

## **SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED: THE INSTAGRAM ACTIVITY OF PORTUGUESE PARTY YOUTH WINGS IN AN ELECTORAL CONTEXT**

*ALGO VIEJO, ALGO NUEVO, ALGO PRESTADO: LA ACTIVIDAD EN INSTAGRAM DE LAS ALAS JUVENILES DE LOS PARTIDOS PORTUGUESES EN UN CONTEXTO ELECTORAL*

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Young people's electoral abstention has negative consequences for democracy, and it is a particularly significant problem in Portugal (Cancela & Vicente, 2019; Dassonneville, 2017). Prior research has identified the importance of digital media on youth political engagement (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Theben et al., 2021).

This study explores the activity of Portuguese party youth wings on Instagram and the way users interacted with content in the month before the 2021 Local Election (26th August - 26th September). Using a social media analytics platform – Buzzmonitor – and a content analysis method, we analyzed the posts (n = 184) by youth wings of parties with parliamentary representation. Namely, Juventude Comunista Portuguesa (JCP), Juventude Popular (JP), Juventude Socialista (JS), and Juventude Social Democrata (JSD). Instagram has been considered the youth's favorite social media platform (Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2020) and the one that grew the most among political elites (Baptista et al., 2021), who use it to reach the younger electorate (Kreiss et al., 2018).

Through digital channels, political agents can provide a large amount of information throughout the campaign and make it more appealing to young people through audiovisual content (Ohme et al., 2020). However, this does not seem to be the case here. Firstly, only 5% of publications are audiovisual: most are based on text and image publications (50%) or photos (40%). There is also textual-only content (4%) and very few infographics (1%). Youth wings use emojis repeatedly (90%), but they less often use hashtags (48%) and rarely share links to learn more (2%).

Regarding content, youth wings seem to be simply extending traditional practices, mainly posting about offline events (48%) and the party candidates' biographies (33%). There were also posts about party news (5%) and posts containing a "frame of conflict" (Neuman et al., 1992) (5%), that is, an attitude of conflict and contestation towards the government, usual among the opposition parties. Posts about the general political landscape represent only 3% of the posted content, and they do not explore matters of local interest which would be useful during Local Election. None of the analyzed accounts provided information about the election, such as the debates' calendar or voting

instructions. Get-out-the-vote strategies were used occasionally, but most posts (61%) did not encourage any kind of mobilization.

The interactivity level registered is low, based only on one-way communication (Silva, 2013). None of the posts started political conversations with young people or asked for their opinions, and there was hardly an answer to the users' participation, which probably contributed to the residual number of comments registered (0.8 per post on average). It is important to note that the youth wing with the highest number of followers and likes and the highest percentage of publications during the electoral month, JCP, does not have a comment section on Instagram. Interestingly, on the opposite end of the political spectrum, JP, with the lowest number of followers, has the highest number of comments (115), 80% of the total comments. However, these comments demonstrate support for candidates instead of expressing eagerness to initiate political discussions.

In three of four youth wings analyzed (JP, JS, and JSD), the most liked posts were about (1) general political information – especially about the death of a former president of Portugal – and (2) frame of conflict posts about themes that directly affect young people, such as youth taxes and the access of young graduates to the bar association. This is particularly representative if we consider that these are two of the less frequent types of content and may be a sign of the youth's willingness to see more information about the political landscape and more fighting for their needs.

Across the political spectrum, Portuguese party youth wings are using new web 2.0 interactive channels with a web 1.0 unilateral approach, a behavior borrowed from their mother parties, as previously reported in Portugal by Santos and Bicho (2016). Also, these youth entities seem to be "preaching to the converted", tailoring their messages to already politically engaged and party-affiliated citizens, an old *modus operandi* within political parties (Norris, 2003). However, prior research has shown that moderately partisan citizens – people with a minimum level of political interest and knowledge – are more influenced by electoral campaigns than strong partisans (Pattie & Johnston, 2012). By using social media to speak to already engaged young citizens, youth wings are not addressing the most critical problem, which is to motivate a larger share of young people to participate (Keating & Melis, 2017).

Youth wings hold a privileged position to captivate youngsters to formal politics (Malafaia et al., 2018). Therefore, it is urgent that, in Portugal, youth wings leverage the power of social media to connect with this age group as a whole, both in form – through audiovisual and interactive posts – and content, encouraging debate and defending the causes young people care about.