding is that attributing responsibility as blameworthy, responsibility as accountability, and responsibility as liability aims to assess and evaluate past actions and whether it is appropriate to blame or praise them. The implication is that under normal conditions, when they harm people/things, other agents (usually authority) are reasonable to blame them. Consequently, attributing SMPs to these three moral responsibilities means that if the conditions are fulfilled, they are blameworthy, accountable, and liable for their actions. This implies that it is reasonable for the other agents to hold them responsible.

Furthermore, attributing responsibility as an obligation and virtue to SMPs aims to ensure that the SMPs are in a position to ensure something happens in the future or prevent

something from happening. Responsibility as obligation emphasizes the obligation of SMPs to ensure something happens. This implies that SMPs owe someone/people/institutions/morality/humanity to ensure that something happens or prevent it from happening. Meanwhile, responsibility as virtue emphasizes a character trait of SMPs to assume some responsibility by taking initiative and judgment to make things right. Though both aim to set future events, the starting point is slightly different. The former begins with a task, the latter with the act of caring.

Interestingly, I found that responsibility as a virtue fits my concern regarding the SMPs holding political power. My point is that responsibility as a virtue gives a moral guideline to the SMPs: always assume responsibility (all types of responsibilities) and care about what they do and its implications whenever they endorse social and political agendas.

So, how do social media political influencers acquire, mobilize, and responsibly influence people? SMPs acquire their power through their perceived characteristics (effective authority) or consent and law (legitimate authority), mobilize their power through endorsing social and political agendas, and can act responsibly by caring about what they do.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

I realize this work has limitations that can provide some ideas for further research. I have three limitations that are followed by the potential future research. First, in Chapter 1, I use a general term for SMPs without concerning each. This can be a flaw since some SMPs (Facebook, YouTube, X, Instagram, TikTok) work differently. If each works differently, it may tell a different story about SMPs or SMPs. Therefore, this limitation is open for further research; it would be interesting to focus on only one SMP and see how this SMP defines the SMPs. Also, it is possible to see how different SMPs enable SMPs to acquire and mobilize their power.

Second, in Chapter 2, I narrow down the concept of legitimacy to a political philosophy approach. Since different disciplines, such as social science and legal science, may have different definitions of legitimacy, the definition and attribution of legitimate political actors and authority may differ from what I have found. So, for further research, one may work on legitimacy in another discipline to see how such disciplines contribute to the definition and attribution of legitimate political actors and authority to SMPs.

Third, I realize that my work in Chapter 3 is quite extensive. As I mainly refer to van de Poel's (2015) works, which divide moral responsibility into five different types, it is hard to say less about its type since each has its underlying concepts that should be sufficiently addressed. Therefore, for further research, it would be interesting to focus only on one type of moral responsibility, such as blameworthiness, to define, assess, and attribute such responsibility to SMPs. By so doing, the content of the work can be more intense instead of extensive.

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