

“The Million-Euro Answer”: Party Youth Wings’ Views on the Opportunities and Challenges of Political Communication on Social Media

“A Resposta de um Milhão de Euros”: A Visão das Juventudes Partidárias sobre as Oportunidades e Desafios da Comunicação Política nas Redes Sociais

https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-5462_45_13

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Submitted: 2024-03-15 | Accepted: 2024-06-26

Submetido: 2024-03-15 | Aceite: 2024-06-26

Abstract

Research on the relationship between youth, politics, and social media in Europe often overlooks the role and views of party youth wings. In this study, we seek to fill this gap by understanding (1) the objectives guiding the political communication of party youth wings on social media and (2) the opportunities and challenges they identify in the process. We do so by conducting semi-structured interviews with representatives of youth wings and informal youth groups from Portuguese political parties. Information emerges as the primary communicational objective of youth wings, who do not consider social media an ideal space for political dialogue. Although social media is the main communication channel with young people, offering more reach, flexibility, and feedback opportunities, several challenges limit the effectiveness of communication: resources, algorithms, audience fragmentation, selection effects, simplification of the complex, and the irreplaceability of face-to-face contact. The implications of these results are discussed.

Keywords

party youth wings, social media, political communication, dissonant public spheres, democracy

Resumo

A investigação sobre a relação entre jovens, política e redes sociais na Europa não tem incluído o papel e a visão das juventudes partidárias. Neste estudo, procuramos colmatar essa lacuna, explorando (1) os objetivos que norteiam a comunicação política das juventudes partidárias nas redes sociais e (2) que oportunidades e desafios elas identificam no processo. Para tal, recorremos a entrevistas semiestruturadas com representantes das juventudes partidárias e grupos informais de jovens de partidos portugueses. A informação destaca-se como o principal objetivo comunicacional das juventudes partidárias, que não consideram as redes sociais o espaço ideal para o diálogo político. Embora as redes sociais sejam o principal canal de comunicação com os jovens, trazendo mais alcance, flexibilidade e possibilidade de feedback, vários desafios limitam a eficácia da comunicação: os recursos, o algoritmo, a fragmentação da audiência, os efeitos de seleção, a simplificação do complexo e a centralidade do contacto cara-a-cara. As implicações destes resultados são discutidas.

Palavras-chave

juventudes partidárias, redes sociais, comunicação política, esferas públicas dissonantes, democracia

1. Introduction

While youth was described as apathetic or alienated from the political system in the past, it is now agreed that younger generations have forged a new definition of citizenship (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). Yet, it seems consensual that young people have a sense of distrust and cynicism toward political institutions, which they see as incapable of addressing their issues (Ellison et al., 2020). This lack of confidence leads to low youth voter turnout, affecting their representation on the political agenda and the influence of public policies (Siegel-Stechler, 2019; Wattenberg, 2020).

Since institutional participation cannot be replaced by new engagement repertoires (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020; Matos et al., 2023), it is essential to keep seeking new ways to reconnect young people to formal politics. The solution has been widely sought in social media. The theory of a positive relationship between digital media use and political participation is supported by several meta-analyses, which find a particularly strong effect in the case of young people (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Boulianne & Belland, 2022; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

However, one dimension is usually not studied: party youth wings. Despite nearly 80% of parties in Europe having a youth wing (Allern & Verge, 2017) and these structures assuming a privileged mediating role (Forbrig, 2005; Hooghe et al., 2004; Malafaia et al., 2018), European research on these organizations remains scarce (European Consortium for Political Research, 2021; Heinze, 2024). Even rarer are studies on youth wings' communication strategies, especially on social media. Existing literatu-

re points to underwhelming communication (Pickard, 2019) and a politics-as-usual logic (Machado et al., 2023). Still, although these studies provide a state-of-the-art analysis, they do not fully explore the role that party youth wings seek to assume on social media or contextualize their communication strategies.

This study aims to understand party youth wings' objectives while using social media and the opportunities and challenges they identify in this type of political communication.

2. Youth and institutional politics: an unlove affair

Historically, young people have faced underrepresentation and exclusion from the public sphere (Siegel-Stechler, 2019), and they now constitute a minority in aging contemporary societies (Dassonneville, 2017). If, in addition, they do not vote and do not form a significant lobbying group, political actors do not take into account their voices (Schlozman et al., 2020).

Indeed, while aging is a dominant theme in the political agenda in many countries, the challenges of young people's emancipation are often sidelined (Wattenberg, 2020). This low prioritization of causes and issues important to youth can significantly affect their living conditions and, in turn, make young people feel even less motivated to participate, creating a potentially vicious circle (Sloam, 2014).

Portugal is one of the countries where the participation inequality based on age is most pronounced (Dassonneville, 2017; Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). An analysis of data from the European Social Survey between 2002 and 2019 reinforces that young Portuguese people (18-24 years old) vote much less than other age groups (Magalhães, 2022). More recently, in an unexpected turn, the turnout rose considerably in the 2024 Legislative Election, also in the 18 to 34-year-old group (Cancela & Magalhães, 2024). Specifically, the popularity of the far-right party Enough among the younger population (Sampaio, 2024) has been associated with the party's penetration on social media platforms such as Instagram and especially TikTok (Anjos, 2024; Coelho & Valente, 2024). It is to be seen if these results are contextual or represent a first step in a sustained growth trend.

Considering that young people are avid social media users, the mobilizing potential of these platforms for participation has been a prominent theme (Matthes, 2022). In a meta-analysis of over 300 studies and 2.000 coefficients, Boulianne and Belland (2022) confirm the existence of a positive and significant relationship between internet use and political participation, occurring at three levels: (1) access to potentially mobilizing resources (e.g., information, people's networks); (2) access to participation platforms (e.g., petitions, contact with politicians); and (3) access to forms of documenting participation (e.g., selfie at the voting booth, protest).

In Portugal, although there are some indications of a positive relationship between social media use and political and civic engagement (Soares et al., 2021), the impact of using these platforms on electoral participation is still an understudied topic (Cancela, 2023). Returning to the framework of Boulianne and Belland (2022), it is clear that party youth wings provide at least two types of interaction: access to information and contact with politicians. For this reason, studying the activities of these organizations on social media is deemed relevant. Firstly, however, it is

important to describe some of the characteristics of the environment in which digital political communication takes place.

3. Social media and democracy in the dissonant public sphere

In the digital era, understanding the public sphere as a cohesive social domain proves challenging (Aagaard, 2016). In that sense, Habermas (2022) recently revisited his seminal work from the 1960s – “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” – to reflect on how digitalization created fragmented public spheres. Answering the need for a reconceptualization, Pfetsch (2018) and Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) popularized the term “dissonant public spheres”. This concept diverges from the traditional view of the public sphere as a realm of consensus, instead portraying it as “a multitude of sounds and voices, fragmented actor constellations, parallel issue agendas, diverting or contradictory opinions, and conflicting interests” (Pfetsch, 2023, p. 346). The dissonant public sphere creates multiple challenges for political communication.

First, the strong audience fragmentation – reinforced by personalization filters and algorithms (Geschke et al., 2019) – contributes to polarization and leads researchers to question whether the internet provides the “social glue” that democracy needs (Sunstein, 2020, p. 260).

Second, there is an erosion of confidence in the media and the political institutions, once considered reliable sources of information (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018), which is only exacerbated by phenomena like misinformation and fake news (Habermas, 2022). Indeed, it is becoming progressively harder to differentiate between truth and fabrication (Koc-Michalska et al., 2023) amid the “post-truth democracy” era (Habermas, 2022, p. 162).

Third, the political discourse on social media is often based on uncivil exchanges and controversial content, which might arouse negative feelings toward politics and have a demobilizing effect (Goyanes et al., 2021; Goyanes et al., 2023). Contact with uncivil content on social media may also promote self-censorship and lead to more passive uses of information (Newman et al., 2023).

Also, the users’ attention spans are waning (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018), along with their ability to process relevant data (Habermas, 2022). The internet provides us with an overwhelming amount of information that we struggle to absorb (Coleman, 2017). As a consequence, in their quest to enhance user engagement (Pfetsch, 2020), institutions increasingly resort to emotionalization, sensationalism, personalization, and politainment (Gómez-García et al., 2023; Klinger et al., 2023; Koc-Michalska et al., 2023; Sunstein, 2020). These trends contribute to society’s depoliticization (Habermas, 2022) and might pose serious threats to democracy (Gómez-García et al., 2023). In this environment, political communication on social media seems like a challenging endeavor, both for parties and youth wings.

4. The (im)perfect mediator: The role of party youth wings

Given the difficulty of youth in establishing themselves as priorities on the political agenda, it is essential to recognize the role of party youth wings in youth emancipation (Forbrig,

2005). Party youth wings can be defined as “political organizations led by young people and open to membership of young people within a limited age range, in order for political parties to establish a connection with young people” (de Roon, 2020, p. 630). These groups are important political socialization agents, playing a pedagogical and educational role for youth and serving as a recruitment and rejuvenation function for the political party sphere (Hooghe et al., 2004). Youth wings can assume a fundamental role in mobilizing youth for political participation, and there is much potential to be explored in this area (Pickard, 2019).

In Portugal, although the contribution of youth party organizations to the relationship between youth and politics is practically unexplored (Silva & Costa, 2022), the value of these organizations is recognized. In the words of Cruz (1990):

Party youth organizations are the main instruments for mobilizing and channeling youth political participation. If they do not absorb all the existence and demand for youth intervention in political life, they at least occupy that political space in a very extensive way, constituting the great visible expression of formal and organized participation. (p. 248) (Authors’ translation)

More recently, Malafaia et al. (2018) concluded that party youth wings in Portugal offer quality political experiences, being “especialmente útil” in connecting young people to formal politics, an “urgent and challenging task” (p. 52). Regardless, the authors recall that these structures have been subjected to harsh criticism and viewed with some prejudice. Young people seem to be youth wings’ harshest critics, considering them obsolete and identifying factors such as an excessive orientation toward careerism, dependence on the parent party, limited available information, and hindrance to the actual integration of young people into politics (Coutinho, 2023; Cunha, 2024; Matos et al., 2023).

Regarding their digital performances, the evidence is not more encouraging. Internationally, party youth wings’ social media campaigns have been described as “uncoordinated and unable to communicate efficiently with different audiences” (Pickard, 2019, p. 224). Also, in the Portuguese context, despite youth wings considering political communication through social media essential (Silva & Costa, 2022), their inadequacy to young people has been noted, similar to parties’ (Costa et al., 2022; Machado et al., 2023).

To better understand this scenario, it is necessary to bring party youth wings into the conversation, understanding the purposes that guide their activity on social media and the opportunities and challenges they face. In this regard, we formulate the following questions:

RQ1: What are the main objectives of party youth wings’ communication through social media?

RQ2: What opportunities and challenges do party youth wings’ members identify in engaging young people through social media?

5. Method and data

To address the research questions, we adopted a qualitative method based on semi-structured interviews with representatives of youth wings of political parties,

whom we consider experts. Experts are individuals who possess a specific type of knowledge that, while not necessarily exclusive, is not readily available to everyone; they are active participants who have acquired this specific knowledge through their professional or voluntary involvement (Meuser & Nagel, 2009).

In recent research, interviews with members of party youth wings have been considered elite interviews (Silva & Costa, 2022). However, we align ourselves with authors who argue that the position of an expert is not necessarily accompanied by the power and status characteristic of elite interviews (Audenhove & Donders, 2019). Additionally, with this distinction in mind, we did not necessarily seek to interview the top hierarchy of the youth wings, allowing them the freedom to indicate the most suitable representative to speak on the topic under study.

Regarding sampling, we employed the purposive technique, where each individual is selected with a specific intention, usually due to their unique position in relation to the phenomenon (Babbie, 2020). In this case, the selection criterion was membership in party youth wings or informal youth groups within parties with (1) parliamentary representation in the last five years and (2) presence on social media. Seven youth political organizations met these criteria: within the realm of formal party youth wings, the Portuguese Communist Youth (Portuguese Communist Party / Partido Comunista Português / PCP), the People's Youth (People's Party / Centro Democrático Social – Partido Popular / CDS-PP), the Socialist Youth (Socialist Party / Partido Socialista / PS), and the Social Democratic Youth (Social Democratic Party / Partido Social Democrata / PSD); and within informal youth groups of parties, the Bloc Youth (Left Bloc / Bloco de Esquerda / BE), the Liberal Youth (Liberal Initiative / Iniciativa Liberal / IL), and the Enough Youth (Enough / Chega / CH). Interview requests were sent via email to each of these youth wings and youth groups, except for Enough Youth, for which we had to resort to the party's general address in the absence of a specific one for the youth wing.

As explained above, all interviewees were suggested by their respective party youth organization as the most suitable spokespeople, except for the interviewee from Enough Youth. After not receiving any response from the party, we were able to reach an Enough member from the Vila Nova de Gaia committee, who recommended a youth member. Since not including the perspective of Enough Youth in this research would impoverish the quality of the data, we proceeded with the interview. However, as the party's youth structure did not officially nominate the interviewee, we caution that greater care should be taken when interpreting the participant's views as representative of his organization. The interviews took place via video call between February 13 and May 24, 2023. The role of video conferencing tools in qualitative research has been growing due to their accessible, convenient, time-saving, and sustainable character (Gray et al., 2020). It is also a particularly adequate technique for young people, who are generally comfortable with these new technologies.

Considering the expert status of the interviewees, anonymity and confidentiality were not assured. The collection, analysis, and publication of data thus depended on the interviewees' formal and written authorization to use their personal data via informed consent. The research plan was validated by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto (opinion no. 18/CEFLUP/2022).

Since we aimed to acquire specialized and interpretative knowledge from the interviews, the script was shared in advance with the interviewees, allowing them to reflect on the themes. Given the non-anonymous character of the interviews, we considered it to be the most ethical approach. The script begins with warm-up questions about party youth wings and youth political participation more generally, gradually moving toward the topic of political communication on social media. Table 1 presents the sample characterization. The diversity of ages, backgrounds, and birthplaces adds to the richness of the data collected.

Table 1

Sample characterization

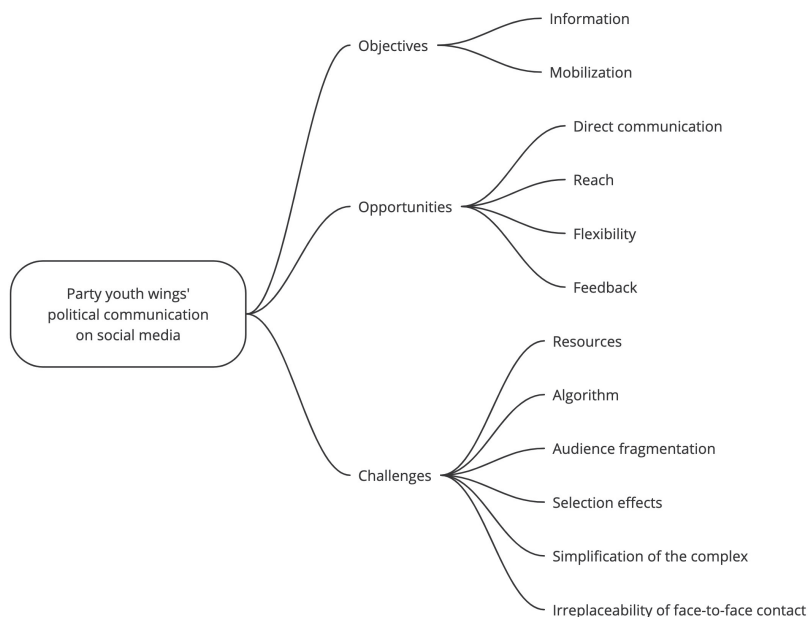
Party	Youth wing	Name	Area of study	Age*	Birthplace
BE	Bloc Youth	Beatriz Vieira	Education / Communication	25	Porto
CH	Enough Youth	Francisco Pereira Araújo	International Relations	19	Vila Nova de Gaia
IL	Liberal Youth	Pedro Pereira	Medicine	26	Viseu
CDS-PP	People's Youth	Francisco Camacho	Law / Management	30	Lisbon
PCP	Portuguese Communist Youth	Francisco Jesus	Electrical and Computer Engineering	24	Vila Nova de Gaia
PSD	Social Democratic Youth	Alexandre Poço	Communication / Management	30	Lisbon
PS	Socialist Youth	Francisco Themudo de Oliveira	Political science	29	Lisbon

Note*. Participants' age at the time of the interview.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo, a software for qualitative data analysis. The data analysis involved inductive coding of the data, aiming for proximity to social reality, and using two sequential and complementary approaches: the In Vivo method and the focused coding method. In Vivo coding relies on using the interviewees' own language as codes, and it is particularly helpful in studies aiming to honor and prioritize the voices of marginalized groups, such as young people (Saldaña, 2021). Thus, in this first step, we analyzed the interviewees' answers as a whole and coded the words and expressions that stood out, using quotation marks. Then, through focused coding, we analyzed the existing list of codes to identify thematic similarities and to find and develop the most prominent categories or themes (Saldaña, 2021) in a process similar to a thematic analysis. The dimensions that emerged are presented in Figure 1, and are further explored in the results section.

Figure 1

Objectives, opportunities and challenges of party youth wings' political communication on social media



6. Results

The results are presented in three sections: (1) objectives, (2) opportunities, and (3) challenges. To maximize the voices of young people – in a social context where they are seldom heard (Ferreira, 2017) – we heavily rely on direct quotations.

6.1 Objectives

Firstly, interviewees were asked about the main objectives of their respective youth wing activity on social media. Mobilization (both electoral and party-related) and, above all, the dissemination of information emerged as the primary functions of digital channels. On the contrary, interaction is not pointed out as a goal by any of the youth wings.

6.1.1. Mobilization

Most of the interviewees identified mobilization as a goal. This mobilization can occur at two levels: on the one hand, in terms of voter turnout, and on the other hand, in terms of party membership.

Pedro Pereira (Liberal Youth) points out both types of mobilization as objectives. The other interviewees are more clearly divided between mobilizing for participation and mobilization for membership. On the left of the political spectrum, Beatriz Vieira (Bloc Youth) and Francisco Jesus (Portuguese Communist Youth) agree on social media's mobilizing power for participation. Beatriz explains that the Bloc Youth tries to reach young people without a political connection and convince them to vote, while Francisco refers to the mobilization for unconventional participation: "a kid from one school sees that another school was closed because of the bar, he thinks 'wow, maybe we can do the same thing here'".

On the right, the potential to attract members is identified more clearly. Alexandre Poço (Social Democratic Youth) has no doubts that social media platforms are a "great gateway" for young people to join the youth wing, and Francisco Camacho (People's Youth) also sees these platforms as a way to transmit a certain message and recruit members.

6.1.2 Information

Despite the importance of mobilization, most participants identify information dissemination as the main communication objective. The types of information are varied and include details about youth wings and their events, political messages and positions, and historical context about significant dates. Nevertheless, even when adopting a 1.0 communication approach, the interviewees remain concerned about factors such as reach and virality. Francisco Themudo de Oliveira, for example, explains that the Socialist Youth's nuclear goal is to "be viral while informing", which is difficult because "going viral involves a bit of bait and we don't want to bait, we want to be serious, but we also want to be seen".

6.1.3 Interaction

Notably, the promotion of interaction and political expression is not mentioned as an objective by any of the interviewees. All the young people admit that the organizations they belong to practice predominantly unidirectional communication, but the reasons differ.

For a few youth wings' representatives, this is not a strategy. Pedro Pereira (Liberal Youth) explains that the number of comments in posts is usually very low, which makes no room for dialogue. Additionally, Francisco Pereira Araújo considers that Enough Youth's unidirectional communication is due, to some extent, to the absence of someone professional and paid to be fully dedicated to the communication department.

However, most interviewees believe that social media is not an appropriate place for bidirectional communication in the political sphere. For the Socialist Youth, in direct contrast to the Liberal Youth, it is strategic. Francisco Themudo de Oliveira acknowledges that, although bidirectional communication is a recommended practice, "given the political situation and the way the internet works" – in which "the comment sections are much more directed at hateful comments, in general, than at positive and constructive comments" – the Socialist Youth chooses not to engage. The young

socialist concludes that “it is not ideal because it is not elevated politics”. Alexandre Poço also describes the Social Democratic Youth’s comment sections as a battleground, in which “some defend and others attack”. He further explains that reactions to their posts are almost always bifold: while the party’s supporters approve and applaud their initiatives, their political opponents criticize them.

Beatriz Vieira and Francisco Jesus share this perspective. Beatriz Vieira considers that “social media is not the best place for debates”, which the Bloc Youth prefers to have elsewhere. However, the Left Bloc member admits that this lack of dialogue can bring mobilization difficulties since, in her opinion, it is complex to convert and engage with people without listening to them. Along the same lines, when asked about the fact that the Portuguese Communist Youth has the comments section disabled on Instagram, Francisco Jesus argues that the social media political discussions are “very fruitless” and that “ends up being just people rambling and talking about things that don’t matter”.

6.2 Opportunities

The interviews allowed us to identify four main youth engagement opportunities social media provides: direct communication, reach, flexibility, and feedback.

6.2.1. *Direct communication*

The first opportunity is the fact that social media networks are “immediate contact channels with the new generations” (Francisco Camacho, People’s Youth) and constitute the primary way party youth wings can communicate with young people, replacing the traditional rallies or pamphlets (Pedro Pereira, Liberal Youth). Francisco Themudo de Oliveira (Socialist Youth) describes the centripetal power of social media as a means of communication:

Social media networks already have total power over our public space and public debate. The press still maintains some preponderance, but I think it’s cultural because people consume even the press on social media. Morning radio programs are among the most viral videos on Instagram, the most viewed reels on Instagram. Where people read the news is on Facebook. In other words, social media is the center of public space, meaning the mobilization power is total. (F.T. Oliveira, interview, April 18, 2023)

The Portuguese Communist Youth spokesperson agrees. Francisco Jesus argues that social media networks facilitate contact and help overcome the “bit of shame” that young people may feel, for example, in the party affiliation process.

6.2.2. *Reach*

The majority of the interviewees mentioned reach as an advantage. Alexandre Poço states that social media networks constitute 90% of the reach of Social Democratic

Youth. Pedro Pereira explains that the electorate of Liberal Initiative is “younger, more educated, more urban, virtually all of them will be on social media”, which means that, theoretically, they can reach their whole target audience. “The reach capacity is infinite”, concludes the representative of the Liberal Youth. Francisco Themudo de Oliveira also emphasizes the importance of reach, suggesting that the influence of Socialist Youth is directly linked to how widely their content is disseminated. Lastly, Francisco Jesus (Portuguese Communist Youth) lists as an opportunity the ability to connect to a broader audience, describing the “massification” nature of social media, although he points out that it is not “the same level of conversation” nor has “the same level of impact”.

Beatriz Vieira presents a slightly different view from the other interviewees, more focused on who than on how many. The Bloc Youth spokesperson argues that in a centralized country like Portugal – very focused on urban centers like Lisbon and Porto –, social media networks can “bring people from the interior closer”. However, the Left Bloc member acknowledges that the decrease in these inequalities was more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, when digital communication was the only available channel.

6.2.3. *Flexibility*

A third opportunity is flexibility. Social media offers many opportunities to be bolder and take a chance: “if it goes wrong, it can go viral for the worst reasons, but if it goes well, it can also have a huge echo for the best reasons” (Francisco Camacho, Popular Youth). This flexibility also translates into a more moldable communication, according to Pedro Pereira from the Liberal Youth:

We can react very quickly on a social media network to a certain theme, to a certain urgent reality than we can with parliamentary activity. And so the mode of communication on social media networks becomes important not only in terms of reach but also in the ability to react, to correct. (P. Pereira, interview, February 27, 2023)

6.2.4. *Feedback*

Finally, two interviewees mention – albeit in different ways – the opportunity to listen. Francisco Jesus explains that the activity of the Portuguese Communist Youth on social media also involves giving visibility to organized youth movements that do not find space in the traditional media. Pedro Pereira highlights the advantage of having positive or negative “automatic feedback” on the Liberal Initiative’s ideas, which he considers very beneficial. The young liberal also displays a strategic communication perspective, emphasizing the opportunity to analyze metrics and assess the content’s effectiveness.

6.3. Challenges

Regardless of ideological orientation, party youth wings face similar challenges while trying to engage young people on social media: resources, algorithm, audience

fragmentation, selection effects, simplification of the complex, and the irreplaceability of face-to-face contact.

6.3.1. Resources

A challenge identified by most interviewees, regardless of the size of the party they represent, is related to resources. It is almost consensual that quality digital communication depends on material, financial, and human resources.

"We know that we don't have all the resources in the world", says Beatriz Vieira, acknowledging the limited resources for audiovisual productions on social media. The Bloc Youth representative explains that communication depends on the limited time of militants, who often accumulate other jobs. Similarly, Francisco Jesus (Portuguese Communist Youth) identifies the lack of resources and the difficulty in achieving a higher production level. In Beatriz Vieira's (Bloc Youth) words, "sometimes, membership in small parties is done like this, everyone helps in the areas they can".

This perspective is corroborated by Francisco Pereira Araújo from Enough Youth, who considers that this is a challenge felt by all youth wings:

Sometimes we think – those inside the Youth – 'communication could be different' or 'communication could do this or that', but it is true that when there is no paid work, things become effectively more complicated in terms of availability, and we always have that perception. Parties are positions that are paid. The Youths are not. (F. P. Araújo, interview, April 24, 2023)

Although the Social Democratic Youth representative (Alexandre Poço) does not mention resource-related difficulties, Francisco Themudo de Oliveira notes that even in the Socialist Youth – the incumbent party's youth wing at the time of the interview – material and production obstacles are always "great challenges".

Pedro Pereira identifies a correlation between resources and communication quality, considering that the Liberal Initiative's growth – also financially – empowered them to act. However, it is worth noting that even in the Liberal Youth, the strong dependency on the militants' voluntary work is evident.

6.3.2 Algorithm

The algorithm is a challenge for the youth wings of parties closer to ideological extremes. Both the Enough Youth and the Portuguese Communist Youth representatives report difficulties with the posts' reach on social media. Francisco Pereira Araújo mentions the possibility that certain social media platforms are "a bit more hostile" to the Enough party's ideals, although he considers this trend has been decreasing. More significantly, he points out that the main obstacle is the party's image as the "black sheep". In his opinion, some people have positive perceptions of Enough but do not follow the party on social media because "they do not want to be associated", which negatively impacts the algorithm.

Francisco Jesus also reports difficulties with the moderating role of social media, claiming that the Portuguese Communist Party's symbols lead to "shadow ban or to artificially boycott the reach" of their posts. He also disputes the comparison between ideological extremes and the idea that "a hammer and a sickle are equal to a swastika".

6.3.3. Audience fragmentation

The third challenge is handling fragmented audiences. Alexandre Poço explains the two main types of communication practiced by Social Democratic Youth on social media:

I think there are two types of communication that party youth wings do a lot, and the Social Democratic Youth as well. It is communication for the masses, to try to go beyond the confines of our natural space, our militants, our sympathizers, where we can generate more reach. And then there is the communication, I would say, that is for the *tifosi*, communication for those who are already in the cause. (A. Poço, interview, March 6, 2023)

Describing the current proportion as 50-50, the social democrat explains that – although, ideally, the communication for the masses would be dominant – it is crucial to maintain a more internal communication for the "support base".

According to its spokesperson, the Socialist Youth also seeks to balance the two types of communication "with a little magic dust". On the one hand, Francisco Themudo de Oliveira considers that the former communication model used by the Socialist Youth – heavily based on the promotion and coverage of events – had "little interest for the average Portuguese citizen". On the other hand, he argues that it is "important to communicate to those who make the day-to-day of an institution", even if it delays the algorithm. Also, in Enough Youth, it is possible to identify the two types of content – "toward the inside", especially in the case of events, and for "an electoral right-wing audience" when it comes to information sharing – but this coordination is not pointed out as a difficulty by Francisco Pereira Araújo.

In addition to content, the tension associated with communicating with different audiences can exist at the level of form or, in other words, language. Francisco Camacho suggests that politicians often use a language that is not accessible to many citizens. Comparing formal language to a "crutch" and arguing that "a good speech has to be a simple speech", the People's Youth spokesperson acknowledges he tried to simplify his approach and presentation over time. Beatriz Vieira recognizes that in Bloc Youth, although they try to adapt their communication to a younger audience, the language ends up being "quite technical", "very specific", and "more for the converted". The Left Bloc representative reflects that, sometimes, "it's difficult to get out of our bubble".

6.3.4. Selection effects

The fourth challenge of political communication on social media is precisely the "bubble", a concept recurrently by interviewees while describing selection effects.

"It's the bubble that participates. The bubble participates both online and offline", summarizes Alexandre Poço (Social Democratic Youth), who has no doubt that the "overwhelming majority" of those who use social media networks politically are "the convinced, the converted, and the affiliated." Francisco Themudo de Oliveira agrees, stating that the Socialist Youth cannot convince those uninterested in politics to go to the ballots through social media.

Francisco Camacho also identifies a bubble context. On one hand, those who follow the People's Youth page are users with a previous level of interest. On the other hand, even when they try to appeal to the participation and militancy of new young individuals, it is in contexts where youth with a previous level of interest tends to concentrate (e.g., Youth Parliament).

"It's very easy to make that connection", says Pedro Pereira (Liberal Youth), explaining that those who use social media networks for political activities are "mostly those who already have a political persona". Beatriz Vieira (Bloc Youth) agrees that the young people who consume Bloc Youth's content on social media are either sympathizers or at least have some political interest. "Even those who go there to insult", she laughs.

6.3.5 Simplification of the complex

The fifth challenge is what Francisco Themudo de Oliveira (Socialist Youth) jokingly calls "the million-euro answer". It is the balance between simplicity and complexity: "it's difficult to convert very complex issues that require a lot of analysis and study into small pieces", explains Francisco Jesus. Referring to José Saramago's idea that people will start roaring instead of speaking, the Portuguese Communist Party representative reproaches the need to condense, for example, on Twitter (X), "highly complex issues into 280 characters."

The Bloc Youth also feels this challenge. Beatriz Vieira believes that social media networks like Twitter (X), whose principle is "be simple, go straight to the point", are somewhat incompatible with ideology. The problem is that, paradoxically, being simple is complicated, as explained by the representative of the Popular Youth, Francisco Camacho:

Having simple language is difficult, it takes a lot of work. There are topics that are not so simple, even for us who may have a more structured thinking on certain matters, are difficult for us to explain, so simplifying the complicated is a complex domain, it's a domain that requires effort. (F. Camacho, interview, May 24, 2023)

Although he considers this balance to be the "golden key" and a complex task, Francisco Themudo de Oliveira acknowledges that it is becoming easier as the Socialist Youth learns "the rules of the game" and perfects "the formula".

6.3.6 Irreplaceability of face-to-face contact

The final challenge of digital political communication is the importance of face-to-face contact, which digital channels cannot replace. In the words of Beatriz Vieira from the Bloc Youth:

How can I put it? I think some parties are more about Twitter and they thrive there. But I think we, despite having a presence and, as our motion stated, living in a very digital world, and obviously we have to be a part of it, but our place is the streets. It always has been. (B. Vieira, interview, February 14, 2023)

One of the “Twitter parties” is the Liberal Initiative, alluding to the party’s success on social media, acknowledged by most interviewees. Interestingly, even the spokesperson of Liberal Youth (Pedro Pereira) agrees with the superiority of face-to-face contact, which “is and will always be the most important way to engage in political participation”.

In the same vein, Francisco Jesus (Portuguese Communist Youth) considers that the fact that social media is not as effective at mobilizing people as personal contact is related to their individualistic-oriented structure:

I am not trying to demonize social media, mind you, they have their purpose – but they end up being a symptom of a much larger thing, which is a society very oriented toward the atomization of the individual. In other words, even Margaret Thatcher said this – I totally disagree with this lady, mind you (laughs) – but what she says is very symptomatic of the thinking that exists today, which is ‘there is no society, there is only a series of individuals.’ And I think social media, in the way they are constructed, often triggers this kind of thinking. And that makes political participation not so strong. (F. Jesus, interview, March 7, 2023)

7. Discussion and conclusion

This study aims to gain more knowledge about party youth wings’ political communication on social media, by identifying its main objectives, opportunities, and challenges.

Information is identified as the primary objective of activity on social media. On the one hand, this purpose aligns with the fact that, in Portugal, social media is a central source of information for young people (Newman et al., 2023), including political information (Costa, 2022). On the other hand, the assumed predominance of information dissemination (unidirectional) over dialogue (bidirectional) corroborates the use of Web 2.0 platforms with a 1.0 approach, previously identified in political communication by Portuguese parties and youth wings (García-Orosa, 2022; Machado et al., 2023; Santos & Bicho, 2016; Serra-Silva et al., 2018).

Although considering social media as an essential tool for direct contact with young people, allowing widespread communication, flexibility, and audience listening, the interviewees identify challenges that limit communication effectiveness. Unsurprisingly, some of them are linked to the characteristics of dissonant public spheres discussed in the literature review.

Firstly, in line with previous research, both international (Pickard, 2019) and national (Malafaia et al., 2018; Silva & Costa, 2022), we find underinvestment by parent parties reflected in limited financial resources, and heavy reliance on volunteers’ work. The diverse areas of study of the interviewees hint that even the most involved members in the youth organizations’ communication often maintain a “real-world job”.

Communicating with fragmented audiences is a further challenge, as reported by Pickard (2019). The frequent need to include an inward-looking approach – also to reward the members' volunteer work – reflects a somewhat “preaching to the converted” logic (Norris, 2003). Unfortunately, this does not help alleviate the perception of elitism associated with Portuguese youth political structures recently identified by Matos et al. (2023).

Furthermore, despite not being explicitly verbalized by the interviewees, assembling the puzzle reveals a certain level of incompatibility between politics and social media: highly polarized spaces marked by high levels of incivility and dissonance (Goyanes et al., 2021) resulting in unfruitful political debates (Goyanes et al., 2023); platforms that require excessive simplification of highly complex issues, posing the threat of “trivialization and ‘dumbing down’ of political issues” (Penney, 2017, p. 168); and the ongoing tension between individualization and politicization (Reuter & Frick, 2024), with the individualization logic of social media potentially discouraging more effective collective action (Maniates, 2001).

If studies keep finding a positive relationship between digital media use and political participation (Boulianne & Belland, 2022; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020) despite the challenges described above, it is necessary to understand who uses social media for political purposes (Matthes, 2022). The interviewees provide the answer: “the bubble”, that is, young people with prior political interest. What they describe is a selection effect: as control over media consumption increases, individual media use motivations become more relevant (Hopmann et al., 2016). This future line of research is crucial. If it is already interested and involved youth who politically use social media, these platforms may increase (rather than decrease) existing participation gaps (Heiss & Matthes, 2019).

The results of the 2024 Legislative Election in Portugal, showing a decrease in youth electoral abstention (Cancela & Magalhães, 2024), add new layers of complexity. It is too early to determine if this scenario represents a paradigm shift or an exception, but it raises many questions. If negativity and populism are rewarded with user engagement on social media (Klinger et al., 2023), could dissonance act as an attraction rather than a deterrent for young people? If so, what is the best of two evils? This theme calls for further research.

On a final note, we should highlight that – in an era where political parties have big incentives to adopt populist and sensationalist strategies to gain popularity (Pfetsch, 2023) – it is encouraging to see the next generation of politicians being aware and reflective about the dissonant public sphere and the role that political communication plays in it. However, if party youth wings withdraw from the conversation, the resulting void is likely to be filled by extremist and populist voices, whose appeal grows. As Coleman (2017) reminds us, paradoxically, in the *social media* era, “the missing element of contemporary political democracy is deliberation: the opportunity to share, compare, argue and resolve views with others” (p. 33). Thus, as difficult as it may be, party youth wings must not give up on the promotion of political dialogue.

This study has limitations. First, the non-anonymous interviews may increase the social desirability bias (Fielding & Thomas, 2016). However, the multiple points of convergence found between interviews and recent research increase confidence in the data's internal and external validity. Also, although we tried to spotlight youth's ideas,

we are still reporting the views of young people inserted in political elites. Giving voice to the subjective contexts and realities of young people, especially the most marginalized, remains urgent. With youth audience engagement expected to be an increasingly tricky task (Newman et al., 2023), the formula for reaching those who are not interested is, also for scientific research, the million-euro answer.

Lastly, our research only begins to uncover the political communication of party youth wings on social media and should not be taken as a comprehensive overview. Future research avenues about the topic may include (1) the members' level of professionalization regarding digital communication tools; (2) multi-platform studies on how youth wings leverage the different social media affordances to reach their communication goals, and (3) the impact of politainment and negativity on young users' engagement.

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Acknowledgments

This work is funded by National Funds through the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), through a PhD grant (2020.05202.BD), with the support of CITCEM - Transdisciplinary Research Centre «Culture, Space and Memory», within the scope of the project UIDB/04059/2020, DOI 10.54499/UIDB/04059/2020.

Conflict of interest | Conflito de interesses

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.
Os autores não têm conflitos de interesses a declarar.

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How to cite | Como Citar [APA 7^a edition]

Machado, S., Ribeiro, V., & Meneses, R. (2024). "The Million-Euro Answer": Party Youth Wings' views on the Opportunities and Challenges of Political Communication on Social Media. *Media & Jornalismo*, 24(45), Article e4513. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-5462_45_13

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