POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND DIGITAL INTERACTIVITY IN POLARISED ELECTORAL PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

Framed within the growing polarization in Peruvian politics, this study explores the mediations between political communication and digital interactivity in polarized electoral processes. Through a qualitative analytical approach, a set of perceptions is gathered, providing a nuanced representation of political polarization. The results reveal a complex dynamic of perceptions during the polarized second round of the electoral process, emphasizing the significant impact of digital interactions on public perception and digital engagement. In this context, the crucial importance of digital platforms in shaping perception and fuelling political polarization during confrontational electoral events becomes evident.

1. Introduction

The increasing prevalence of digital media across diverse social, political, and economic domains has ushered in a new era of political mediatisation (Carlón, 2015). In this context, it is crucial to comprehend the nature of political communication in electoral contexts, which are typified by digital interaction. The advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic has precipitated a rapid acceleration in the digitalisation of political processes, particularly in the domain of social media, thereby transforming the modus operandi of electoral campaigns and reducing the salience of conventional forms of political advertising (Slimovich, 2022). Furthermore, there is evidence of a decline in trust in representative democratic systems, which can be attributed to a perceived failure to fulfil the underlying principles that previously sustained this trust (Barandiarán et al., 2020). The utilisation of digital technology is effecting a transformation in how information is produced, distributed and received (Boczkowski & Anderson, 2017; Gutiérrez-Aguilar et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is not yet clear whether this transformation leads to an increase in citizen participation (Prior, 2007). In other words, the increased circulation of news and communications in digital environments, as well as additional entertainment options, does not necessarily result in increased political participation.

The advent of the digital revolution, characterised by the pervasive presence of devices such as smartphones and tablets, has profoundly transformed the manner in which information is consumed within society. The necessity for immediate access to information has diminished the significance of computers, while readers seek and demand a continuous flow of information at an unparalleled speed (Sobrados, 2016). This shift in information dynamics underscores the imperative for comprehension and adaptation to novel forms of digital communication in order to retain relevance in the public sphere. In the contemporary era, there is a notable inclination towards the consumption of information from a multitude of sources, encompassing traditional media, blogs, and social networks. This shift in the information behaviour of the population highlights the necessity for an understanding and adaptation to the novel dynamics of digital communication in order to maintain relevance in the public sphere (Quispe-Mamani et al., 2023).

The relationship between political communication and digital interactivity in confrontational electoral processes provides a detailed and complex view of youth expression in Latin America. This highlights diversity in the political, social, cultural and intersubjective spheres as a fundamental element in understanding youth dynamics in the region. The focus is specifically directed towards the last years of the present decade, with the objective of situating it in the context of emerging forms of participation and political notions among young people, as evidenced by recent studies (García, 2022). A key objective of this study is to examine the extent to which young people engage with political institutions, and to what extent they may exhibit apathy towards political institutionality. This apathy is evidenced by the fact that young people are leading social mobilisations, a phenomenon that has been particularly prevalent in Latin America during the last decade (2011-2021). It is therefore essential to identify the specific triggers that influence this behaviour in order to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence young people's active participation in the political sphere (Montañez et al., 2022).

Political communication has historically played a pivotal role in political campaigns. However, we are currently witnessing a surge in affective polarisation, characterised by social distancing and mutual rejection based on partisan preferences (Lachica, 2021). The phenomenon of political polarisation, when occurring within a social context, gives rise to divisions and renders consensus difficult to achieve, particularly when it is combined with affective polarisation and aggressive discourse directed towards opposing views. The Internet, by reconfiguring political interaction, serves to intensify this polarisation by placing political parties in distant positions due to their disparate interests (Gómez and Ochoa, 2021). This shift in political communication underscores the necessity to address these phenomena in the digital age.

Digital interactivity, enabled by channels such as email, blogs, social networks, and instant messaging, has resulted in a redefinition of communication strategies for political institutions and their representatives. This has led to a transformation of the political paradigm (Mateo-Toscano et al., 2022). In this context, the analysis of social mobilisation is a crucial element in the comprehension of the political concepts that inform young people's actions, and it serves to emphasise the identity and political diversity that characterise their participation. In this regard, the investigation of young people's involvement in electoral processes and their utilisation of digital interactions in Latin America aims not

only to comprehend their political conduct, but also to examine the impact and extent to which digital platforms influence their active engagement in polarised electoral contexts (Burgos et al., 2023). The advent of digital interactivity has created new avenues for participation, thereby becoming a pivotal factor in the shaping of contemporary political dynamics.

As Montaña et al. (2013) observe, there is an urgent need to establish more effective mechanisms to regulate the content generated by virtual communities and prevent the dissemination of undesirable elements. The advent of digital interactivity has brought with it a host of opportunities, but also a number of challenges, with the issue of accountability being a particularly pertinent one. The phenomenon of political polarisation is evident in electoral processes, whereby the population is divided into opposing poles of left, right and centre. This polarisation is the result of ideological distance and is related to fundamental problems in the country, including economic and social inequality, increased immigration and corruption scandals. In this context, it is essential to analyse the multimedia narrative of digital media, such as social networks, to ascertain whether they utilise the digital linguistic flexibility to innovate in their narrative or whether, in daily practice, they eschew an elaborate multimedia narrative that adds value to the information and the media outlet that offers it (Palau-Sampio and Sánchez-García, 2007). The interrelated aspects of digital interactivity, political polarisation and multimedia narrative shape the complex landscape of political communication in the digital age and merit careful attention in the analysis and understanding of confrontational electoral processes.

The study of political communication and digital interactivity in confrontational electoral processes is situated within a historical context in which interactions have played a pivotal role in numerous political campaigns. In the present era, this scenario is shaped by a rising phenomenon of affective polarisation, typified by sentiments of distrust and disdain, leading to social isolation and reciprocal rejection based on partisan affiliations. The advent of digital interactivity, through a multiplicity of information channels, has precipitated a redefinition of the communicative strategies adopted by political institutions, thereby engendering a profound transformation in the political paradigm (Chaves-Montero et al., 2017).

In the 2021 presidential elections in Peru, the palpable polarisation and fragmentation of the party system, epitomised by Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori, transcended the purely political to extend into society. This phenomenon is characterised by a deep-rooted competitive individualism that has persisted since the 1980s. During the second round of elections, social networks played a pivotal role in intensifying this polarisation, giving rise to ideologically driven discourses that were amplified in public opinion (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022). It is of particular significance that in contexts characterised by economic crisis and a perceived erosion of rights, the circulation of polarising and even hateful discourses tends to gain greater strength (Pagliarone and Quiroga, 2021). Ames (2021) posits that economic powers, with their influence over the mainstream media, bear a significant responsibility to elevate the quality of political discourse and prevent polarisation.

In the context of the second round of elections, a greater prevalence of affective polarisation was observed on social media, with positive and negative messages outnumbering those of a neutral nature. The emotional charge intensified, thereby underscoring the pivotal role of emotional expressions as drivers of interaction and propagation of polarisation (Ponte, 2022). This context presents challenges for political stability and crisis resolution in Peru, as well as for the health of the democratic system. It highlights the importance of understanding and addressing the dynamics of political communication and digital interactivity in this context (Olivera, 2022; Pozo, 2023).

In the context of national political survival, the phenomenon of political polarisation has been observed to involve the identification of ideological positions that are distant from the political centre within the spectrum of the party system. This has emerged as a central element influencing contemporary political dynamics (Vargas Cárdenas, 2021). The digital revolution has not only impacted information consumption patterns but has also strengthened the connectivity of the population. This is evidenced by a growing willingness to consume information from diverse sources, whether through traditional media, blogs or social networks (Barredo-Ibáñez and Díaz-Cerveró, 2017). In essence, this study seeks to elucidate the interrelationships between political communication and digital interactivity in the context of political polarisation in polarised electoral processes. It is of paramount importance to gain an understanding of these dynamics and to adapt to them in order to maintain relevance in a public sphere that is becoming increasingly influenced by digital technologies.

2. Method

The methodological proposal was structured in two clearly delineated phases. The initial phase of the study entailed an in-depth examination of the dynamics of political communication. This was achieved through the conduct of interviews with 23 students in their final year at a School of Social Communication at a public university in southern Peru. This phase contributes to an understanding of the interviewees' perceptions of politics in the country from a communication perspective. Particular emphasis is placed on the interconnection between political communication, inherent to the propaganda of competing political parties, and the interactions that emerge on social networks, particularly Facebook. Subsequently, a detailed examination of the electoral process was conducted, with a particular focus on user interactions on the Facebook platform. This analysis examined digital interactivity through an investigation of the interactions between groups and followers of the presidential candidates, the participation of individuals in the form of political comments for and against, and the underlying motivations for the consumption and sharing of content. The objective was to identify interactions with a significant impact on the network, prioritising symbolic messages that contributed to the creation of arbitrarily selected polarised spaces.

The in-depth interview guide was employed as the instrument for the collection of data pertaining to students' perceptions of political communication and digital interactivity in contexts characterised by polarisation. The following questions were posed: 1) Please indicate the extent of your participation or interest in political and electoral issues at the national level. 2) Do you consider that there is a polarisation in political communication in Peru? The rationale behind this question is to ascertain whether social network interactions influence perceptions of political polarisation.

3) How do interactions in social networks influence your perception of political polarisation?

The Facebook platform of a national radio station (Radio Programas del Perú/ Peru Radio Programmes. RPP), with a significant national penetration estimated at 80% (Compañía Peruana de Estudios de Mercados y Opinión Pública/ Peruvian Company of Market and Public Opinion Studies. CPI, 2021), was employed for the purpose of analysing the interactions of users who expressed support for Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori during the presidential run-off election. The intensity of messages shared participation in comments and motivations for sharing were evaluated during the second round of elections (April-June). This period, which Sartori (2005) characterised as a centripetal contest, is inherently polarising.

The two moments of analysis delineated permitted the establishment of connections between students' perceptions of political communication and digital interactivity on social networks. The degree of interactivity, participation and the underlying motivations behind the messages shared by users on Facebook were evaluated in order to gain insight into the evolution of political polarisation in Peru. From this perspective, the analysis assumes a causal relationship between the identified scenarios and their potential impact on democratic processes. The objective is to comprehend the processes that give rise to distrust and rejection among political adversaries, which in turn foster an environment conducive to bad governance. In particular, the second round of elections took place within an environment of polarisation, which had been shaped by a climate of instability and conflict in government.

3. Results

An investigation of the nexus between political communication and digital interactivity in contexts of electoral polarisation reveals the intricate and pivotal nature of these interactions. They not only influence public opinion but also have a bearing on the quality of democracy itself.

3.1. Student Perspectives on Political Communication in Peru

This approach is centred on an investigation of students' dispositions towards political communication, with a particular focus on confrontational election situations and the growing influence of digital platforms.

3.1.1. Student Participation in Political and Electoral Processes

As pivotal figures in the contemporary and future political landscape, students contribute novel insights and dynamism to the political process, encompassing information consumption and active voting.

Figure 1. Student perceptions of involvement in political and electoral issues
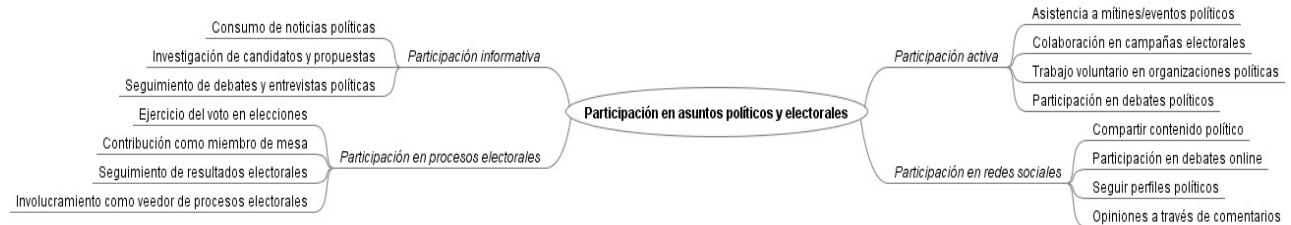
Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the students interviewed demonstrated active and varied participation in the political sphere, as evidenced by their engagement in events, campaigns, and debates. The consumption of news and research into candidates demonstrates an informed interest in politics. The notable prevalence on social media underscores the significance of these platforms as conduits for civic engagement and the articulation of perspectives. The participation of the students in the electoral process, from voting to assuming the role of members of polling stations, reflects a commitment to the democratic process. Community participation, evidenced by the organisation of events and collaboration in local initiatives, serves to underscore the interviewees' broad connections. In conclusion, the results demonstrate a comprehensive and committed participation in a range of political and community activities.

Figure 2. Students' perceptions of polarisation in political communication

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The findings presented in Figure 2 illustrate the multifaceted nature of perceptions regarding polarisation in Peruvian political communication. A notable proportion of respondents identified the underlying causes of this phenomenon as a pronounced social and economic bias, compounded by the influence of the mass media. The phenomenon of political polarisation has been identified as a potential catalyst for the weakening of democratic institutions and the exacerbation of social tensions. Nevertheless, some posit that there are positive consequences, such as increased motivation for political participation. Some argue that polarisation is rooted in political history, while others perceive it as a recent and accelerating trend. A third group interprets it as a cyclical phenomenon occurring in electoral cycles. When considered collectively, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how citizens in Peru perceive political polarisation.

Figure 3. Student perceptions of political interactions on social networks
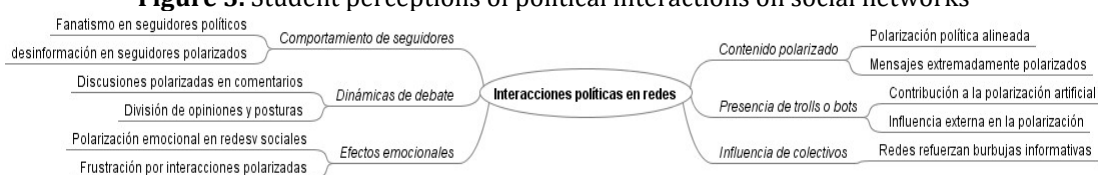
Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The results presented in Figure 3 demonstrate that the presence of polarised content is evident in the form of partisan publications and extremist messages, which contribute to a discourse characterised by impassioned discussions and divergent perspectives. The influence of groups and communities is reflected in the formation of information bubbles and the exertion of pressure to conform to dominant perspectives. Furthermore, follower behaviour encompasses bigotry and bullying, while the presence of trolls or bots contributes to the artificial polarisation of discourse. The emotional effects are evident, with participants reporting feelings of emotional impact, frustration and disenchantment due to their experiences of polarised social media interactions. These findings underscore the intricate and substantial influence of digital interactions on perceptions of political polarisation.

3.2. Digital Interaction Dynamics in the Polarised Run-Off Election in Peru

In the second round of elections in Peru, digital interactions played a pivotal role in the context of a highly polarised political environment. These interactions provide a comprehensive insight into the role of social networks in the intensification of polarisation and the formation of public opinion during this pivotal electoral period.

3.2.1. Digital Interactivity on Facebook During the Polarised Run-Off Elections

The concept of digital interactivity is manifested in a multitude of forms, including comments, likes, shares, polls, and other actions that engage users in active participation within networks. This was particularly evident during the second round of elections between presidential candidates Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori on RPP's Facebook network. This environment was characterised by a high level of political polarisation and confrontation.
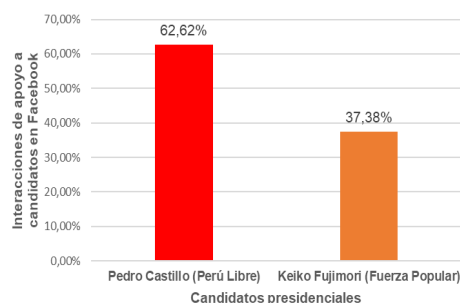
Figure 4. Facebook support groups
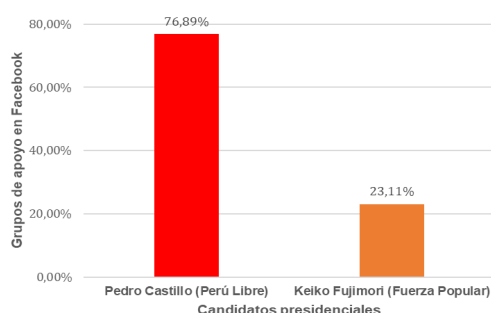
Source: Based on data from RPP's Facebook page, 2024.

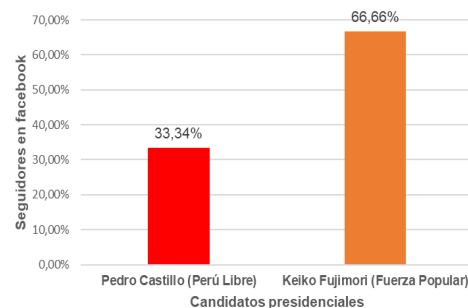**Figure 5.** Advocacy posts on Facebook
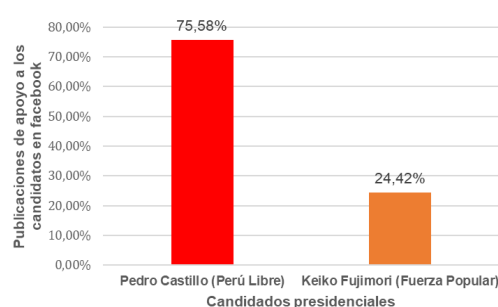
Source: Based on data from RPP's Facebook page, 2024.

Figure 6. Supporting interactions on Facebook

Source: Based on data from RPP's Facebook page, 2024.

Figure 7. Facebook followers

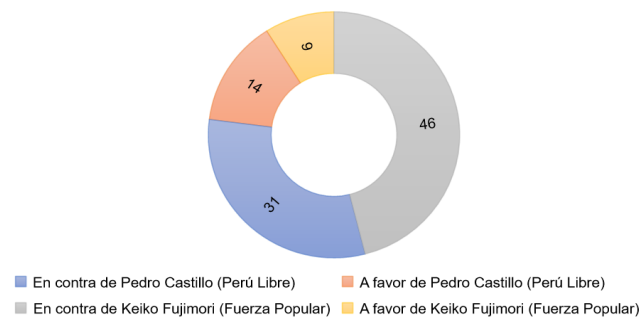Source: Based on data from RPP's Facebook page, 2024.

Figures 4 to 7 illustrate the interactions of users with the presidential candidates on Facebook, thereby demonstrating a significant disparity in digital support between them. Pedro Castillo, the representative of Peru Libre, is the clear leader in all aspects evaluated, with the exception of the number of followers. He demonstrates a robust presence in support groups, a higher volume of posts and

interactions, which suggests substantial digital support and indicates active mobilisation in the virtual realm. In contrast, Keiko Fujimori of Fuerza Popular exhibits lower figures in most parameters, indicating a less active digital presence or a reduction in virtual mobilisation. These discrepancies in the scope of support networks have considerable implications for the way in which the public perceives the candidates and for the extent of their digital engagement, which is becoming increasingly important in the contemporary political landscape.

### 3.2.2. Engagement with Facebook Content During the Polarised Run-Off Election

This analysis examines the impact of user engagement with Facebook content on the formation of public opinion and the intensification of political polarisation, with a particular focus on interactions with content related to presidential candidates.

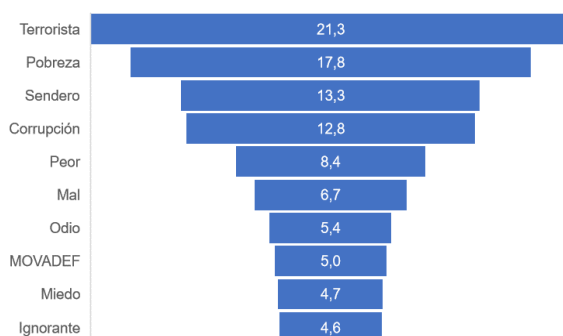**Figure 8.** Preferential comments towards the presidential candidates

Source: Based on data from RPP's Facebook page, 2024.

Figure 9. Comments with complementary preference for presidential candidates
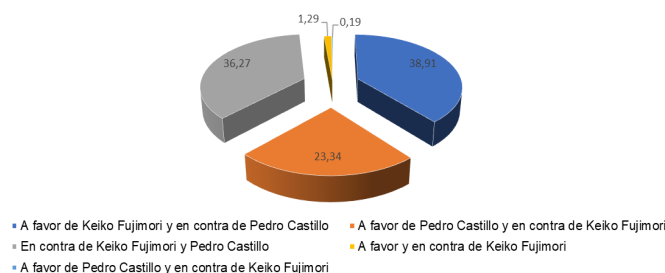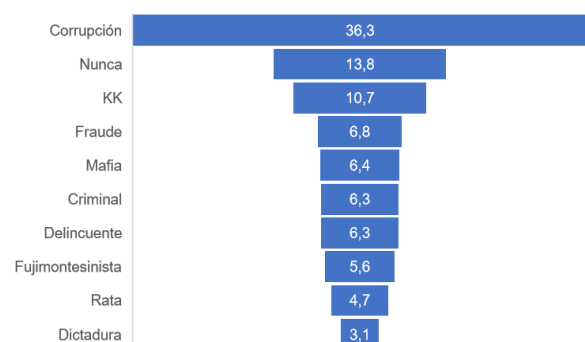

Source: Based on data from RPP's Facebook page, 2024.

Figure 10. Explicit messages with negative connotations towards Pedro Castillo

Source: Based on data from RPP's Facebook page, 2024.

Figure 11. Explicit messages with negative connotations towards Keiko Fujimori

Source: Based on data from RPP's Facebook page, 2024.

The runoff election was characterised by a generalised rejection of both candidates, as evidenced in Figure 8 by the prevalence of comments indicating opposition to Fujimori (45%) and Castillo (33%).

While there is a paucity of comments indicating support for the candidates, those that do exist suggest a slight inclination towards Castillo (15%), in contrast to the low preference for Fujimori (7%). Figure 9 illustrates three distinct positions evident in the comments: (1) A combination of support for one candidate and rejection of the other, with 38.91% of comments indicating a preference for Fujimori and a rejection of Castillo; (2) Opposition to both candidates, with 23.34% of comments reflecting an anarchic attitude towards the electoral process and the political class in general; and (3) A combination of support and rejection of the same candidate, representing 1.29% of comments and suggesting a critical or non-polarised view of Fujimori. Figures 10 and 11 present the negative messages, in which criticism of Castillo is primarily focused on contempt, largely due to his alleged incapacity and purported connections to terrorism. In contrast, criticism of Fujimori is predominantly shaped by concerns related to corruption, death, and crime. These findings collectively demonstrate a multifaceted and nuanced dynamic of perceptions and attitudes during the highly polarised run-off election.

3.2.3. Political Polarisation in Networks and Confrontational Impact on the Second Round of Elections

The analysis of digital interactions in political communication processes is of paramount importance for the elucidation of the nature of polarisation on digital platforms and for the comprehension of its impact on the evolution of the electoral process. They play an important role in identifying and highlighting the extent of polarisation, as well as the overt dynamics in politics that characterised the Peruvian run-off election.

Figure 12. Political participation and polarisation in polarised electoral processes
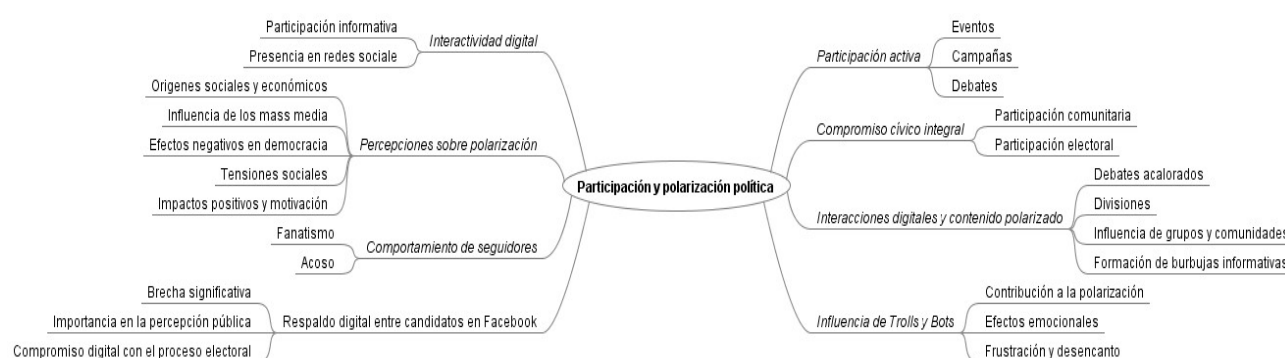
Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Figure 12 illustrates the active and multifaceted involvement of students in the political domain, encompassing a range of activities, including events, campaigns, and debates. The digital interactivity, manifested in informational participation and social media presence, serves to underscore the relevance of these platforms in the context of civic engagement. The level of electoral and community participation reflects a comprehensive commitment to democracy, although there is a discrepancy in perceptions of polarisation. While some posit that its roots lie in the amplification of social and economic issues through mass media, resulting in adverse effects on democracy and social tensions, others contend that it has beneficial consequences, such as stimulating greater political participation. Digital interactions have been observed to give rise to the propagation of polarised content, which in turn fuels impassioned debates and divisions. Social groups have been identified as contributing to the formation of information bubbles, while followers have been seen to display extreme behaviours. The presence of trolls and bots serves to artificially amplify polarisation, generating emotional effects such as frustration and disenchantment. Furthermore, the digital endorsements between candidates on Facebook demonstrate a notable disparity, underscoring the pivotal role of these platforms in shaping public perception and digital engagement during the highly polarised run-off election.

4. Discussion

The findings lend support to the proposition that active and varied participation, particularly through digital interactivity in events and campaigns, is a key factor in the politicisation of the media (Carlón,

2015). The significance of the digital revolution, as evidenced by evolving patterns of information consumption and the necessity to adapt to novel forms of communication, underscores the importance of grasping digital dynamics to maintain influence in the public sphere (Slimovich, 2022). Nevertheless, the question of whether this digital transformation contributes to a genuine increase in citizen participation gives rise to a pertinent issue that necessitates further analysis and evaluation, thereby suggesting potential areas for future research. Moreover, the link between the theory of political polarisation and the findings regarding the diversity of perceptions in Peruvian political communication emphasises the intricate nature of this phenomenon. The polarisation evident in digital interactivity and extreme follower behaviour emphasises the necessity of understanding these dynamics in order to address the current challenges facing political communication and civic engagement (Ames, 2021). The integration of theory and findings provides a robust basis for understanding and addressing the evolution of political communication in the digital age, identifying key areas for future research and reflection on civic engagement and polarisation.

The study underscores a profound interrelationship between political communication, digital interactivity and youth engagement in contentious electoral processes in Latin America (Montañez et al., 2022). These findings support the premise that digital interactivity plays a crucial role in highlighting the diversity of youth expressions in political, social, cultural and intersubjective domains (García, 2022). The active involvement of young people in social movements highlights the importance of understanding their political concepts in the digital context. However, the advent of affective polarisation, intensified by digital interactivity, has been identified as a significant phenomenon that impedes the pursuit of political consensus and agreements (Gómez and Ochoa, 2021; Lachica, 2021). In this context, the necessity for responsibility in digital interactivity is underscored, particularly in the context of polarisation, underscoring the need to address phenomena such as multimedia narrative. This approach serves to reinforce the necessity of considering ethical and responsibility aspects in these digital platforms (Mateo-Toscano et al., 2022). In essence, the intricate interconnection between political communication, digital interactivity and youth participation underscores the imperative for a reflexive and ethical engagement with the inherent challenges of these dynamics in the contemporary era.

In the context of the 2021 presidential elections in Peru, the manifestation of affective polarisation on social networks was clearly evident. The intensification of emotional messages, both positive and negative, poses substantial challenges to political stability. This situation highlights the crucial need to comprehend the intricate interplay between political communication and digital interactivity within this particular context (Ponte, 2022; Pozo, 2023). Digital interactivity has emerged as a significant factor influencing contemporary political dynamics, affecting public perception and digital engagement during polarised electoral processes. The considerable discrepancy in digital endorsements between candidates on Facebook underscores the pivotal importance of these platforms in the public sphere, reinforcing their status as pivotal actors in political communication (Barredo-Ibáñez y Díaz-Cerveró, 2017; Chaves-Montero et al., 2017; Vargas Cárdenas, 2021). The complexity of perceptions and attitudes during the polarised run-off election, coupled with the active participation of students in various political and community aspects, underscores the urgency of addressing these phenomena. It is imperative to comprehend and adapt to the evolving dynamics of contemporary political communication in order to safeguard the integrity and efficacy of democratic processes in the digital age.

In essence, the complexity of student perceptions during the polarised run-off election, along with citizen participation in various political and community aspects, underscores the urgency of addressing these issues. This context emphasises the crucial necessity to comprehend and adapt to evolving dynamics in contemporary political communication. It is therefore imperative to address these challenges in order to preserve the integrity and effectiveness of democratic processes in the digital age, where digital interactivity and affective polarisation emerge as key factors influencing public perception and citizen engagement during polarised electoral events.

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