

## Young people and social media: opportunities and risks for democracy

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### Abstract

This study analyses the relationship between different profiles of social media use and young people's civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media, and explores the opportunities and risks for democracy that arise from this connection. We used a mixed sequential methodology, including surveys that triggered focus groups with young students aged 13-18. The results show one group of young people who are politically engaged and use social media for their political opportunities; and another group whose intense social media use appears to be associated with their online civic and political participation, regardless of whether they express prior political interest. In addition, young people point out that social media offer both opportunities (increasing youth awareness and political mobilisation) and risks (misinformation and manipulation, little space for political debate between different opinions) for democracy.

Keywords: democracy, politics, social media, young people

### 1. Introduction: young people, politics and social media

Verba (1967, p. 54) noted that political participation was in an acute crisis, and three matters were raised simultaneously: "new people want to participate, in relation to new issues and in new ways. This 50-year-old perspective is still a good illustration of the current panorama, often reappearing in discourses on the "crisis" of political participation, particularly by those concerned with the signs of disengagement among young people.

There is a dichotomous perspective on young people's relationship with politics (Bennett, 2008). Academic and public rhetoric argues that young people can be seen as political *unfollowers* due to their apparent alienation, disinterest and lack of knowledge (Dahl et al., 2017; Ferreira et al., 2017). This consideration is linked to a deeper distrust of democratic institutions, the perception of politics as distant or irrelevant, and the decline in involvement in traditional political activities. Some studies show that young people are moving away from formal and institutional political participation (Grassi et al., 2024; Ribeiro & Menezes, 2022), especially regarding voting (Magalhães, 2022; Sloam, 2016). Binder and colleagues (2020) argue that young people are "dealigned but mobilised", as they are less aligned with traditional politics yet more engaged in flexible, individual, and issue-based forms of participation. Still, some recent research has contended that young people, albeit in smaller numbers, are active in political parties and value them (Martins & Campos, 2024).

Some focus on young people as political *followers* because of their interest and critical stance on social and political issues (Malafaia et al., 2016; Matos et al., 2023). In recent years, youth activism has come to the fore, with several protests demonstrating young people's political engagement in various issues (Sloam et al., 2022; Wray-Lake et al., 2025). As Farthing (2010, p. 189) states, "many young people live their politics, they do not vote for change; they do change". Moreover, young people are seen as protagonists of the reinvention of political activism (Norris, 2002) as they engage in new and latent forms of participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Pickard & Bessant, 2018). Young people are engaging in informal and horizontal ways (Campos & Simões, 2024; Farthing, 2010) that are often artistic (Campos & Sarrouy, 2020), disruptive (Ferreira et al., 2017), performative (Pleyers, 2018) and issue-based (Sloam, 2016).

Digital contexts, such as social media, are also emerging as spaces for sociability, building understandings of citizenship and youth civic and political participation (Campos & Simões, 2024; Hodgins, 2019). Recent studies show that Portuguese young people are more likely to participate online and to use social media to stay informed about political issues (Costa, 2022; Margato et al., 2025; Matos et al., 2023). In this regard, Pickard (2019) suggests that young people are adopting forms of participation that are autonomous and based on specific causes linked to social media – DIO (Do-it-Ourselves) participation. Loader and colleagues (2014) characterise the young generation as "networked young citizens," adopting a fluid, self-updating model of citizenship strongly anchored in digital media.

Social media are prominent digital technologies in people's daily lives (Cardoso et al., 2025), especially among young people (Amaral et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2023). Within their multidimensionality, social media offer a range of functionalities (Masrom et al., 2021) that simultaneously bring opportunities and risks (Bozzola et al., 2022; van der Wal et al., 2024). Research has examined how young people use social media. Meneu and Masanet (2025) identify three primary uses of social media among young people: receptive (consumption of others' content), productive (creation and publication of one's own content), and social (conversing, reacting, commenting, and sharing). The authors conclude that young people navigate online spaces with awareness and creativity, adapting platforms to their own needs and going beyond the functionalities originally envisaged. Van der Waal and colleagues (2024), by contrast, point to a degree of homogeneity in young people's motivations for using social media – communication, entertainment, and information – yet highlight that these platforms do not affect all adolescents in the same way: when exposed to the same content, their emotional responses vary. Finally, Sormanen and colleagues (2025) reveal that young people integrate political discussion into their everyday digital experiences organically, even in spaces that are not primarily political. Thus, as Boulianne (2015) states, it is particularly relevant to examine the relationship between social media use and civic and political engagement. Although our data were collected before major global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, this article makes three key contributions: first, it contributes to understanding how young people use social media. It also explores how young people have different civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media. Finally, this study analyses how the use of these digital technologies relates to political practices and, consequently, opportunities and risks for democracy that arise from this relationship.

The structure of this article is as follows: first, we discuss the political role of social media, which oscillates between hope and scepticism. We then present the methodological profile of the research: the study design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, and the techniques, instruments and procedures used. Next, we detail the study's results on the 'multifunctionality' of social media, on civic and political attitudes and behaviours in these digital contexts, and the opportunities and risks for democracy that come from

young people's digital and political practices on social media. We discuss these findings, namely those that refer to two specific groups we identified: one group that is politically engaged and uses social media for its political opportunities; and another group whose intense involvement in social media appears to be associated with their online civic and political participation, regardless of whether they express prior political interest.

## **2. From hope to scepticism: the political role of social media**

The political role of social media has been debated, oscillating between hopeful perspectives (on its enhancing effect) and sceptical views (on its perverse side). Akyol's (2026) literature review reveals the nuanced relationship between social media and politics: these contexts function simultaneously as spaces for democratic participation and as vehicles for political manipulation and disinformation, with consequences on ideological polarisation and radicalisation. As Campos and colleagues (2016, p. 41) point out, "digital media can have an emancipatory, democratic and participatory function (...) but that doesn't mean it doesn't have a dark side".

Some believe that social media foster new repertoires of political action (Brites & Ponte, 2012; Simões & Campos, 2016) that are perhaps more attractive to young people (Matos et al., 2023; Sormanen et al., 2025). As contexts for participatory politics (Soep, 2014), social media enable: i) the organisation, planning and publicising of political actions and events; ii) the extension of the temporality of protests (before, during, and after); iii) opportunities for self-representation and curation of individual and collective political identities; iv) the mobilisation and discussion of political causes and positions (Boulianne, 2020; Campos et al., 2016; Kharel, 2024; Malafaia & Meriluoto, 2022; Soares et al., 2021; Zuckerman, 2014). These digital technologies also play a fundamental role in the political communication of parties (Costa et al., 2021) and activist collectives (Soares et al., 2022).

Social media is a source of information (Casero-Ripollés, 2018), where users have easy and wide access to political information (Boukes, 2019). National research indicates that young people tend to consume news primarily through social media, favouring content that is brief, visual, interactive, and relevant to their own experiences (Feio & Oliveira, 2025; Margato et al., 2025). Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues (2012) also point out that searching for information on social media is a positive and significant predictor of online civic and political participation. Moreover, social media facilitates incidental exposure to political information, which, in turn, fosters political learning and increases participation in traditional political activities (Matthes et al., 2020).

Research has highlighted the strong relationship between online and offline participation (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Feio and colleagues (2023) find that politically active Portuguese young people use social media as a complement to other forms of political participation, with offline and online engagement operating in conjunction. Other studies show that social media use positively affects youth political engagement (Oden & Porter, 2023; Xenos et al., 2014).

In contrast, there are views on the risks of social media, namely its permeability to anti-democratic, contentious and populist narratives (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022).

The literature highlights the algorithmic power of social media to personalise their environments through “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011), facilitating users’ exposure to worldviews that align with their own (Bakshy et al., 2015) and the formation of echo chambers, groups characterised by shared beliefs and opinions (Sunstein, 2017). This algorithmic personalisation increases fragmentation and polarisation as extreme political positions of individuals and groups are reinforced (Barberá, 2020; Hong & Kim, 2016). Ferreira and Ferreira (2025) demonstrate how social media can exacerbate discursive fragmentation and ideological antagonism among the most politically engaged young people. On this, Paz-Rebollo and colleagues (2026) reveal that young people, whilst acknowledging the importance of politics, tend to avoid engaging in online political debate owing to its association with personal conflict and fears of judgment and social exclusion. Consequently, political discussions are largely confined to trusted circles (family and close friends), limiting exposure to and exchange with individuals with divergent viewpoints.

Moreover, social media creates a “digital panopticon of voluntary exposure” (Han, 2015), opening the door to surveillance (Brown, 2015), political manipulation (Simões et al., 2020) and the misuse of personal information shared for political (and economic) microtargeting, as in the case of Cambridge Analytica (Heawood, 2018).

Two other concerns can also be identified in the literature: the role of fake news in amplifying disinformation (Amaral & Santos, 2019; Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Selnes, 2024); and the fact that these online contexts accommodate low-commitment styles of participation – slacktivism (Morozov, 2011) or “couch or like activism” (Campos et al., 2016, p. 41) – where actions’ effects are more on the activist’s wellbeing and behaviours don’t transfer to lives offline (Chayinska et al., 2021; Soares et al., 2021). Sormanen and colleagues (2025) emphasise that young people’s online political engagement tends to be more expressive than activist in nature, rarely connecting with institutional actions or concrete mobilisation.

Some researchers are cautious about the role of the digital sphere in political participation. In Sebastião’s (2014) study, almost 50 per cent of respondents believe that digital media do not influence people’s political involvement. Other studies show that only a minority of users engage in political activities online (Oswald et al., 2025; Sebastião & Lourenço, 2016). Some authors argue that younger people focus more on social and entertainment than on political online activities (Paz-Rebollo et al., 2026; Theocharis & Quintelier, 2016). Matthes (2022) reveals that the predominant use of social media for entertainment and socialisation can distract young people from politics rather than mobilise them towards it.

Given this scenario, Kahne and colleagues (2014) warn of the importance of deep and careful reflection on new digital media’s problems and positive potential, especially among younger groups. This article contributes to this by exploring how young people use social media and the opportunities and risks for democracy that may arise from their digital and political practices in these contexts.

### **3. Methodological profile of the study**

This study explores the relationship between different profiles of social media use and young people’s civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media, and aims to understand the opportunities and risks for democracy that arise from this connection. Specifically, this research pursued three objectives: 1) to identify and characterise profiles of social media use among young people; 2) to map profiles of civic and

political attitudes and behaviours on social media; and 3) to analyse the relationship between these profiles and their implications for democracy.

To address these objectives, we used a sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Clark, 2018) based on two levels of analysis: first individual and then group. This option allows the results of the previous analysis to inform and clarify the next step, resulting in an articulated, coherent, and interdependent study. In practice, a survey was used for the individual-level analysis, and focus groups (FG) were organised to capture young people's perspectives, enriching the understanding of the quantitative results.

Our research focuses on youngsters between 13 and 18 years old, often thought of as the first generation to be described as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) – whose lives and development have been shaped by digital practices – and who are at an important period of civic and political development (Finlay et al., 2011). In fact, we chose this age group because it covers key stages of adolescent development and the transition into early adulthood (Jungkunz & Marx, 2025; Wachs et al., 2023). We included individuals who were beginning to form political attitudes and identities (around age 13) as well as those approaching or reaching the legal voting age of 18. This period is also marked by significant educational and life transitions, such as the conclusion of compulsory education and decisions about future academic or professional pathways, which can influence civic and political orientations.

Data were collected in a public school in the litoral north region of Portugal. This school has an educational offer of regular and vocational courses and has a diverse student population, as it covers a large geographical area.

### 3.1. Quantitative selfie: sample and measures

In the first phase, we surveyed 392 young students (207 female and 185 male) from 15 classes (9th grade to 12th grade) from regular (12) and vocational (3) courses, with an average age of 15.72 years ( $SD = 1.34$ ). We intended to map the nature of social media use and explore civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media. We also sought to understand how these two dimensions influence and relate to each other.

We asked how often young people use social media to stay informed about social and political issues on a 5-point scale from "I don't use it" to "I use it every day". The survey included scales related to the *functionalities of the social media used* (e.g., "send messages", "like other people's publications"; seven items) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). We also asked about the *reasons for using these platforms* (e.g., "to promote social or political causes or positions", "so I can share thoughts, comments, videos or photos"; nine items). The response's format ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These two scales result from the combination of items we created and adaptations of other items from the work of Cardoso and colleagues (2015).

To explore civic and political participation on social media, we adapted the Portuguese version of the Political Action Scale (Lyons, 2008; Menezes et al., 2012), using ten items (e.g., "support a political, social or environmental cause through a like or comment", "do volunteer work"). Young people rated the question, "Have I done the following activities in the last 12 months?" on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). To measure the political interest (e.g., "I'm interested in politics"; three items) and political efficacy (e.g., "the important people in government care very little about what people think", "things can

change for the better if young people work together”; six items) we used two scales (Emler, 2011; Niemi et al., 1991); respondents reported their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). After conducting exploratory factor analysis – extraction method, maximum likelihood, and varimax rotation – we found four viable scales<sup>1</sup>: i) *civic and political participation on social media* with four items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.77$ ): e.g., “sharing news, music, photos or videos with social and political content on social media”; ii) *political interest* with three items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.84$ ): e.g., “I bring up social and political issues in conversations with other people”; iii) *internal political efficacy* with two items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.84$ ): e.g., “I know more about politics than most of the people with my age”; and iv) *collective political efficacy* with two items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.75$ ): e.g., “If young people work together they can influence government decisions”.

The survey was administered in a classroom context after parental approval from all underage participants and verbal consent from participants when they filled it out. Data were collected between November and December 2019.

### 3.2. Qualitative chat: participants and script

In a second phase, we organised four focus group discussions (FG) to listen to what young people had to say about civic and political participation on social media, namely what they saw as the opportunities and risks for democracy arising from their digital political experiences.

As this qualitative phase was complementary to and an extension of the preceding study stage, the discussion topics were selected to reflect the survey results. These results served as an introduction to each discussion point, helping us to make sense of them. The aim was to encourage young people to answer questions such as “What do you think about this?” or “Do you identify with these results?”.

Given the sequential nature of the research, the central criterion for selecting participants for the FG was that they had participated in the previous phase of the study. Thus, there is a nested relationship (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) between the two samples, as the FG participants are a sub-sample of those who responded to the survey.

Twenty-two young people – mostly female (77.3 per cent) – participated in the FG. We organised three groups with students from the regular courses (six students from the 9th grade, six from the 10th grade, and four from the 12th grade) and one group with six 11th-grade students from the vocational course. We intentionally strived to maintain a diversity of participants.

The participation of all underage participants was subject to prior parental consent. The FG's dynamisation took place in March 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis also produced a fifth scale related to *external political efficacy* with two items (e.g., “the important people in government care very little about what people think”). However, it has a low reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.49$ ), which makes it impossible to use in subsequent analyses.

### 3.3. Data analysis

One aim of this study is to identify and characterise profiles of social media use among young people, and to map profiles of civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media. Therefore, our research is exploratory and descriptive, rather than seeking to establish causal mechanisms.

First, and to explore how participants are grouped according to different uses of social media, we conducted a cluster analysis including five items from the scale on the functionalities of the social media used ("send messages", "comment on posts", "like others' publications", "create or join groups", "make posts about news, music, photo, video or other things") and one item from the scale on the reasons for using social media ("to promote social and political causes or positions"). In addition, we conducted another cluster analysis to explore how young people are grouped according to different profiles of civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media, including four variables: civic and political participation on social media, political interest, and internal and collective political efficacy. In both analyses, the squared Euclidean distance was used as a proximity measure in an agglomerative hierarchical clustering method. Fusions were made by Ward's method. The development of the error sum of squares determined the number of clusters. Finally, the K-means procedure was implemented to optimise the cluster solution. K-means is a partition-based clustering method that minimises the sum of squared error over all clusters.

To examine whether and how civic and political participation on social media is related to the consumption of political information on social media and to different profiles of social media use, we performed an analysis of variance (ANOVA). We also conducted a Chi-Square test to examine the association between profiles of social media use and profiles of civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media. We used the IBM SPSS Statistics software for data analysis.

The qualitative data collected in the FG were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

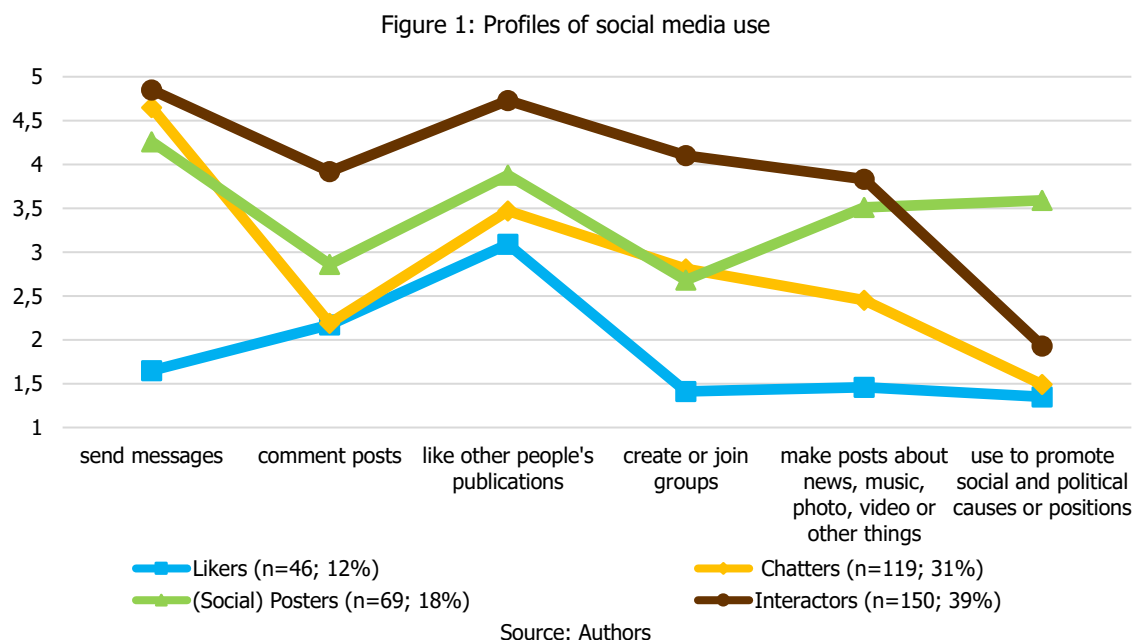
## 4. Results

Quantitative and qualitative findings are presented together to promote an integrated understanding of the phenomenon under study, allowing us to pursue the objectives outlined in the methodological section. We begin by exploring the 'multifunctionality' of social media (objective 1) and young people's civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media (objective 2). We then discuss some opportunities and risks for democracy arising from the relationship between different uses of social media and young people's civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media (objective 3).

### 4.1. The 'multifunctionality' of social media: digital contexts for entertainment, communication and political information and participation

A descriptive analysis shows that 71.60 per cent of young people use social media daily to stay informed about social and political issues. Indeed, social media is a valuable context for young people to follow political news, as Sara, a 12th-grade student, said: "I think most young people start with social media to get information because it's the first contact we have with news in general".

The clustering procedure used to classify participants based on social media use profiles yielded a four-cluster solution. The four adjusted clusters explain about 44 per cent of the variance. Figure 1 portrays these results.



The first cluster was interpreted as *likers* [n=46; 12 per cent]: it includes young people with low involvement in social media; they mainly use the function of liking other people's publications (the least demanding interaction).

The second cluster suggested a *chatter* profile [n=119; 31 per cent]: it described a group of young people with a medium level of involvement in social media; the main purpose of the use is to communicate with others by sending messages.

The *(social) poster* profile emerged as the third cluster [n=69; 18 per cent]: people in this group have a more intensive involvement in social media; this group shows a higher level of content production (e.g., making posts) than interaction with other publications (e.g., commenting). Moreover, their use is motivated by the possibility of promoting social and political causes or positions.

Finally, the fourth cluster was labelled *interactors* [n=150; 39 percent]: it includes young people with a high level of involvement in social media; their use is mainly for communication but also for interacting with other people's posts (e.g., through comments or likes); this group doesn't seem to be attracted to these platforms by the possibility of promoting social or political causes or positions.

Inês<sup>2</sup>, a 12th-grade student, said, while examining these profiles of social media use, that "social media have several functions, and each one uses them in their own way". All the groups refer to the 'multifunctionality' of these digital technologies. According to the participants, young people use social media for entertainment and communication or as a context and tool for civic and political participation. 10th-grade students talked about this:

<sup>2</sup> All participant names are fictitious to ensure anonymity.

*Moderator: So, what do you do on social media?*

*Constança: Communicate.*

*Bruna: I think, speaking for myself, I use Instagram more to communicate with my friends, especially when I'm not with them. I use it more for that than to watch videos or like other people's publications or anything else.*

*Bárbara: What I think happens a lot is that you wait for a message and then you look, and you scroll through the feed.*

*Moderator: But is it for entertainment?*

*Bárbara: Yes, it's mainly to pass the time.*

*Sara: Sometimes I see posts and like comments that are interesting. I use Instagram more to see what people are posting, and I follow a page – I think it's called 'For You' – that deals with different social issues: racism, xenophobia... I also follow pages for fun and laughter. It has a lot to do with my mood that day.*

Most 9th-grade students focus their use of social media on communicating with others. Andreia, for example, said: "I use social media as a tool to talk to my friends. I rarely look at posts or photos". Other members of the group shared this opinion. Other students identify posting photos or moments from their daily lives and seeing or sharing other people's posts as other frequent actions in their use of social media. 11th-graders mentioned that they use social media as a context for entertainment and communication. Manuel said he prefers to use social media "for entertainment: watching videos, following someone I like" and "to reply to friends, to talk". Another member of this group, João, recognises the same purpose: "To be honest, I don't pay much attention to it, and I don't see much of it on social media [about social and political issues]. I use social media more to communicate with people".

Regarding the group of 12th-grade students, Rosa describes herself as a "chatter because I use social media more to communicate with people". Catarina, another participant in this group, shares this view:

*I would be more of a chatter because I've never been very connected to social media (...), and it's more to communicate. I'm not so much into posting news or supporting or disagreeing with something. I don't use it so much to spread information as to communicate. Sometimes, as Joana said, I also share places I've been.*

Joana and Inês have different points of view, referring to the more social and political nature of the use of these digital technologies. Joana said that she mainly shares what she feels has a social impact, i.e. "posts that draw my attention to an action that has been taken, which I use to criticise or support". Similarly, Inês said that besides entertainment, she likes to post "some news that I see to criticise or spread information that I consider important".

Therefore, young people also use social media to share political content that affects them, influence others, and condemn or improve certain actions. The 9th-grade students talked about this:

*Moderator: For example, have you done anything on social media?*

*Rita: Oh yes, we have. We've already shared something.*

*Gonçalo: Yes, we have.*

*Moderator: Yeah? What kind of things?*

*Gonçalo: For example, the fires in Australia.*

*Rita: Or a more serious image to bring people to their senses.*

*Andreia: To condemn certain actions.*

*Moderator: And you do it to show interest, stimulate debate, or do you do it because you see others doing it?*

*Andreia: No. I put it up as a warning to people to stop doing certain things or be more careful in their actions.*

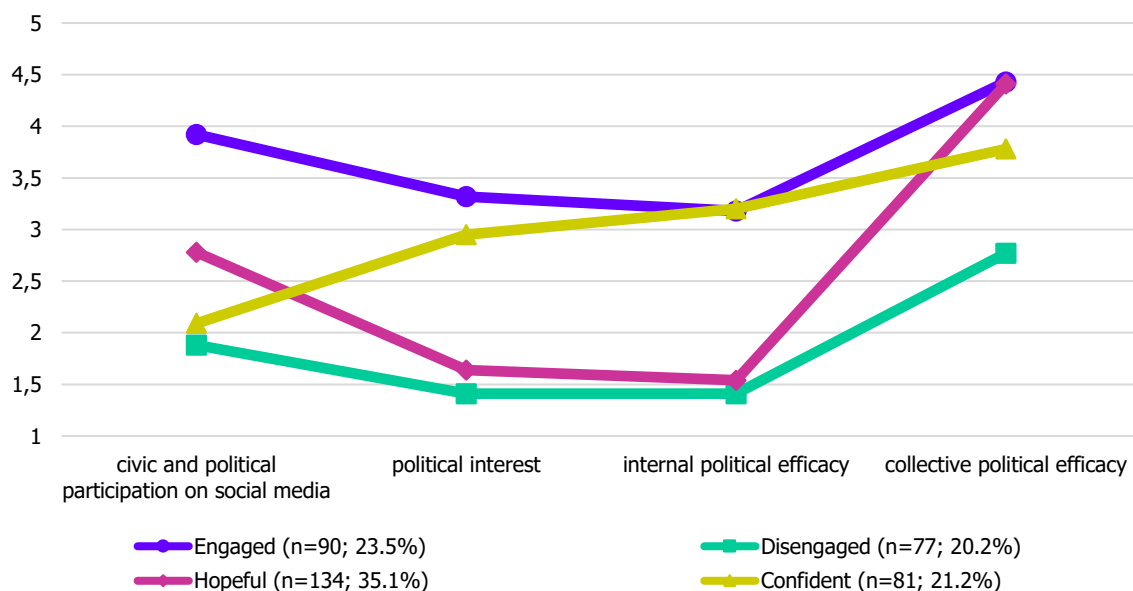
In the next section, we look in more detail at young people's civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media.

#### 4.2. Civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media

This study also focuses on the participants' social and political use of social media. We found that social media is a space where young people tend to participate politically. On a scale of 1 to 5, young people show a medium level of civic and political participation on social media ( $M_{\text{participation}} = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ).

From the K-means clustering used to classify the participants according to profiles of civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media, a four-cluster solution was found to be the best. The four adjusted clusters solution explains about 52 per cent of the variance. Figure 2 portrays these results.

Figure 2: Profiles of civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media



Source: Authors

The first cluster was interpreted as *engaged* [n=90; 23.5 per cent]: it includes young people with the highest levels of civic and political participation in social media; they also have considerable levels of political interest and political efficacy (internal and collective).

The *disengaged* profile emerged in the second cluster [ $n=77$ ; 20.2 per cent]: a group of young people with low levels of participation in all forms; they are politically disinterested, participated little online and feel that neither they nor young people as a whole can play a relevant role in social and political change.

The third cluster suggests a *hopeful* profile [ $n=134$ ; 35.1 percent]: the participants in this group believe that other young people can play an important role in improving the course of things; however, they show little interest in politics and feel that individually, they would have little power to influence social and political change; nevertheless, this group has a medium level of political participation in social media.

Finally, the fourth cluster was labelled *confident* [ $n=81$ ; 21.2 per cent]: it describes young people who, despite having low political engagement, feel that they have a role and power in social and political improvement, as do other young people.

#### 4.3. The relationship between social media use and young people's civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media: opportunities and risks for democracy

Results indicate a statistically significant relationship between civic and political participation on social media and the frequency of consumption of political information in these digital contexts [ $F(4, 379) = 3.36$ ,  $p = .010$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ]. Post-hoc comparisons revealed that young people who use social media every day to stay informed about social and political issues have levels of civic and political participation on social media ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), which are significantly higher [ $p = .008$ ] than those of young people who don't use social media for political information ( $M = 2.12$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ).

Discussing the importance of social media in the dissemination of political information, Sara, a 10th-grader, said that "a lie told many times ends up becoming the truth; in other words, fake news or an exaggerated rumour can cause a general panic. And that's one influence social media can have on people's behaviour". Henrique, an 11th-grade student, points out that the political information they receive online can often lead to manipulation and misinformation among young people.

*Henrique: I think many young people are informed and know that there is fake news. But many don't know how to filter it and are manipulated.*

*Moderator: How is it with you? Do you feel that it's easy for you not to be influenced? Can you tell if something is fake or not?*

*Henrique: It depends on a lot. For example, there is coherent news that looks like it's true. And to know that it's a lie, you must research and be interested in the subject. Most young people today don't do that. They see information and take it as absolute truth, and don't bother to find out the background of the news.*

The group of 12th-graders shares this opinion:

*Catarina: Regardless of whether, in our case, we manage to have this capacity and perception, I think that for the majority of teenagers, it doesn't happen, and they are very influenced by what they see.*

*Inês: I think so too.*

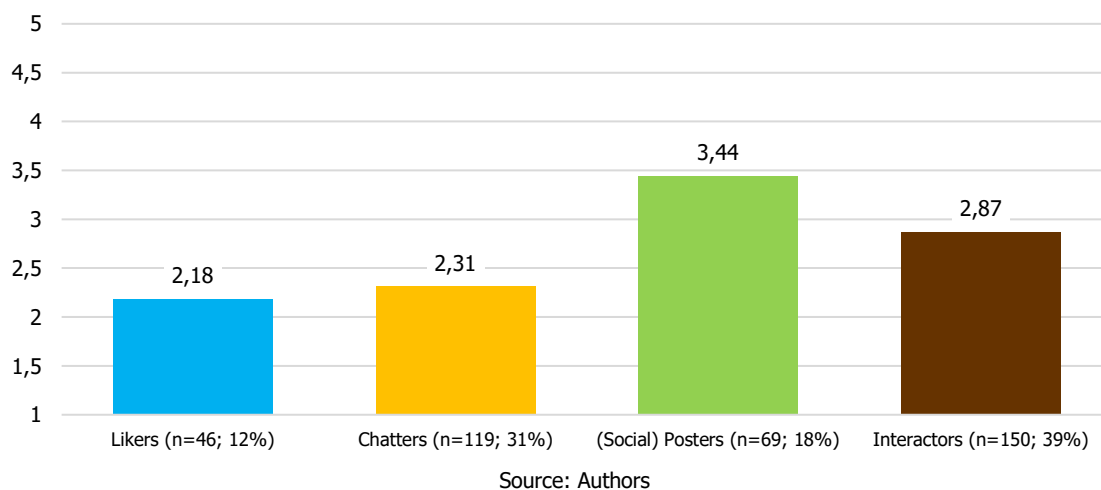
*Catarina: It's like Joana said, all they have to do is see the slightest bit of information or the title of something, and they end up taking sides without knowing what it's about.*

*Joana: I don't know if young people have the illusion that they know without knowing. I think young people know the problems, but can't see when they are being manipulated or influenced.*

*Catarina: And now they end up rejecting the opinion of older people with more knowledge. They think they know everything because they know the internet and social media.*

Moreover, given that young people have distinct profiles of social media use, it is important to understand whether this is also reflected in different ways of engaging with social media for civic and political purposes. The analysis of variance conducted revealed effects of profiles of social media use on civic and political participation on social media:  $F(3,380) = 26.11$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .17$ . Post-hoc comparisons showed that *(social) posters* ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) have the highest level of civic and political participation on social media compared to all groups [ $p = 0.000$ ]. Moreover, young people with an *interactors* profile show higher levels of online participation ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) than those with a *likers* ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) and a *chatters* profile ( $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). Figure 3 details these differences.

Figure 3: Differences in civic and political participation on social media between profiles of social media use



There is also a significant association between profiles of civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media and profiles of social media use,  $\chi^2(9) = 54.60$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\phi = .381$ . Results from cross-tabs analysis show that young people with an *engaged* profile are more likely to use social media based on a *(social) posters* profile (adjusted residual value = 6.7) and less likely to use social media as *likers* (adjusted residual value = -2.1) and as *chatters* (adjusted residual value = -2.7). *Hopeful* young people are more likely to use social media as *interactors* (adjusted residual value = 2.7) and less likely to use social media as someone with a *(social) posters* profile (adjusted residual value = -3.5). Table 1 details these results.

Table 1: Cross-tabs between profiles of civic and political attitudes and behaviours on social media and profiles of social media use

|                   |                   | <i>Likers</i> | <i>(Social) Posters</i> | <i>Chatters</i> | <i>Interactors</i> |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| <i>Engaged</i>    | %                 | 5.6%          | 41.6%                   | 19.1%           | 33.7%              |
|                   | Adjusted residual | -2.1          | 6.7                     | -2.7            | -1.3               |
| <i>Disengaged</i> | %                 | 18.4%         | 9.2%                    | 36.8%           | 35.5%              |
|                   | Adjusted residual | 2.0           | -2.2                    | 1.3             | -0.8               |
| <i>Hopeful</i>    | %                 | 11.5%         | 8.4%                    | 31.3%           | 48.9%              |
|                   | Adjusted residual | -0.2          | -3.5                    | 0.2             | 2.7                |
| <i>Confident</i>  | %                 | 13.6%         | 14.8%                   | 37%             | 34.6%              |
|                   | Adjusted residual | 0.5           | -0.8                    | 1.4             | -1.0               |

Source: Authors

Commenting on this intersection between social media use and young people's civic and political attitudes and behaviours, Joana, a 12th-grade student, noted that social media "can even be a first phase to participate in other ways in the future". Other participants shared their views on the possibility that these contexts could be a tool to increase young people's interest and civic engagement. They reported a possible link between exposure to social and political content on social media and increased interest in these kinds of issues. Adriana, a 9th-grade student, explored this effect:

*For example, a person might see a particular topic in one profile, not think it's important, and move on. But if that person keeps seeing that topic in different profiles, they might think it's important and want to know what's going on. And that person can read and find out more about it.*

The group of 11th graders shared this opinion while pointing to how different people may have different degrees of power to influence others. Natália, a participant in this group, disagreed with this perspective, focusing more on how some may always resist this kind of content on social media.

*Henrique: But then it has to be the right person to share that.*

*Gabriela: I don't think anyone can do that.*

*Henrique: Right, only some people have that power of social influence.*

*Natália: But many people think it's boring, and even if a YouTuber, for example, says it's good and something needs to be done, these people can ignore it because they think it's boring and just focus on entertainment content from them.*

*Henrique: But, for example, they see this once, twice, three, four, five, six, so...*

*Natália: Then those people might even block that YouTuber and stop following them because they find them boring.*

*Henrique: But if it's not just one person, but several public figures.*

Catarina, a 12th-grade student, believes that her position on environmental issues has been influenced by what she has seen on social media: "I think that social media has helped me to increase my support and my concern (...) in my point of view it is more present than before".

The participants recognise that this power of influence via social media can also facilitate anti-democratic movements. Henrique, one of the 11th-grade participants, spoke about this:

*For example, when Donald Trump was being investigated, he moved away from the debate about the conflict that was taking place between the United States and Iran through social media. In other words, social media allows people to see what others want. It seems to distract people.*

At the Portuguese level, Joana discusses a specific case:

*In the case of André Ventura, for example, he must be one of the people who has grown the most on social media, to the point where every post has a huge number of likes and shares. Or, on Twitter, he is one of the most talked-about people. People talk about his stuff.*

Another pattern highlighted by young participants is that social media makes dissent more difficult by amplifying conflict. All groups said there is no space for debate between different points of view on these digital contexts. Andreia, a 9th-grade student, mentioned this:

*If I were to comment on a post by someone I didn't know, I'm sure that they wouldn't bother to understand what I was trying to say. (...) They would think that I was just criticising their position, and they would not take it in the way it was meant to be taken. They wouldn't realise that all I was doing was pointing out that their perspective was wrong.*

The group of 11th graders shares this view, adding that presenting opinions on certain issues sometimes may provoke personal attacks.

*Manuel: Yes, there is always the feeling that we can be attacked if we take a position.*

*Natália: That's true.*

*Manuel: People on social media have a different way of talking than people who talk face-to-face.*

*João: Sometimes, we share our opinions and get negative comments.*

Likewise, Sara, a 10th-grade student, said, "When we go on social media to comment on something, we are always afraid that someone we don't know will come from somewhere and attack us personally for our ideas".

Thus, when confronted with anti-democratic, racist or xenophobic campaigns and positions on social media, most participants – despite following some debates – choose to discuss them in more closed online groups or face-to-face with people close to them. Nonetheless, two older students showed a different attitude. Although they recognise that these online spaces are prone to conflict, Joana and Inês express their positions in public debates.

*Moderator: We have had colleagues here who have said they avoid these discussions because they get complicated. And they avoid giving their opinion because it creates an environment...*

*Joana: I don't. I like to give my opinion. When I see a discussion about something I disagree with, I always give my point of view.*

*Inês: Me too, by chance.*

*Moderator: Aren't you afraid of these conflicts?*

*Joana: No. When I comment, I like to know what I am talking about. I don't want to comment just to be silly. I always comment if I can give the person a different perspective.*

*[...]*

*Catarina: But I think the internet is much more prone to this kind of conflict.*

*Rosa: That is what I was going to say.*

## 5. Discussion

Today's youth live in an online world that provides access to information, entertainment and participation. Against this backdrop, social media have emerged as a key space in the spectrum of new forms of communication and participation. Thus, it is essential to understand the opportunities and risks for democracy that arise from young people's digital and political practices on social media. To contribute to this, we used a mixed sequential methodology, including surveys and focus groups with young students.

The quantitative and qualitative results reveal the 'multifunctionality' of social media. These findings are consistent with recent studies demonstrating the diversity of social media uses among young people (Meneu & Masanet, 2025). Our study contributes to this body of research by identifying four profiles of social media use with distinct purposes and intensities of involvement: *Likers*, *Chatters*, *(Social) Posters*, and *Interactors*. When these profiles were discussed in the FG, young people both described social media as a context for communication and entertainment (Paz-Rebollo et al., 2026; van der Waal et al., 2024) and as a tool for civic and political participation (Campos & Simões, 2024; Matos et al., 2023), such as for protesting or supporting a cause and making their voices heard.

Young people show medium levels of civic and political participation on social media. Four profiles of political engagement on social media, including behavioural and attitudinal dimensions, also emerged from the quantitative data: *Engaged*, *Disengaged*, *Hopeful*, and *Confident*. These typologies constitute a relevant contribution to the literature by demonstrating that – similarly to what has been observed in other behavioural, emotional and cognitive forms of engagement (Árnadóttir et al., 2026; Malafaia et al., 2021) – the socialisation and political practices of young people on social media are also distributed in a nuanced manner across distinct groups, challenging the notion that young people constitute a homogeneous group.

The analysis we have carried out to examine the relationship between profiles of social media use and profiles of civic and political attitudes and behaviours in these digital contexts allows us to identify two particular youth groups that require special and reflective attention. On the one hand, it is possible to see a group of politically *engaged* young people – with the highest levels of civic and political participation on social media, political interest and internal and collective political efficacy – who are concurrently heavily involved in social media, joining these digital technologies also for the possibility of promoting political causes or positions as *(social) posters*. On the other hand, it can be seen that the group of *interactors* – the young

people who are most involved in social media with the highest levels of production, interaction and online communication but who don't join these platforms for their political opportunities – have medium levels of civic and political participation on social media. When the attitudinal dimensions are included, we observe that they are more likely to have a *hopeful* profile of political engagement – showing medium values of civic and political participation on social media despite having low levels of political interest and believing that, individually, they have little power to influence social and political change. This finding suggests a possible link between greater social media involvement and higher levels of civic and political engagement, even among young people who claim to be disinterested and lack a prior political inclination. This pattern may reflect processes such as incidental exposure to political content (Matthes et al., 2020), peer influence, or features of social media platforms that encourage superficial and low-involvement behaviours (Campos et al., 2016; Sormanen et al., 2025).

Indeed, young people report that social media can have a strong influence, increasing youth political interest and engagement (Oden & Porter, 2023). FG participants noted that the abundance of social and political content online could increase the likelihood of young users being exposed to and interested in social, civic and political issues, even if they didn't intend to do so. Young people's discourses point to concrete examples of how social media has increased their awareness and mobilisation around specific issues, such as climate change.

Young people are also critical of this power to influence and recognise it can be a 'double-edged sword', posing some threats to democracy. Firstly, our findings show that social media are contexts that the vast majority of young people use to stay informed about social and political issues. These results are consistent with recent national studies indicating that social media constitute the preferred source of information amongst Portuguese youth (Feio & Oliveira, 2025; Margato et al., 2025). Young students recognise that information on social media can be false and that misinformation can manipulate them (Selnes, 2024). Like Feio and colleagues (2023), we found that those who use social media as a source of political information have the highest levels of civic and political engagement on social media.

FG participants also mention that social media, as permeable spaces for anti-democratic and extremist discourses, makes it more likely that young people come into contact and engage with them while not always knowing how to, particularly given the potential for conflict that it may entail. When confronted with anti-democratic, racist or xenophobic positions, most students choose to discuss these issues in closed online groups or face-to-face with people close to them. This demonstrates how social media encourages the formation of groups with similar beliefs and opinions (Bakshy et al., 2015; Sunstein, 2017). The formation of separate groups that don't debate with one another or try to understand opposing positions can exacerbate ideological and political polarisation and fragmentation (Barberá, 2020; Ferreira & Ferreira, 2025; Hong & Kim, 2016). In FG, there was almost unanimous agreement that social media are contexts with little space for dialogue. Young people say that these digital technologies are prone to personal conflicts, with no room for debate between different points of view. This position is corroborated by young participants in the study by Paz-Rebollo and colleagues (2026), who report actively avoiding online political discussion owing to its association with interpersonal conflict and fears of judgment and social exclusion. Research has effectively concluded that online political discussions are often characterised as uncivil and hostile (Salgado et al., 2024). As a result of this risk, many social media users feel discouraged from expressing and discussing political opinions (Weeks et al., 2024).

Democracy is an ongoing challenge that requires vigilance and action to preserve it. This paper shows that young people's digital and political practices on social media are diverse and involve both opportunities and risks for their political development.

## 6. Conclusions

This research set out to examine how different profiles of social media use are associated with young people's civic and political attitudes and behaviours, and to explore the opportunities and risks for democracy that emerge from this relationship.

The data used in this study were collected before several major global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, that have significantly shaped young people's digital and political practices (Colombo et al., 2024; Schoon et al., 2025). Additionally, the social media landscape has undergone substantial changes since data collection, including shifts in platform popularity – with TikTok emerging as the most widely used social media platform among young people (Nagata et al., 2025; van der Wal et al., 2024) – as well as significant policy changes, most notably the acquisition of Twitter (now X) by Elon Musk, which resulted in a relaxation of the platform's content moderation policies and a consequent rise in the tolerance of hate speech (Wang et al., 2024). These factors could limit the applicability of the study's findings to the current media ecosystem and should be considered when interpreting the results. Nevertheless, the article's analytical contribution remains relevant for understanding youth participation in social media, namely the typologies of social media use and the profiles of online civic and political attitudes and behaviours. These results constitute a theoretical contribution that can inform future research: these typologies can be applied to and tested across different national contexts, age groups, and temporal moments – including in the post-pandemic era – to assess their stability and generalisability.

The study's distinctive contribution lies in highlighting the diversity of youth engagement in digital environments (objective 1) and in identifying distinct profiles of civic and political engagement among young people (objective 2). Specifically, the results point to the coexistence of a group of politically *engaged* young people who actively use social media for civic and political purposes; and another group that, despite lower political interest, displays moderate levels of online participation, potentially associated with their high exposure to and interaction within social media. These findings suggest that social media may function not only as a space for intentional political engagement but also as a context in which participation can emerge, even if in more incidental, low-threshold ways.

Other findings are consistent with more recent studies highlighting the growing importance of social media as a space for political information and engagement among young people (Margato et al., 2025; Matos et al., 2023), while also pointing to the increasing concerns about misinformation, algorithmic power, the quality of online political discussions, and the rise of extremism and polarisation (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2025; Paz-Rebollo et al., 2026; Selnes, 2024) (objective 3).

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the data were collected in a single public school, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, it is important to note that this study is exploratory and descriptive in nature: it documents associations between social media use profiles and civic and political attitudes and behaviours, but does not establish mechanisms or causal processes. Thus, we recognise that an important limitation is the inability to determine the directionality of the observed associations. For

instance, it remains unclear whether political interest leads young people to adopt specific social media political practices or whether particular forms of social media use shape political awareness and participation over time. This is not only a methodological constraint but also a substantive theoretical question: the literature on social media and political participation has long debated whether media use mobilises politically disengaged citizens or primarily reinforces the engagement of those already inclined to participate (Boulianne, 2015; Matthes, 2022). Our cross-sectional design does not allow us to adjudicate between these possibilities. Additionally, some measurement limitations should be acknowledged. Although their internal consistency values were acceptable, the reduced number of items in some scales (civic and political participation on social media, and internal and collective political efficacy) may constrain the breadth and robustness of the constructs measured. Moreover, the external political efficacy sub-scale was excluded due to insufficient internal consistency. We recognise that this dimension is conceptually relevant to understanding youth (dis)engagement (Khane & Westheimer, 2006), and its absence may limit the comprehensiveness of our findings. Finally, the use of self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly regarding civic and political participation, which may be perceived as socially valued behaviours.

Future research should replicate this study across multiple schools and regions, adopt longitudinal and comparative designs, use more robust, comprehensive measurement instruments, and systematically explore the role of age. Ethnographic methods, such as digital ethnography and online observation, may also provide valuable insights into how young people's social media practices unfold in context, including peer interactions and platform-specific cultures. This approach would allow researchers to observe, over time, in naturalistic settings, the everyday contexts and processes in which young people engage with social media, capturing behaviours that self-report measures and focus groups may not fully reveal.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical statement**

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of scientific research and did not require additional ethics committee approval.

### **Declaration of AI usage**

The authors used Grammarly to check spelling, grammar, and readability. They reviewed and edited the content as needed and assumed full responsibility for the publication's content.

### **Data availability**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

**Author contributions**

|                            | Ricardo Soares | Carla Malafaia | Pedro Ferreira |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Conceptualization          | X              | x              | x              |
| Data curation              | X              |                |                |
| Formal analysis            | X              |                |                |
| Investigation              | X              |                |                |
| Methodology                | X              |                |                |
| Supervision                |                | X              | X              |
| Writing - original draft   | X              |                |                |
| Writing - review & editing | X              | X              | X              |

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