

**Internet and citizen participation: an analysis of the impact of connectivity on civic engagement during the pre-election and post-election period in Angola**

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# **Internet and citizen participation: an analysis of the impact of connectivity on civic engagement during the pre-election and post-election period in Angola**

**Abstract** (EN): The digital revolution plays a pivotal role in the public sphere of contemporary societies. Social media have established themselves as a contested public space where various actors disseminate their messages. For instance, political parties utilise these platforms to propagate their ideologies and political agendas, aiming to influence citizens' perceptions. Similarly, civil society organisations and other citizen groups primarily employ these platforms as channels for expressing protests and dissatisfaction with political governance. To investigate how internet access affects citizens' engagement in the political sphere and to identify media instances where digital connectivity fosters civic participation in Angola, platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were analysed. These social networks were chosen due to their significance as spaces for political discussion in the country. Angola exemplifies the rising prominence of digital activism, with the utilisation of these platforms highlighting the expanding role of the internet in civic mobilisation and public debate. This research adopts both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Three Facebook pages and two Instagram pages, all "publicly accessible", were selected, and data pertaining to 2022 and 2023 were extracted. This period was marked by active social media usage by political actors and supporters of political parties to mobilise, communicate political ideologies, and address issues concerning politics and social challenges. The analysis of these pages employed the CrowdTangle tool, a data collection and extraction platform that facilitates the export of data from various sections of Facebook and Instagram (Rieder, 2013). The most frequently published content on the analysed Facebook and Instagram pages during the specified period centred on themes such as "calls for votes, election results, public petitions, public complaints, challenges to election results, police repression, arrests during protests, protests, transparent communication, electoral transparency, and the monitoring of the electoral process". These posts garnered substantial engagement from Angolan users on the platforms.

*Keywords:* Civic participation, Social Media, Internet, Connectivity, Angola.

## Introduction

The democratisation of the *media* has brought a new form of action to the political and social sphere, creating a context for civil society to share information among citizens and bring them closer to causes related to politics and/or citizenship. This new mode of political communication has strategically reshaped the African continent in several ways. (Bosch, 2018).

First, the use of online platforms facilitates the mobilisation and exchange of ideas to challenge suppressive regimes and bring about a new order in the political spectrum. Second, these tools have continually been framed as a threat by authoritarian leaders, as they challenge well-established elite control over information and the circulation of political messages.

Thirdly, in the context of political campaigns, the use of *social media* creates a new political culture and new forms of political control that influence the organisation of political campaigns, the management of a candidate's presentation and voter behaviour, as well as the articulation of crucial political issues; and fourthly, the use of these networks during political campaigns has the potential to degrade the integrity of democratic elections, manifested through the manipulation of information, the introduction of technological control, political misrepresentation and the rapid dissemination of cyber propaganda and inaccurate news, popularly known as "fake news". (Bosch & Ncube, 2020).

Previous research shows that these platforms have enabled activists and social movements to mobilise their voters across space and time (Gerbaudo, 2012; Lim, 2012; Ndlovu & Mbenga, 2013). Digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and X social media have also allowed users, in both democratic and autocratic contexts, to carry out a variety of political activities, such as posting, retweeting, quoting or replying to tweets about politics and engaging with politicians and political parties, allowing users to participate in political debate (Cohen, et al., 2012; Kamau, 2017; Mare, 2018).

Unlike traditional media, which are often controlled by authoritarian and dictatorial political regimes, digital platforms allow individuals to bypass these gatekeepers, transferring some of the political power to ordinary citizens and giving them a voice and a say due to their potential influence through their ability to reach considerable audiences easily and quickly (Kamau, 2017). However, we do not rule out the possibility that the

owners of these social media platforms may have their own political agendas, given the power they wield to influence politics and participate in networks of global influence.

The narrative that participatory politics through digital *media* helps mobilise countless people for political and social engagement through dialogue and the circulation of political information is quite convergent among researchers (Tufekci, & Wilson, 2012; Castells, 2013; Lapa, & Cardoso, 2016).

This article seeks to contribute to this literature by examining the role of social media in expanding democratic political space and the public sphere through engagement on Facebook and Instagram, in the Angolan context, through content analysis.

## **1. Social media and citizen participation**

It has been argued that *social media* have transformed political participation and now form a fundamental part of all forms of political action or protest, whether in more formal contexts or as grassroots activism. *Social media* have opened up new possibilities for different voices to create and share narratives about public events, personalities and their actions (Tromble, 2018 as cited in Bouvier, & Machin, 2023).

The use of the internet and media can provide accessible, diverse and timely opportunities for civic engagement (Park et al., 2023). However, in order to use the media and the internet in an interactive and collaborative way, citizens need to be equipped with specific skills and knowledge. According to Park, Lee, Notley & Dezuanni (2023), the more active people are online, interacting with content or other individuals, the more likely they are to get involved in civic activities. A broader understanding of the multidimensional characteristics of media literacy is needed to consider the role of online interaction activities and media literacy skills in contributing to civic engagement. Online social networks such as Facebook, X and WhatsApp are used to share political ideologies, express support for candidates and participate in political and social discussions (Kamau, 2017; Mukhongo, 2014; Bosch et al., 2020).

One of the main advantages of *social media* is its ability to facilitate political discussions (Bosch et al., 2020), as well as offering civic movements and marginalised activists multiple options for constructing alternative narratives that challenge the dominant discourse (Bitman, 2023). *Social media* platforms, such as Facebook pages, are a realisation and extension of the original public sphere. These platforms facilitate the expression of diverse political opinions, including those of minority and marginalised groups (Bosch et al., 2020).

The issue of the digital divide permeates and influences levels of participation in *social media* pages. In the African context, those who are connected have access to electricity and relatively cheaper Internet and dominate online participatory platforms to the detriment of disconnected and poorer citizens (Bosch et al., 2020).

There are two distinct propositions about how the internet and digital technologies have influenced public participation in society. Early studies on internet participation and civic engagement noted that the internet increases public awareness of current affairs and provides citizens with the stimulus to be more active in their interaction with society (Norris, 2001). Nelson, Lewis & Lei (2017) found that digital civic engagement fills the gap left by the decline of traditional forms of political participation. They argue that the digital space offers opportunities to participate in different ways, and we need to expand our notions of participation by incorporating a variety of *online* activities.

### **1.1. Some studies carried out**

Some social and political movements are increasingly utilising internet platforms as a preferred means of action and organisation, largely due to the democratisation facilitated by these platforms.

In recent years, numerous reports have documented the role of social media in demonstrations and protests globally (Shirky, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Castells, 2013). However, a deeper understanding is required to discern what is genuinely novel in civic participation or social engagement. Terms such as "Facebook and X social media revolutions" (Rahaghi, 2012; Sullivan, 2009), which imply that social media were the primary catalysts for the protests in Arab countries, arguably overstate their role.

Three fundamental aspects emerge in the interaction between the internet and social movements: the crisis facing traditionally structured and consolidated organisations, such as political parties and politically-oriented associations. Scholars such as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), Putnam (1995), and Wattenberg (2002) have argued that one of the principal challenges confronting many Western democracies is the decline in citizens' civic and political engagement. The strategic communication practices of political actors have, as Dahlgren (2009) suggests, left citizens feeling disconnected from and ineffective in the political process.

A second significant aspect concerns the rise of social actors emerging predominantly from coalitions focused on specific objectives. These actors do not organise through formal associations but rather through targeted campaigns. For example, in the European

context, the "European Citizens' Initiative" (ECI) coalition enables European Union citizens to propose legislation on various issues, mobilising support directly for their campaigns. Similarly, the "Fridays for Future" movement demonstrates how social groups across Europe have rallied against climate change through initiatives such as school climate strikes, eschewing formal organisational structures.

In the African context, a notable example is the Kenyan government's 2023 campaign against gender-based violence (GBV) and female genital mutilation (FGM). Spearheaded by former President Uhuru Kenyatta, the initiative established a "Platform for Action" to eradicate FGM and reduce GBV by 2026. This campaign was implemented in collaboration with UN Women and other civil society organisations.

These mechanisms of popular participation illustrate how groups of citizens can coalesce around specific objectives and organise targeted campaigns to influence policy, circumventing the need for formal associations.

It is quite common to observe that in some societies social movements are increasingly developing around cultural codes and values. There are traditional demands movements, but the most important movements - the environment, environmentalism, women, human rights - are values movements. There are narratives that there is no decreasing involvement in politics per se, but the patterns of participation and the relationship between citizens and traditional political institutions have changed (Dalton, 2008; Stolle et al., 2005).

The third aspect is that power is increasingly structured around globalised networks and that people live and build their values, resistance movements and alternatives in local societies. The use of digital media during the Arab Spring and the Brazilian protests was a clear example of creating connections between individual content producers, loose networks of editorial aggregators and the general public.

A study carried out in Egypt of participants in the Tahrir Square protests showed that "social networks in general, and Facebook in particular, provided new sources of information that the regime could not easily control and were crucial in shaping the way citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests" (Tufekci, & Wilson, 2012).

According to the Afrobarometer report (2023), several digital platforms - including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and YouTube - were shut down, as well as all mobile internet and several television stations, in order to contain mobilisation, transmission of "hateful and subversive" messages and interaction among protest

participants and social movements during the demonstrations in Senegal. Internet penetration in Senegal has exploded in recent years; a decade ago, only 13 per cent of the population was *online*. By 2021, the majority (58 per cent) were connected via mobile internet.

Internet blockages or interruptions in Africa are increasingly common. Disruptions were documented in 11 African countries in 2022 and in six between January and May 2023. Recent cases include Ethiopia, Libya, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Afrobarometer report (2023).

According to a nationally representative survey carried out by Afrobarometer between December 2020 and January 2021, 54 per cent of Senegalese respondents agreed that unrestricted access to the Internet and social networks helps people to be more informed and active citizens on social and political issues. According to Afrobarometer, those who say they use digital media at least once a week are more supportive of unrestricted access than those who do not, 59 per cent to 47 per cent. Urban dwellers are more supportive than rural dwellers (58% to 50%), and men are slightly more supportive than women (55% to 52%).

According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), the message of the "new" social movements lies in the relationship between people and technology (and the organisational structures it enables), in the ways in which online social networking platforms enhance and alter the strengthening of social ties and produce connective types of action that link people, opinions and practices. There is two types of action according to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), namely: collective action, associated with high levels of organisational resources and the formation of collective identities, and connective actions, based on the sharing of personalised content on media networks that promote changes in the dynamics of political action. *Social media* have brought new ways of exercising autonomous actions, leading to the notion that networked people are, in fact, the message. This could mean that the engagement and collaboration between people on social media platforms (Facebook, X, Instagram, LinkedIn) is so significant that it becomes the very essence of what is being communicated. In this sense, the way in which users of these platforms connect and share information shapes the message and the meaning, highlighting the importance of everyone's active role in creating content and shaping opinions (Cardoso, 2023).

Considering the example of what happened in Brazil in 2013:

1) The use of *social medias* during the Brazilian protests allowed for joint action through the creation of *links* or *networks*, both with a global reach and adapted to the country's economic context at the time.

2) Example of personalised connective action formations - the Brazilian protests in 2013 were mentioned on social media more often than the football event in progress (Confederations Cup).

3) The role played by SNS in mobilising people for protests and spreading the word to mobilise other potential protesters.

During the June 2013 protests, 62% of participants joined Facebook events calling for action and 46% of respondents who used social media to mobilise others were taking part in a demonstration for the first time. At least 75% of Brazilian respondents who were called to demonstrations on SNS also mobilised other people online (IBOPE, 2013).

Another example is that the legalisation of satellite networks, newspapers and *social media* in some Arab African and Middle Eastern countries has enabled public debates and discussions about the consumption of ideologies such as democracy, religious freedom and human rights that were not possible before (Kalliny et al., 2018).

The authors tried to discover some changes that took the Middle East to the place that could have contributed to the uprisings or the so-called Arab Spring. *Social media* was one of the catalysts, if not the catalyst, in the Arab uprisings known as the Arab Spring. The protests began in Tunisia, followed by Egypt and quickly spread to North African countries such as Morocco and Algeria and other parts of the Arab world, including Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Oman. Some consider new media technologies behind the eruption and spread of these revolutions and refer to them as "Facebook revolutions" (Cottle, 2011 as cited in Kalliny et al., 2018). Facebook's ability to connect social networks and or connect people through email exchanges, short message service, shopping, blogs, chat forums, photos and the exchange of audio files was very appealing to the Arab population. Another factor that we believe has played a significant role in changing consumer culture in the Arab world is changes in power distance, collectivism and materialism.



## 2. Connectivity in Angola: a contextual analysis

According to the global digital statshot 2023 report for October, it showed that of the 8 billion inhabitants of planet earth, 5.3 billion (66%) have access to the Internet. 4.95 billion of these inhabitants (61.4 per cent) are social media users. Compared to the previous year, there was a 3.5 per cent increase in the number of people with internet access. But the number of *social media* users grew even more (4.2%). In terms of internet adoption, Angola is a digitally "third world" country with 32.6% (11.78 million) users. The 4.95 billion people who use social networks have an average of 6.7 accounts. Overall, 54 per cent are male and 46 per cent female. Angola had 3.70 million social media users in January 2023, which is equivalent to 10.2 % of the total Angolan population. A total of 20.11 million mobile phone connections were active in Angola at the start of 2023, equivalent to 55.7 % of the total population.

Internet users in Angola increased by 352,000 (+3.1 per cent) between 2022 and 2023. For the sake of perspective, these user figures reveal that 24.35 million people in Angola were not using the Internet at the start of 2023, suggesting that 67.4 per cent of the population remained *offline* at the start of the year (DataReportal, 2023). And with regard to Internet connection speeds, data published by [Ookla](#) indicates that Internet users in Angola could expect the following Internet connection speeds at the start of 2023: average mobile Internet connection speed via mobile phone networks: 19.51 Mbps , average fixed Internet connection speed: 14.89 Mbps. The data from the Ookla report shows that the average speed of the mobile Internet connection in Angola increased by 1.41 Mbps (+7.8 per cent) and the speed of the fixed Internet connection in Angola increased by 2.63 Mbps (+21.5 per cent) during the period 2022 and 2023.

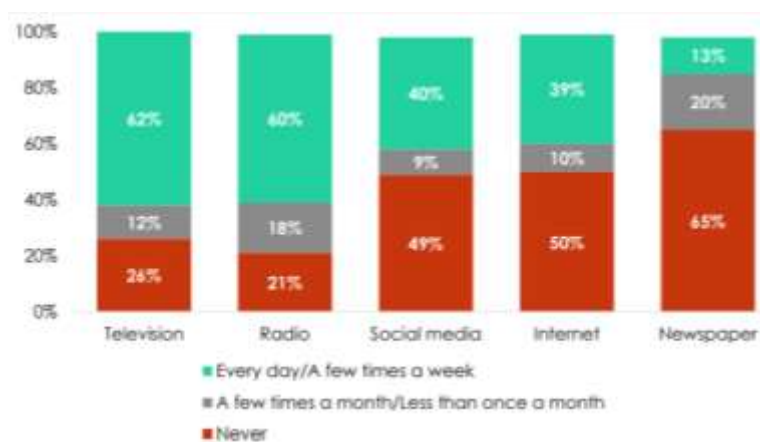
Regarding the average age of users of the main *social media* platforms in Angola, by the end of 2022 there were 3.45 million users aged 18 or over, which was equivalent to 19.7 per cent of the total population aged 18 or over. Overall, 31.4 per cent of the total internet user base in Angola (regardless of age) used at least one social networking platform in January 2023. At the time, 43.2 per cent of social media users in Angola were women, while 56.8 per cent were men (Ookla, 2023).

Facebook continues to be the most widely used social network in the world, with more than 3 billion users (almost 40% of the world's population). In the Angolan context, Facebook has 3.55 million users. YouTube (2.5 billion), WhatsApp and Instagram (2 billion). 78% of Facebook users also use Instagram. Despite the policy of restricting the

Instagram platform to ages up to 13 in Angola, it is important to note that 2.3 per cent of the "eligible" public in Angola used Instagram in 2023.

A study carried out by Mpako and Pacatolo (2023), considers that Angolans are loyal to their television and radio stations, which are still the mass media most used to get news. Around six out of 10 citizens say they get their news from television (62 per cent) and radio (60 per cent) "every day" or "a few times a week" (Figure 1). But substantial portions of the population also regularly use social networks (40 per cent) and the Internet (39 per cent).

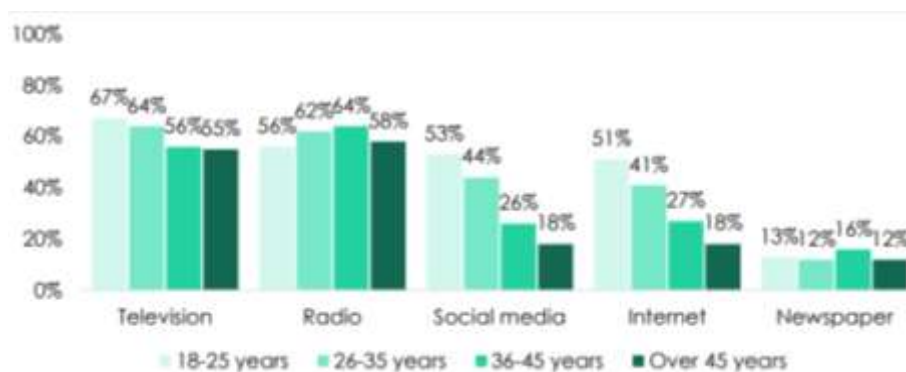
Figure 1: News Source - Frequency of Consumption, 2022



Source: Afrobarometer

A breakdown by demographic group shows that television and radio are popular sources of news in all age groups. But older respondents are much less likely to get their news from social media and the Internet (Figure 2).

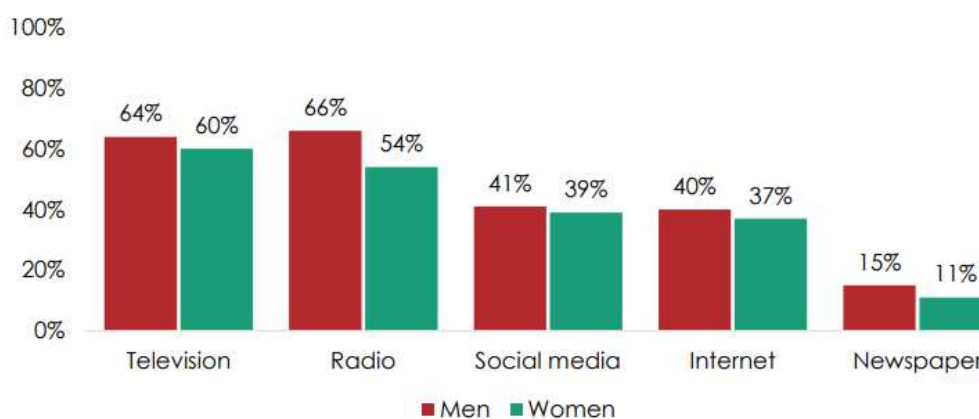
Figure 2: Regular source of news - By age groups, 2022



Source: Afrobarometer

Men are slightly more likely than women to consume news via radio (66 per cent versus 54 per cent), television (64 per cent versus 60 per cent) and newspaper (15 per cent versus 11 per cent), while roughly equal proportions of men and women get their news via social networks and the Internet (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Regular source of news - By gender, 2022



Source: Afrobarometer

## 2.1. Angola's social and political context

Between 2017 and 2023, Angola went through an important political and social transition, triggered by the departure of José Eduardo dos Santos from the presidency after almost four decades of authoritarian rule. The rise of João Lourenço, candidate of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), signaled the start of a new political cycle. Institutional reforms, the fight against corruption and economic diversification signaled a significant change in the country's political landscape.

The general elections in August 2022 represented the height of the political and social crisis in Angola, and were one of the fiercest electoral disputes since independence in 1975. The MPLA, led by João Lourenço, faced its biggest electoral threat in the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), under the leadership of Adalberto Costa Júnior. UNITA's campaign stood out by capitalising on popular discontent, with promises of substantial political and economic change (Dundão, 2023).

The official results gave victory to the MPLA with 51.17 per cent of the vote, while UNITA won 43.95 per cent. This narrow margin of victory, one of the smallest in the MPLA's history, was strongly contested by the opposition and segments of civil society, who denounced irregularities in the electoral process. A crucial factor in the contestation

was UNITA's performance in Luanda, the country's largest and most important electoral district (Dundão, 2023).

In Luanda, UNITA won an expressive victory, winning around 62 per cent of the vote, a significant change from the previous elections, in which the MPLA largely dominated the capital. The vote in Luanda has become a symbol of the growing discontent between the urban population and the political elite, reflecting the wear and tear on the MPLA in areas where economic problems are most acute.

Provincial deputies are elected using the D'Hondt method, while the national constituency uses the Hare-Niemeyer system. Although the Angolan electoral system is criticised, the Constitution of the Republic of Angola and the Organic Law on General Elections state that both promote proportional representation (Dundão, 2023).

The 2022 elections showed growing voter disaffection, with a record abstention rate of 58 per cent. Only 44.82 per cent of registered voters took part, with many votes being void or blank, reflecting the population's disengagement from the electoral process. This scenario was aggravated by the increase in the number of ineligible citizens due to their lack of legal capacity (Dundão, 2023).

This panorama reveals a series of structural and political challenges that Angola needs to face in order to promote greater justice and democratic participation.

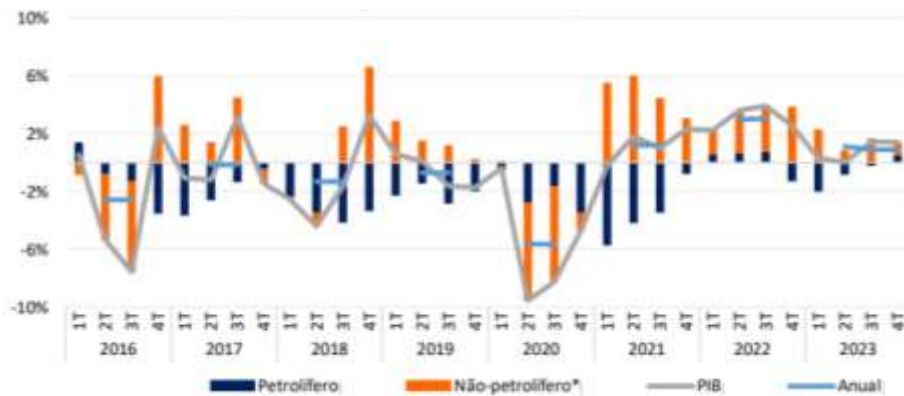
Angola's high unemployment rate, over 30 per cent in some sectors, has mainly affected young people, who make up the majority of the population. This economic situation has exacerbated socio-economic inequalities and generated frustration, especially in urban areas like Luanda, where there is a large concentration of unemployed young people. As a result, there has been an increase in social and political tensions, reflected in the growing organisation of protests and mobilisations, both in person and online. Between 2017 and 2023, protests increased in frequency and intensity, organised by young people and civil movements, expressing dissatisfaction with corruption, the high cost of living, unemployment and the government's lack of action to tackle these issues.

With the increased use of the internet, particularly the use of social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, they have become essential for mobilising activists and disseminating information about social and political problems. These online protests often complemented face-to-face demonstrations and drew international attention to the situation in the country. Young people, in particular, began to use digital platforms to avoid state repression and organise demonstrations in a decentralised way.

In addition, the depreciation of the currency and rising fuel prices have driven up inflation since mid-2023, reaching 24 per cent in February 2024, compared to 11.5 per cent the previous year. The National Bank of Angola raised its interest rate to 19 per cent in response to inflation. With 80 per cent of public debt pegged to foreign currencies, the depreciation of the exchange rate raised the debt/GDP ratio from 69 per cent in 2022 to 87 per cent in 2023.

The Angolan economy has not generated enough jobs to absorb the growth in the labour force. Between 2022 and 2023, more than 550,000 workers entered the labour market, but only 10,000 jobs were created. Urban and youth unemployment reached 42 per cent and 58 per cent respectively at the end of 2023, compared to 39 per cent and 53 per cent the previous year. The economic slowdown in 2023, with growth of just 0.9 per cent, also contributed to this scenario. In the 4th quarter of 2023, GDP grew by 1.4 per cent, with the oil sector resuming growth of 2.2 per cent after four quarters of contraction. However, the non-oil sector slowed to 1.2 per cent, with the agricultural (+6.2 per cent) and extractive (+6.1 per cent) sectors standing out.

Figure 4: Year-on-year change in GDP and sectoral contributions



Source: BPI, 2024

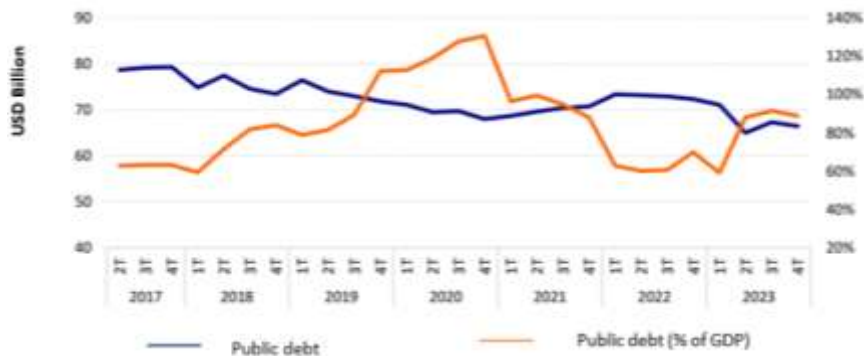
Figure 5. Oil price (Brent Angola) and Yield of Eurobond 2025



Source: BPI, 2024

Angola also faced a significant increase in public debt, which reached 55.1 billion kwanzas in the 4th quarter of 2023, influenced by the depreciation of the currency and inflation. In dollars, the debt was 66.4 billion, representing 88.9 per cent of GDP, up from 69.8 per cent in 2022. The China Development Bank remains Angola's biggest creditor, with 10.2 billion dollars.

Figure 6: Public Debt



Source: BPI, 2024

### 3. Methodology

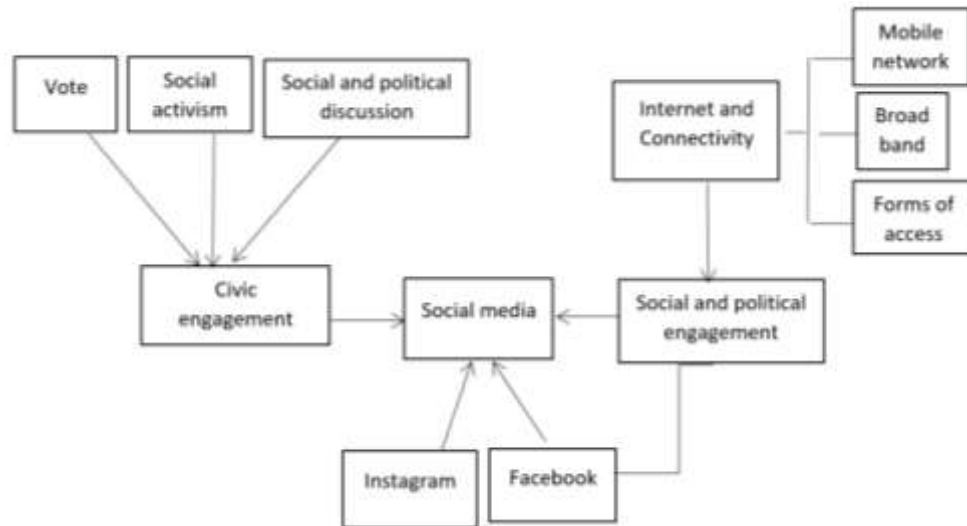
Based on previous research, we can conclude that the use of *social media* as a stage for civic participation, a means of manifesting digital social activism and access to the internet are all related to political and social engagement. In this study, we investigate these relationships. To explore these relationships, we posed the following research questions:

Q1. What are the media cases in which digital connectivity promotes civic participation in Angola?

Q2. What are the levels of involvement of Facebook users in the pages of influential activists at election time?

Q3. Which publications/content have the most engagement and page likes?

Figure 7: Theoretical/ framework- political electoral communication on social networks



Source: author

There is an increasing use of the Internet for social research, particularly for the collection of qualitative data. For example, Deakin and Wakefield (2014), in their study entitled *Skype Interviewing: Reflections on the Use of a New Data Collection Method*, explore the use of Skype interviews for qualitative research. The study highlights benefits, such as geographical accessibility, and challenges related to interaction and ethics. The authors conclude that although Skype has limitations, it can complement or replace face-to-face interviews in certain circumstances.

Similarly, Stewart and Williams (2005) investigate the application of online focus groups in the article *Researching Online Populations: The Use of Online Focus Groups for Social Research*. They analyse two empirical studies: one focusing on the employment experiences of people with inflammatory bowel disease and the other exploring deviant behaviour in online communities. The results indicate that online focus groups, when used synchronously, offer flexibility and greater geographical reach, making them a viable alternative to face-to-face approaches.

Snelson's (2016) study, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods Social Media Research: A Review of the Literature*, analyses the use of social media, such as X and Facebook, in

qualitative and mixed methods research. Through a systematic review of the literature published between 2007 and 2013, 229 studies were identified that use these platforms for data collection. The study highlights both the opportunities and challenges in analysing data extracted from social networks, such as the need for new methodological approaches to deal with the large amount of information and ethical issues relating to the privacy of participants.

Finally, Kosinski, Stillwell and Graepel (2013), in the article *Private Traits and Attributes are Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behaviour*, demonstrate how social media data can be used to predict a range of sensitive personal attributes, including sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political beliefs, personality traits, intelligence and age. Using content analysis methods, the authors show that online interactions can be transformed into in-depth information about human behaviour. It is fertile ground for such data, with textual material such as videos, blog posts, comments, *social media* posts and so on all becoming part of the online qualitative material extension (Ditchfield, & Meredith, 2018). More recently, online content has become more multimodal, with images, videos and audio being used in combination with the written or typed word (Herring, 2015). There are therefore numerous types of data, and there appears to be no standardised procedures for collecting qualitative data online (Walsh et al., 2022).

This is a qualitative study. Three (3) facebook pages and two (2) instagram pages "pages open to the public" were selected and information related to the year 2022 and 2023 was extracted, as it was a period in which political actors actively used *social media* to mobilise and communicate political ideologies and because it was a space in which supporters of political parties and political candidates in Angola debated and addressed issues related to politics and social problems.

To analyse the pages, use was made of the CrowdTangle tool; API; CrowdTangle Link Checker, a data collection and extraction tool that allows researchers to export data in standard file formats from different sections of Facebook and instagram (Rieder, 2013). The criteria for selecting the pages of both organisations and prominent people in Angolan society (at a political and social level) were based on the criteria related to the theme or editorial line of the page and the criteria for monitoring pages required by CrowdTangle. The instagram pages have more than 50,000 followers and the facebook pages have more than 25,000 followers, as shown in figure 8 and 9.



Figure 8: Facebook page



Figura 9: Página do Instagram



### 3.1. Data collection

Posts on Facebook pages related to political, economic and social issues in Angola were collected by searching for the keywords, "Manifestation" OR "Manifestations" OR "protest" OR "protests" OR "civic participation" OR "citizen participation" OR election OR elections OR voting OR votes OR "social mobilisation" OR "social mobilisations". It should be noted that this study only included publications written in Portuguese and on the websites of Angolan institutions and individuals living in Angola. Key areas and peaks of activity were highlighted, that is from 1 June to 31 September 2022 (pre-election, election and post-election periods) and from 1 May to 31 August 2023 (periods of demonstrations or protests in Luanda, Benguela, Huíla and Huambo).

In both cases, 4,600 posts were extracted, including posts by page and posts by users. From these posts, using a non-probabilistic sample selection criterion, a convenience sample of 992 posts was extracted for a thematic qualitative content analysis, using R software and Iramuteq 0.7 alpha 2.



It can be seen that the words in all the classes appear in a centralised segment that expands to peripheral points. However, there are a few words that go beyond the other quadrants, showing a significant separation between the classes. The words in classes 1, 2 and 5 are closer together, such as: "democracy", "Angolans" and "propaganda". In opposition are the words in class 4 - "parliamentary group", "assembly" and "president" and class 3 - "cne", "electoral law" and "vote".

The spatial separation of words into different quadrants reveals important thematic divisions in the text. It indicates that while some themes, such as democracy and national identity, are interconnected in multiple classes, other topics - such as the parliamentary group (class 4) and electoral law (class 3) - are more specialised and operate within distinct discourses.

This pattern of grouping and separation may reflect the multifaceted nature of political discourse in the context of facebook, where there is an interplay between broad ideological debates and more technical discussions such as electoral law. The proximity of certain classes may indicate ideological cohesion or shared views, while the divergence of others underlines the complexity and compartmentalisation of specific political or institutional discussions.

These findings suggest that while some issues are universally discussed in different segments, other topics are highly specialised, with limited crossover between discourses. This may have implications for understanding how different groups engage in policy debates, revealing potential gaps in communication or areas where discussions are more insular or focused on specific institutional mechanisms.

In summary, the results of CFA not only map the associations between words and themes, but also offer a lens through which to view the structure of political discourse in the text, highlighting both shared concerns and points of divergence.

Figure 11: Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA) - facebook

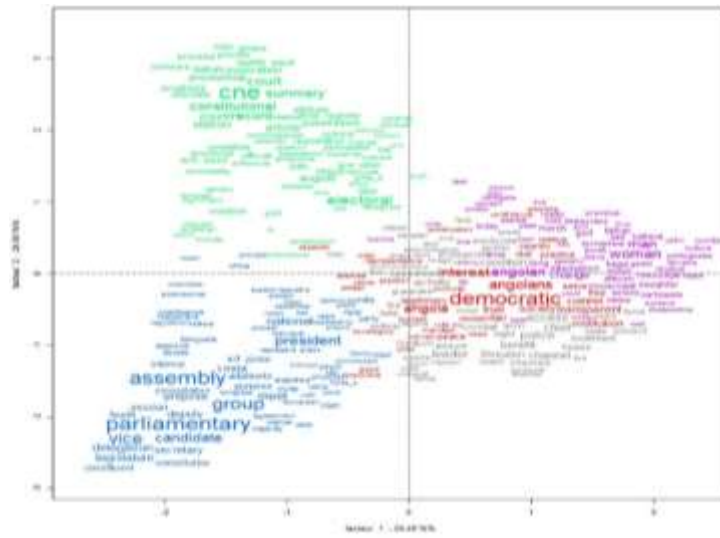
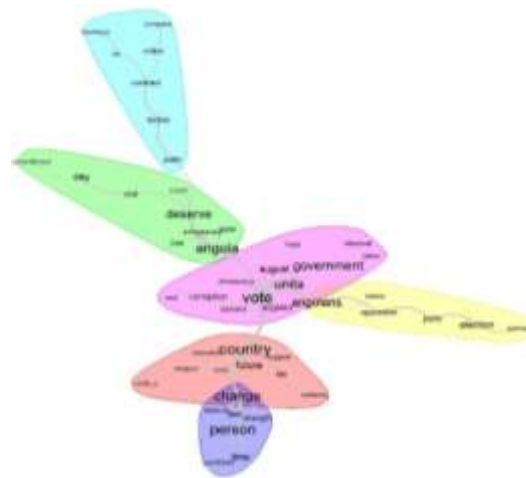


Figure 12. Multidimensional correspondence map – Instagram



By analysing the multidimensional correspondence map, it can be seen that the content published on Instagram on the date in question - "vote", "alternation/change", "country", "government", "Angola", "future" and "UNITA" - have similar characteristics. The level of user interaction on the Instagram page of politician Adalberto Costa Júnior and activist Nelson Dembo- Gangsta77, in relation to the content published, reflects the role of this platform during the pre-election and post-election period.

During the period from June to September 2022, many issues arose in the Angolan public sphere that were discussed in the traditional media and that the discussion extended to digital platforms, leading to greater participation by society, some issues were brought up

by the protagonists themselves, especially aspects related to the electoral process, fraud, corruption and other matters of Angolan public interest and utility.

A look at the two Instagram pages shows that the appeal to vote, with a number of interactions (112,872), of which (109,694) "Likes", (3,178) comments and (412,723) Views; Election campaign with (38,175) "interactions", "Likes" (30,024), (1,151) "comments" and (41. 220) views, were the topics that generated the most engagement on the page of politician Adalberto Costa Júnior, while on the page of activist Nelson Dumbo-Gangsta77, topics related to solidarity and patriotism aroused the most interest among internet users on the platform. The call for solidarity had the following data: "Interactions" (4,685), "Likes" (4,463), "comments" (222) and views (40,840). As for the theme of patriotism, the content had (3,480) "interactions", (3,318) "Likes", (164) "comments" and (27,432) "views".

Figure 13: Content engagement on Instagram

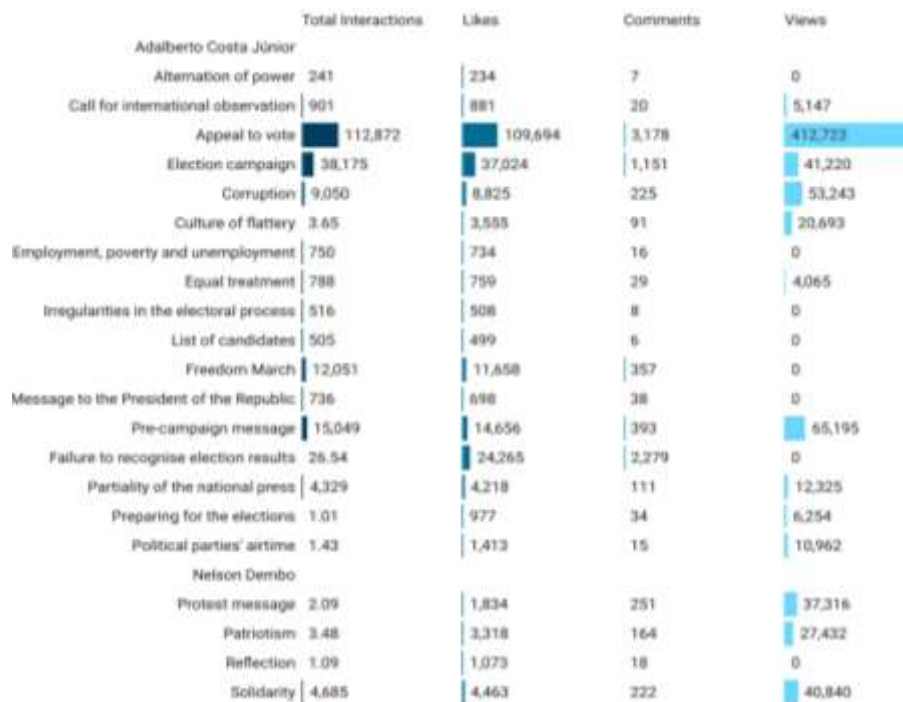
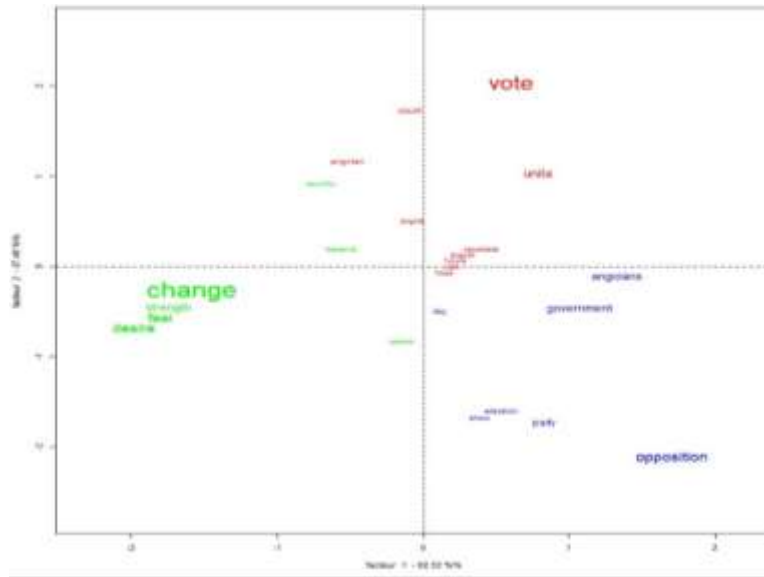


Figure 14: Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA) - Instagram



This analysis shows that there are three classes of words represented by the colours blue (class 3), red (class 1) and green (class 2). It can be seen that there is a similarity in class 1 between "vote" and "UNITA", which is the largest opposition party, as well as "candidate" and "August", which was the month in which the general elections were held in Angola in 2022. In class 2, the word "change or alternation" had the highest incidence and in the last class it is possible to see the similarity between "opposition", "Angolans" and "governance".

If we analyse in more detail, we can see the following:

Green cluster or class: change, strength, feel, desire, deserve, country.

This group seems to be centred on emotions, aspirations and values related to political or social change. Words like ‘change’, ‘desire’ and ‘strength’ suggest a discourse centred on transformation or reform, probably reflecting people's feelings and motivations for political or social change. This class may represent a hopeful or reformist discourse, possibly aligned with grassroots movements, civil society or a desire for systemic change.

Red cluster or class: voto, UNITA, contagem, candidato, angola, esperança.

The red cluster seems to centre on electoral and party themes, particularly around voting and political candidates. ‘Vote’, ‘count’ and ‘candidate’ suggest discussions about the electoral process, and ‘UNITA’ (Angola's largest opposition political party) indicates that this group may be specifically aligned with the discourse of political competition, particularly around elections. This class may represent a political or electoral discourse, particularly associated with campaign rhetoric or party politics.

Blue cluster or class: opposition, government, Angolans, election, party.

The blue cluster centres on institutional and opposition politics. Words like ‘opposition’ and ‘government’ point to a discourse around political power structures, perhaps centred on debates between ruling and opposition parties. ‘Election’ and ‘party’ further suggest that this class is concerned with formal political mechanisms and interactions between political entities. This class may represent formal political discourse or governance, particularly related to political structures, election results and party systems.

As for implications, cluster 1 (Green) probably represents public sentiment and activism, emphasising feelings, desires and the will to change. While cluster 2 (Red) represents electoral competition and party politics, focusing on the practical mechanics of the political system, particularly elections and party rivalry.

And finally, cluster 3 (Blue) represents institutional politics and governance, emphasising formal political structures and the dynamic between the opposition and the government. These clusters highlight distinct but interrelated areas of political discourse on Instagram. The green cluster suggests the emotional factors underlying political action, the red cluster reflects how these emotions and aspirations translate into electoral action and party competition, and the blue cluster focuses on the results of these processes within the framework of governance and institutional politics. Together, these clusters paint a comprehensive picture of the political landscape, in which public sentiment (green) fuels electoral participation (red), which in turn affects formal political structures (blue).

Figure 15: Content engagement on Facebook

	Total Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Love	Wow	HaHa	Sad	Angry	Care	Total Views	Total Views For All Crossposts
Freedom NOW! Activist Kidnapped by SIC Agents	934	415	44	161	6	7	1	253	15	12	7,011	0
election campaign	380,370	288,050	18,074	34,473	43,179	890	4,008	3,946	71	974	3,522,723	0
Message to voters	96,790	68,494	7,054	13,772	1,000	100	88	394	53	217	1,629,865	0
Electoral transparency	53,480	42,610	1,520	2,445	5,896	62	399	92	10	113	375,779	0
Complaint: tabulation of results at polling stations	32,950	30,000	2,134	14,106	2,697	428	350	3,551	353	220	570,067	0
Excessive police force during election campaigns	46,020	36,880	3,651	3,807	3,013	102	150	4,443	109	650	356,620	0
Messages of thanks to voters	41,750	30,096	4,330	2,727	3,198	18	28	7	5	87	338,067	0
Call for votes	41,280	30,000	2,562	3,511	5,201	40	379	21	4	62	297,801	0
Election results	29,690	19,977	1,643	2,011	4,558	44	1,000	94	3	48	27,084	0
March for the elections	29,040	30,000	1,210	1,266	3,313	13	38	14	1	75	229,122	0
Protest against electoral fraud	28,530	13,000	1,479	1,954	2,939	12	69	1,000	64	110	274,218	0
Press conferences	24,090	16,000	3,770	3,053	4,071	14	11	8	1	61	148,194	0
Airtime - Political campaign	22,690	15,000	875	1,505	3,126	23	21	5	2	46	102,678	0
Political intolerance	10,850	10,000	672	1,569	1,261	91	24	1,000	23	152	182,439	0
Public denunciation against sponsoring subversive groups to hold demonstrations	15,630	9,742	1,672	2,786	1,286	21	9	64	6	45	84,780	0
Tabulation of election results	13,440	9,413	904	395	2,574	12	12	21	1	49	41,113	0
Closing of UNITA's election campaign	12,900	10,000	509	648	1,713	5	19	1	0	13	67,429	0
Political intolerance	11,200	6,628	1,230	754	685	30	379	1,000	90	56	85,690	0
Media bias	10,270	7,076	948	1,440	600	17	43	102	9	30	98,216	0
Freedom March	10,110	7,182	675	509	1,492	2	8	0	3	34	45,597	0
Statement on the announcement of the final results of the General Elections	10,030	7,397	538	427	1,357	10	7	273	9	48	38,877	0
Protest march against media bias	9,450	6,374	1,020	1,147	850	15	18	4	3	21	60,090	0
Bad governance	8,300	4,023	905	1,715	441	80	124	892	4	125	75,331	0
Winning doesn't always mean getting on the throne...	7,010	4,743	804	592	769	2	11	89	4	27	32,515	0
Statements by the President of UNITA as he leaves the funeral of José Eduardo dos Santos	6,740	5,252	253	199	1,017	0	2	2	1	10	29,387	0
Election results	5,360	2,704	561	1,306	87	323	81	646	236	20	70,790	0
Electoral incidence and electoral aftermath	3,860	1,564	209	1,018	255	5	4	7	0	2	21,728	21,728
We are working for Alternation	2,960	2,295	218	140	294	1	0	0	2	10	14,895	0
Muscular speech by the security forces	2,810	1,411	542	275	18	59	208	255	26	15	31,501	0
Pre political campaign	2,510	1,868	240	46	354	1	1	0	0	4	9,564	0
National mourning Honour to the former President of the Republic	2,338	1,965	50	87	230	0	0	32	2	10	16,953	0
The current electoral process in Angola	1,800	1,487	58	71	172	2	3	0	1	7	8,173	0
Party activity	1,680	1,367	55	79	168	1	1	0	0	6	15,327	0
Message of protest about the electoral process in violation of the law	1,530	1,294	29	63	117	0	2	0	0	4	6,833	0

These publications garnered a significant level of engagement from Angolans on Facebook, including views, comments, likes, loves, cares, sadness, joy, nervousness, and smiles. Among these posts, those related to the electoral campaign of the main opposition party "UNITA" stood out for their total engagement, with (380,370) interactions, comprising (288,050) likes, (18,074) comments, and (3,522,723) total views. Following closely were posts addressing messages to voters, including appeals to vote, calls for trust in the UNITA party, awareness of the state of Angolan governance, and others, with (96,790) interactions, including (68,494) likes, (7,054) comments, and a total view count of (1,629,865). The third most engaging post, or with a high level of user involvement on Facebook, was a post related to electoral transparency, accumulating a total of (53,480) interactions, consisting of (42,610) likes, (1,520) comments, and (375,779) total views. Given that Facebook is the primary platform in terms of usage in Angola (78.67%), with Instagram being the fourth most used platform (3.33%) between February 2023 and February 2024, according to global statistics, an analysis of the content from the Instagram pages of politician Adalberto Costa Júnior and activist Nelson Dembo-



Gangsta77, as well as the Facebook pages of NGOs such as Omunga Association and Civic Movement Mudei, and politician Nelito Ekuikui, indicates that general elections, typically held every five years, discussions on corruption at both governmental and institutional levels, and public protests or demonstrations against poor governance and the cost of living, are the media topics that promote civic participation among Angolans. The publications and the nature of engagement on politician Adalberto Costa Júnior's Instagram page and the Facebook page of MP Nelito Ekuikui, affiliated with the main opposition party in Angola, suggest new forms of political communication in the public sphere, possibly accompanied by an implicit promise of a more deliberative discourse (Lilleker, 2006). This is supported by evidence of discursive participation where citizens engage in speaking, discussing, listening, debating, and/or deliberating (Carpini, 2004), as they frequently respond, share, and "like" each other's comments. In the comments section, the ideal requirements of public sphere discourse (Dahlberg, 2001) are observed, determining the extent to which online deliberations facilitate rational critical discourse.

### **Analysis 2 – Civic Engagement in 2023**

The other analysis in this article was based on events that occurred between May 1st and August 31st, 2023, within the Angolan national context, where interventions and reactions of society were made on the digital platform Facebook. An exploration of all content published on Facebook pages during this period was conducted, and pages with the highest levels of engagement were randomly selected.

In an exploratory manner, the previously selected pages were revisited to analyze the publications or content with the highest levels of engagement. The results revealed that content related to demonstrations or protests, increases in gasoline prices, public security, vandalism, deaths in protests, arrests of activists during protests, political activity, and campaigns by civil society garnered the most engagement on the Facebook platform.

Figure 16: Word clouds (content published on Facebook)

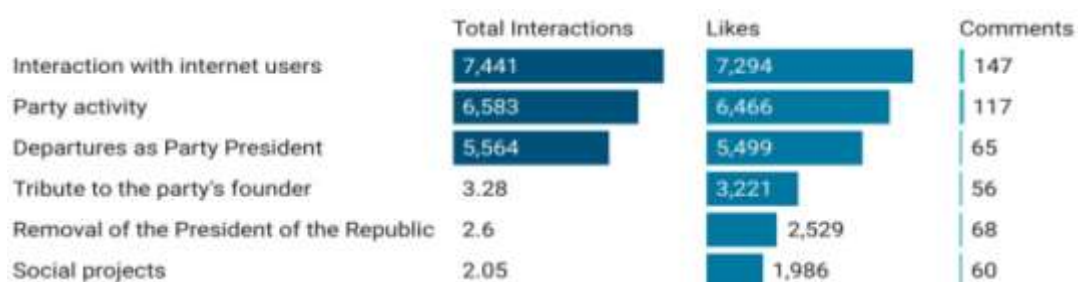


Digital media platforms, such as Facebook pages, constitute an accomplishment and extension of the public sphere as originally conceptualized by Bosch (2019). These social media platforms facilitate the expression of diverse political opinions, including minority and marginalized views (Clarke, 2010). Westling (2007) argues that SRSs have the "potential to exceed Habermas's expectations regarding the public sphere." In the two case studies considered in this article, we observe how Facebook enables citizens to engage with political and social content posted by politicians, activists, civil society organizations, and individuals with strong social capital in Angolan society. However, this study demonstrated that there is no lack of active listening on Facebook pages managed by politicians. If anything is to be noted, it is "active listening," through which politicians and civil society organisations use these participation spaces to shape opinion, monitor, and observe government actions by sharing user information on the platform as a form of public denunciation.

The evaluation of user engagement levels on the influential politician's Instagram page between May and August 2023 involved metrics such as "interactions, likes, comments" provided by Crowdtangle. Due to ethical and user privacy concerns, Crowdtangle does not provide the contents of the comments. During the period under analysis, no content was published on the activist Nelson Dumbo's Instagram, so the analysis focused solely on interactions on the page of politician Adalberto Costa Júnior.

The posts or content with the highest engagement were those related to interaction with internet users, party activities, and appearances as party presidents. Interaction with internet users (7,441) "total interactions," (7,294) "likes," and (147) comments; Party activity (6,583) "total interactions," (6,466) "likes," and (117) comments; and visits as president of the largest opposition party (5,564) total interactions, (5,499) "likes," and (65) comments.

Figure 18. Content Engagement on Instagram



## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Only a limited number of studies have examined the issue of connectivity and civic engagement during pre-electoral, electoral, and post-electoral periods (Norris, 2001; Loader et al., 2014; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2019).

The findings of this study aim to enrich our understanding of how social media platforms can act as intermediaries between political leaders and voters and how these platforms contribute to participation in the public sphere. More crucially, this study has highlighted the substance of political communication as mediated by social media platforms. Research suggests that the social, cultural, and political context underscores that the use of social media platforms for political communication is not an isolated phenomenon governed by a fixed set of internal and deterministic rules (Enli & Moe, 2013). Instead, the influence of social media on electoral campaigns is contingent upon media environments, cultural practices, and political systems. The population size considered by politicians as (potential) voters is significant for political communication, alongside the forms and intensity of engagement across different platforms.

Through content analysis of topics sourced from Facebook and Instagram at specific intervals, this study elucidates certain word associations and approaches that inform the topics posted on these pages and the levels of engagement among followers or users of these platforms.

These findings will assist scholars in developing theoretical frameworks within the context of mediated communication in electoral environments and political communication. Furthermore, they provide an empirical basis for implementing the Electoral Political Communication in Social Networks model in the realm of social media. This study will also offer insights for governmental and regulatory bodies, indicating how the concerns of users and civil society organisations are increasingly represented on social media platforms to engage a broader audience.

The conclusions reflect that activists and politicians utilise these platforms to communicate their needs, share information on social issues, governance requirements, expressions of dissatisfaction, and calls for protest, as indicated by the results. Voters and civil society organisations, acting as pressure groups, shared and requested information regarding election outcomes, including the dissemination of provisional results from polling stations, accusations of illegality in the electoral process, and bias from state-run

television channels on social media. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of prior research on political communication throughout the pre-electoral, electoral, and post-electoral phases. Consequently, we conclude that social media platforms already serve as a significant venue for electoral political communication in Angola, with substantial engagement from both politicians and civil society members. These digital infrastructures, which facilitate user connectivity and enhance outreach to diverse audiences, also function as forums for public denunciation by users.

### **Disclosure Statement**

In adherence to our ethical responsibilities as researchers, we confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication, nor has any financial support been provided for this work that could have influenced its findings.

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