

The Rear Window Effect: How Users Respond to Political Discussions and Persuasive Discourses in Social Media

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Social media facilitates the exposure of individuals to a wide range of political discussions and opinions. Extant research investigated how citizens participate in these deliberative behaviors and their implications for democratic citizenship, paying scant attention to users' avoidance tactics. In this study, we further investigate individuals' perceptions and attitudes toward the political discussions they encounter on social media, and toward their influence on their political opinion (i.e., persuasion). Based on in-depth interviews with 30 Spanish social media users, we show how online political discussions trigger what we conceptualize as the *rear window effect*, a metaphor drawn from Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* that encapsulates the exceptional circumstances under which users take a stand and express their political views online. We also show that users manage to effectively persuade by posting about their experiences and personal narratives. This study contributes to extant literature by theorizing about users' common reluctance to be politically active on social media, the rationales that shape their sporadic participation, and the mechanisms by which they are persuaded.

Keywords: political discussion, political persuasion, social media, lurkers, rear window effect

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Discussing politics is a core tenet of deliberative democracies, whereby individuals form their opinions and participate in political processes (Huber, Goyanes, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). In the online realm, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enable users to post about current events and politics everywhere and in real time while also discussing the same with various individuals that they may or may not know (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Scheffauer, Goyanes, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021). Moreover, a litany of studies has shown that not only do people blatantly discuss and express politics ideals in these ecologies, but also convey concerted efforts to change others' opinions (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Kwak, Lane, Lee, Liang, & Weeks, 2021; Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). On social media, even a retweet or a shared post may have a persuasive intent behind it (Penney, 2017).

In this study, we seek to explore users' perceptions on these two critical and interconnected dimensions of social media practices: online political discussions and the presumed influence they have in changing citizens' political opinions (i.e., persuasion). Despite the fact that social media is usually heralded as a potential public sphere that stimulates deliberative democracies (Hampton, Shin, & Lu, 2017), a substantial body of literature has empirically shown that not all users are prone to participate equally in these processes (Goyanes & Skoric, 2021; Treré, 2020; Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). Accordingly, this study aims to better understand why some users participate while others do not, and clarify the individual strategies by which users navigate such interactions. Finally, we also examine how users evaluate the persuasive efforts to change their attitudes and perceptions about politics.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 Spanish social media users, our findings show that citizens only discuss public affairs and politics on social media in particular circumstances that trigger them to react and to exceptionally abandon their lurking attitude. We conceptualize this twofold behavior as the *rear window effect*, a metaphor that draws on Alfred Hitchcock's (1954) film *Rear Window*. On social media, users present the same voyeuristic attitude as the main character of *Rear Window* when they stumble upon political discussions. They are, as the main character is, lurkers. This lurking behavior allows them to reflect on and be persuaded by the discursive stimuli they encounter while remaining fully invisible. Users also resemble the more active counterpart of the aforementioned character, momentarily leaving their precious passive behavior when facing topics and issues relevant for their identities, such as feminism, racism, or regional politics. Finally, our findings also show that despite the general belief that family and friends have greater persuasive power, weak ties and strangers online circumvent strong-tie homogeneity, allowing users to find out through narratives novel viewpoints by which to revise their political stands.

In brief, our study contributes to the stream of literature at the intersection of online political discussion and persuasion highlighting, on the one hand, users' lurking behavior toward political discussions and the main mechanisms that activate their exceptional participation. On the other, the study also emphasizes the key role that persuasion plays in such discussions, addressing how regular users persuade through personal narratives and experiences.

Political Discussions on Social Media

Political discussion has traditionally been pondered as a hallmark of a deliberative democracy, which consists of a discursive system “where citizens share information about public affairs, talk politics, form opinions, and participate in political processes” (Kim et al., 1999, p. 361). These deliberations were once exclusively limited to offline settings. However, the advent of the Internet and especially social media opened a new sphere for expression of political and social issues (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Skoric & Zhu, 2016) in which every user could become an active player, respond to others, and change the course of a given discussion.

The large range of activities that social media users can undertake when they post about current affairs and politics may reach a large audience of potential participants (Goyanes & Demeter, 2022; Lane, Kim, Lee, Weeks, & Kwak, 2017). Hence, as could be expected, scholars have addressed these platforms as online public spheres (Hampton et al., 2017), thus investigating how their affordances for action contribute to the maintenance of different democratic processes (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Lane et al., 2017; Skoric & Zhu, 2016). In this regard, the use of social media has mostly been found to be positively associated with online and offline participatory behaviors (Boulianne, 2019; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016), which has generally ascertained these platforms’ mobilizing role.

More specifically, discussing politics on social media has proven to be one of the main predictors of participation and users’ social capital (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Yamamoto, Nah, & Bae, 2019). In fact, those who typically exchange views with others are more likely to express themselves afterward (Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006), have more political knowledge (e.g., Park, 2017), and are more likely to be exposed to dissenting opinions (Mutz, 2006), all of which are traits of well-functioning democracies (e.g., Moy & Gastil, 2006). In addition, as Kim and Ellison (2021) point out, observing users discuss and engage in different online political activities increases the likelihood of engaging in such activities in the future.

Despite the empirical evidence described thus far, the assumption that social media stimulates civic engagement and deliberative behaviors remains questionable, so much so that another body of literature has extensively emphasized how most users seem to reject the participatory culture of the Internet, preferring not to be exposed to such a potential big audience (Edelmann, 2013; Honeychurch, Bozkurt, Singh, & Koutropoulos, 2017). According to the “90-9-1” principle introduced by Nielsen (2006), in an average online community, passive users or lurkers account for 90% of the participants and solely read and examine other people’s posts, 9% of the rest generate content occasionally, and 1% of the participants frequently comment and engage in discussions. Accordingly, while a minority of users keeps online political discussions active, the overwhelming majority adopts a lurking attitude that may end up impairing the vitality of the deliberations (Ping & Chee, 2001).

Extant research has associated the concept of “lurking” with “observation, silence, inactivity/passivity, invisibility, or bystander behavior” (Edelmann, 2013, p. 345) and, while lurkers have typically been assessed as free-riders that contribute very little or no value to online discussions (e.g., Muller, 2012; Van Mierlo, 2014), other studies have taken a more optimistic attitude toward them. Honeychurch and colleagues (2017), for instance, refer to lurkers as “legitimate peripheral participants” who contribute to a particular community by passively participating while learning more about its complex system. Similar studies have also suggested that

passive users may become more active over time (Antin & Cheshire, 2010; Muller, 2012), or even more or less central in a given online discussion (Norman, Nordin, Din, Ally, & Dogan, 2015), hinging on each user's overall engagement and the nature of the community (Muller, 2012).

Accordingly, despite their deliberative potential, there are myriad motivations why some users may choose not to partake in online discussions and engage instead in a more inconspicuous behavior. Notably, discussing politics may trigger individual or collective conflicts, which not everyone is willing to venture into. Indeed, on social media, not only do individuals have to deal with overexposure, but also with a darker side of such ecologies, which includes the spread of hate speech (Mathew, Dutt, Goyal, & Mukherjee, 2019) and uncivil political discussions (Goyanes, Borah, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021; Jordá, Cañedo, Bene, & Goyanes, 2021). In addition, the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) illustrates that the perception of holding divergent views from that of the majority hampers citizens' opinion expression. Research indicates that social media contributes to a spiral of silence that hinders political conversation among most users (Fernández, Rodríguez-Virgili, & Serrano-Puche, 2020; Hampton et al., 2017). However, users with strong opinions appear to overcome this silence, perceiving higher levels of attitude congruence, and being more willing to express their opinions on such issues (Hampton et al., 2017).

Against this backdrop, Treré (2020) argues that each social media platform triggers different behaviors and discussion practices. While Twitter and Facebook are "frontstage" platforms in which users have to deal with overexposure, WhatsApp or Twitter direct messages are "backstage" and may provide lurkers the familiar and safe environment that they need to actively participate (Goyanes & Skoric, 2021). Moreover, studies show that users' deliberative engagement varies, hinging on the nature of the issues tackled. Vraga and colleagues (2015) note that political disagreement can sometimes spur passive users to express their opinions, while Goyanes and Skoric (2021) point that fabricated content makes an effective mobilizer.

All things considered, although scholars have generally taken for granted users' participatory behavior, social media affordances can both facilitate or obscure potential political behavior (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017). In fact, affordances make visible political activities that were once invisible to the public eye (e.g., support for a political candidate, political opinions, voting), potentially prompting users to merely observe and silently learn from their invisible position (Kim & Ellison, 2021). We argue that such use of affordances does not prevent individuals from ever taking action and developing into active discussants. At the same time, it still enables online persuasion to change users' political opinions. Active users may change their viewpoints as a result of engaging in discussions (Ardèvol-Abreu, Barnidge, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017), passive users, on the other hand, may still learn from others' political conversations (Honeychurch et al., 2017), reflecting on them, and reconsidering their own viewpoints.

Political Persuasion on Social Media

Persuasion is the process by which communicators attempt to change people's opinions and behaviors and, as noted by Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason (2010), comprises three dimensions: attitude change, attitude formation, and attitude reinforcement. Prior studies on persuasion addressed the presumed influence of the news media, opinion leaders, strong ties, and weak ties (e.g., Krackhardt, 1992; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weimann, 1994). They examined the settings in which individuals change or reinforce their

political standpoints and the processes that underlie such changes in the offline realm. In this regard, despite scholars having long noted the importance of close-knit social connections for greater persuasion effects (Krackhardt, 1992), the rise of social media potentially allows ordinary citizens to change attitudes and behaviors on a mass scale (Fogg, 2008).

Accordingly, the burgeoning area of inquiry into online political persuasion has tended to explore its main antecedents and effects in social media. Recent survey research has examined the relationships among political persuasion and political discussion (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017), opinion leadership (Weeks et al., 2017), or civil reasoning (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Diehl, 2018), mostly finding positive links. Altogether, these studies show that both political and apolitical uses of social media may lead individuals to reconsider or change their political views, especially among those who use it as a means of news consumption (Diehl et al., 2016).

Furthermore, social networking sites have increased the roles of highly active users or *prosumers* in spreading political information and persuading others (Weeks et al., 2017). In fact, although Weeks and colleagues (2017) note that only a small fraction of their sample (12.5%) fits the characteristics they define for highly engaged prosumers, they also emphasize that the more users engage on social media, the more they see themselves as politically persuasive. Other studies have highlighted the important role that political humor and argument quality have in online persuasion (Cyr, Head, Lim, & Stibe, 2018; Greenwood, Sorenson, & Warner, 2016). The level of involvement that an individual has in an issue also conditions possible opinion changes (Cyr et al., 2018).

Building on these theoretical insights, Ahmad (2020) concludes that social media usage remains a significant predictor of online political persuasion regardless of the characteristics of online messages. And, in a more recent study, Kwak and colleagues (2021) propose the "Persuasion-Openness" model, which suggests that both persuading and being target of persuasion online may also motivate individuals to engage in cross-cutting discussions and, in turn, become more dialogically open. According to their findings, persuaders are more prone to engage in cross-cutting discussions and be more dialogically open regardless of how much their information environment challenges them. By contrast, recipients of persuasion only appear to engage in cross-cutting discussions and increase their dialogic openness with low levels of attitude-challenging information.

In sum, online political discussions may provide both active and passive users with new information that they previously ignored or cogent arguments that make them change their political opinions. Consequently, even though counter-persuasion had been argued to be less common in the online context (Holbert et al., 2010), this growing body of work has substantially showcased how the different types of content on social media, and even the "symbolic packets of opinion and ideology" that people share through retweets or hashtags (Penney, 2017, p. 5), manage to encompass the three dimensions of persuasion. Our study extends this line of research by investigating users' perceptions toward online political persuasion.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Research on online political discussion has traditionally portrayed social media platforms as positive contributors to deliberative democracies (Hampton et al., 2017). These studies have provided robust

empirical evidence of the positive links between different social media uses, including discussion, and political participatory behaviors (Skoric et al., 2016). However, they have paid scant attention to the lurking majority (Edelmann, 2013), thus leaving unclear their perspectives about their social media management germane to political discussions. In a similar fashion, while extant literature has extensively illustrated the persuasion within users' political discussions (e.g., Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017; Weeks et al., 2017), few studies, if any, have qualitatively examined the mechanisms by which users are persuaded. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 Spanish social media users, we address the aforementioned gaps in the literature and formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: How does exposure to political discussions in social media shape users' online behavior?

RQ2: What content features facilitate political opinion change in social media?

Methodology

For our study, we conducted in-depth interviews with 30 Spanish social media users. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2020 and March 2021. We decided to rely on in-depth interviews since they provide a more complete picture of individuals' thoughts, experiences, and behaviors as opposed to other quantitative methods (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Additionally, this research approach facilitates the identification of patterns from the complex thoughts offered by participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

We used purposive sampling, specifically maximum variety sampling (Patton, 2002). Participants were selected as to create a heterogeneous and relatively rich sample: We included users from different rural and urban areas, different genders, ages, political orientations, and levels of education. The sample included a broad range of occupations: teachers, factory workers, publicists, supermarket workers, nurses, and others. In general, the recruitment of participants started by inviting a handful of distant contacts through personal networks and using snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, whenever possible, participants were requested to provide names of a few acquaintances who could be suitable follow-up participants. These contacts had to be diverse in terms of sociodemographic characteristics. We repeated this procedure with each person who was subsequently interviewed until we achieved theoretical saturation of ideas. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Participants	Gender	Age	Employment Status	Education	Type of Interview
30	50% male (<i>n</i> = 15)	20–29 (<i>n</i> = 24)	Working (<i>n</i> = 20)	High school or less (<i>n</i> = 11)	Video call (<i>n</i> = 11)
	50% female (<i>n</i> = 15)	30–39 (<i>n</i> = 6)	Student (<i>n</i> = 7)	Some college (<i>n</i> = 6)	Telephone (<i>n</i> = 11)
			Unemployed (<i>n</i> = 3)	College degree or more (<i>n</i> = 13)	Face-to-face (<i>n</i> = 8)

We informed all interviewees about the nature of the study and intended dissemination of the results, and they verbally consented to their participation before the interview started. Still, to protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout the Results section. In most cases, the interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and they were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide addressed three topic areas. The first part aimed to familiarize participants with the goal of the study and concerned their use and perception of social media for information purposes. The questions addressed how participants consume news through social media and their preferred platforms to discuss politics and stay informed about current affairs. The second part focused on the attitude of participants toward political discussions: questions addressed how users perceive such discussions, how they participate in them, the main reasons for their participation, and the potential effects of this engagement. The third part concerned participants' perceptions of opinion change, and how political discussions on social media shape and affect participants' political views.

We analyzed the interviews using the six-stage thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows for the systematization and transparency in the coding and the analysis process. This thematic analysis enabled us to identify key features, similarities, and differences across the statements of interviewees that were relevant to our research interests (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the same time, this analysis provided us enough flexibility to identify other emerging themes.

Results

General Social Media Use and Personal Preferences

The use of social media as an information hub is becoming pervasive, particularly among young adults. Most of our participants acknowledge that they mainly stay informed about current events and public issues through these ecologies. As Elena, a publicist, reports, social media "sort of summarizes what is happening in the media. It takes you from one place to another, so you can get a better idea of what is going on" (P27). Our participants reflect on the multiplicity and versatility of social media, and most of them point out Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram as the most informative platforms. To a lesser extent, others mention YouTube and WhatsApp. All things considered, Twitter is appraised as the ultimate platform for information by the majority of the respondents, who use it to check "what is happening" (P2).

Despite this apparent information realm, many participants realize they consume news as a by-product of their regular active use of social media. In fact, the affordances of these platforms assure users will encounter news information anywhere and anytime, as prior scholarship has systematically demonstrated. On social media, information is ubiquitous and, as Roberto, a hairdresser, simply states, "Either you look for it or not, you always end up finding news" (P9). Accordingly, the vast majority of interviewees conceive online social networks as both a source of information and a sphere of discussion, mostly about political matters. Current events and issues indeed serve as a catalyst for people from all walks of life to express their political opinions, which sometimes leads to uncivil discussions, as Noelia, a nursing assistant, clearly illustrates:

Each one talks about one thing and paints their reality in their own way. And maybe one is more focused on what the news wants to say. And the other one is criticizing the former with something that has nothing to do with it. One gets under the other's personality and the other one is maybe talking about something completely different. They criticize each other a lot. (P25)

Consequently, according to our testimonies, social media is a "double-edged sword" (P26). On the one hand, it provides users the very real possibility to learn about all kinds of issues and different "realities" from one's own (P13). For instance, Victor, a university student, states he had "the biggest growth in terms of social involvement" because of social media, through which he learned "many points of view" that he would not have known otherwise, since he lives in a rural area (P11). On the other hand, given the massive circulation of fabricated content, other participants emphasize that "many things can be misinterpreted" (P23), from news content to misleading posts shared by other users. Additionally, as Noelia described, political discussions on these ecologies are typically complemented by uncivil comments and hate speech that users with dissenting opinions foster, from which people sometimes cannot draw any conclusions.

Users' Behavior Toward Online Political Discussions: The Rear Window Effect

Despite this convoluted online context, our participants are mindful of the fact that social media allows them to comprehend, to some extent, "the current situation of Spain" (P1) and "the state of public opinion on different issues" (P3). Our interviewees appreciate users' views because of "their closeness and accessibility," as Milagros, a community manager (P22), notes. Nonetheless, most of them refrain from expressing their political opinions online, except in particular circumstances that trigger them to react. Our participants generally observe their surroundings inconspicuously, adopting a twofold behavior similar to that of L. B. Jefferies or "Jeff" in the film *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), which we conceptualize as the *rear window effect*. In the film, Jefferies, a temporarily disabled photojournalist, learns about his neighbors while observing them from his window without being seen. However, when Jefferies thinks he has witnessed a murder, he abandons his reluctance. In fact, he does his utmost, and persuades the individuals who surround him to help him to expose the alleged criminal, regardless of the aftermath.

In this regard, the *rear window effect* refers, on the one hand, to the receptive, yet lurking attitude most participants maintain on social media. In essence, most of them acknowledge that, at any given time, they could come across a post that teaches them something about a topic, a reality or fact, they do not know about. Furthermore, they may witness a discussion that catches their attention and makes them question or change their political attitude, to a greater or lesser extent. Against this backdrop, many of our participants resemble the film character and behave as voyeurs, that is, they lurk but do not participate. Victor acknowledges he is "very nosy" and states: "I like to watch. Even though I don't get involved, I get into the conversation to watch what people are discussing" (P11). Echoing this perspective, Laura, a university student, describes herself as a "viewer" and asserts that on social media, she tries to be "as neutral as possible," while she forms her political opinion (P28).

On the other hand, the *rear window effect* refers as well to those decisive moments when users make the decision to actively participate, either by expressing their opinion or by engaging in discussions.

At these times, individuals feel the urge to take action, and disclose publicly their standpoint on a given topic to make their followers or friends aware of its importance. According to our evidence, most of these topics are “politically related” (P25), and include issues such as fascism, feminism, regional politics, and so forth. For instance, Pablo, an unemployed shop worker, reveals that he always tries to stay quiet on social media, but recalls he posted his opinion on a right-wing extremists’ protest because, as he explains: “There are things you can’t keep quiet about. It makes your blood boil” (P10). Other participants think likewise, and reflect on this call to action in the following terms:

It made me very angry and I posted about it [the appointment of a politician from my region]. He is not from Almeria, nor has he ever lived in Almeria. . . . I published it out of helplessness, since I can’t do anything about it, at least I share my opinion. (P1)

I publish my opinion about women’s advocacy, racist violence . . . When I see something that I really think is worth sharing, of course I share it! It’s like when you publish something because you want to awake consciences and make people more aware, not just to say “look at me!” (P14)

I post about certain topics that I see as super important. I talk about them, I don’t hide. If I, for example, am against abortion and news about that issue come out, I share them on my social networks. Sometimes I even discuss with my followers. Or if I am very much in favor or against a new law, then I also share it. (P27)

Interestingly, a second group of participants feel hesitant to share their opinions even in those dramatic moments, preferring instead to retweet, like, or share someone else’s opinion. María, an English teacher, retweets and comments on opinions of comedians about political actions that make her feel “indignant,” but never writes anything personally. In fact, she prefers not to get “too involved in some issues, since they are delicate” (P4). Similarly, Eduardo, an illustrator, states he retweets very few political posts, and explains: “In the end, if you retweet something, it’s like saying it yourself. What happens is that you don’t dare do it” (P17). Despite the fact that this kind of online engagement might seem both less direct and effective, participants who undertake it do not necessarily think of it as being imprecise or non-persuasive:

Even if you are a viewer and you are just retweeting, I think it will somehow influence your followers. Those followers are going to learn what they read and I think there is going to be a connection, just like dominoes. (P28)

However, it is paramount to bear in mind that, more often than not, the vast majority of participants are inclined to consider themselves as not active players. Accordingly, most interviewees prefer to keep on watching and examining what they see from their rear window. Nevertheless, unlike Jefferies, they are not handicapped. Some of them argue that they only leave behind their invisible position in more appropriate places, like Ismael, a bartender who believes sharing his political opinion on social media is “a way of creating an unnecessary discussion in an unnecessary place with people I may not know.” Thus, he prefers to share his political ideas “with family, with friends or with the people around me” and always face-to-face

(P18). Other participants are so entrenched by their lurking role that they believe their comment would hardly make any difference, like Eduardo, who explains: "The discussion is already there with a lot of people taking part. . . . I think I'm just going to leave my opinion among a gigantic sea. I think there is no point in doing so" (P17). Luis, a supermarket cashier, shares a similar perspective, saying his potential participation "is not going to change anything" (P29).

Still, many interviewees just fear the consequences of their intervention. Indeed, according to our testimonies, sharing a political opinion on social media could be "very controversial" (P19). The aforementioned uncivil discussions and hate speech worry most of our participants, and symbolize the rationale behind María's thought that on social media "words must be measured" (P4). Some participants provide illustrative examples of this preventive behavior, like Eva, a student: "On such sites I prefer not to give my opinion because I fear they might come after me. I mean, I think it must not be nice to have strangers insulting you" (P7). Following this line of thought, Ricardo, a publicist, explains that "freedom of expression in social networks leaves a lot to be desired. Because in the end, if you are discerning, if you give a different opinion, you will be singled out, and everyone will lynch you" (P26).

In contrast, a few of our interviewees leave aside these motivations, and blatantly admit to engage in social media discussions on a daily basis. One of them is Roberto, who regularly shares his political opinion on Instagram stories because, as he says, "It's my personal account, and if someone doesn't like it, then they can either unfollow me or stop coming to my hair salon. I don't care at all" (P9). Relatedly, Luisa, a university student, admits she was "tired of reading other people's opinions," and felt hers was not being said as much: "You see all the people interacting, liking, discussing . . . Well, I also have an opinion and it is different, so I'm going to post it as well." She highlights how, thanks to her active online participation, she has been able to find like-minded peers. She adds, "You learn from them and you start following each other. Then, if they mess with one of us, we all go after them. It's like a family" (P2).

Attitude Change and Political Persuasion on Social Media

The social media political posts that users see from their rear window affect their political views differently. Generally, the vast majority of interviewees agree that changing people's attitudes is a complex task, which is additionally hindered by the current polarization. Accordingly, our participants tend to think of change in the long term. As Javier, an unemployed waiter, expresses it: "I think we all change bit by bit. It doesn't happen overnight, but everything contributes a little" (P21). As a rule of thumb, most of our interviewees think that they do their bit. Victor thinks change is "from bottom up" (P11); Rosa, a call center assistant, says that "change is made by oneself" (P20). Likewise, Blanca, an unemployed film assistant, believes that "a lot of small changes make big changes" (P16).

A large number of our interviewees recognize that they are open to opinion and attitude change—to be persuaded—and think of it as a positive thing. Moreover, some of them acknowledge the persuasive power of the constant inputs they gather through social media. As Laura illustrates, "Even if you don't remember it, next time you see something, unconsciously you will think about that previous post you have seen, so I think it influences you" (P28). Although a lot of participants believe they have changed their minds in the past due to news or political discussions on social media, a few others do not think so. Tomás, a university student, thinks

social media tends to confirm what he already thinks, "I don't remember when I have had other opinions," he adds (P3), and Ricardo considers that online discussions just make him laugh (P26).

Similarly, most of our respondents are aware that their openness to change depends on "the topic," as stated by Rosa (P20). Interestingly, some of them speak of their persuasion threshold in terms of percentages. While Roberto is 100% open to change, Milagros is 50%. She adds, "There are issues that I think are more debatable and there are others that I won't discuss, and these issues I do not give the opportunity to change my mind" (P22). According to this line of thought, our evidence seems to suggest that there is a series of issues whose political standpoint our participants are not willing to change, regardless of what they hear or read. These topics are typically pondered as "the pillars" of their identities, and include everything that relates to human rights, feminism, or other topics that some participants regard as "ethical," like euthanasia or abortion. "I am for abortion and whatever people post my opinion is not going to change. Or if someone posts 'feminism is wrong, it's a lie,' even if you give 40,000 arguments, I'm not going to believe you," María argued (P4).

Surprisingly, a minority of participants considers morally based issues the most troubling ones. Eva explains: "When all the news about the abortion law in Argentina came out, it made me think. It's a life but at the same time it's not? On issues like this, like abortion, I'm more open to change my opinion" (P7). Nonetheless, the rest of interviewees typically think that, with regard to these topics, they have reached a point of saturation. In other words, they have read enough as to have an informed opinion, and do not expect to receive any new input that challenges their viewpoint. As Celia, a university student, reflects:

When it comes to feminism it is very difficult for me to see somewhere something that I have not already read. . . . All the things that have made me question my position and change it or leave it unchanged, I have already read them. (P6)

Consequently, most of our respondents acknowledge to have changed their views on issues in which they did not have strong opinions or had little knowledge of. As previously mentioned, social media is considered a means to learn from others, which ultimately helps our participants to form their political opinions. In this regard, Isabel, a project manager, points out how online posts made her opinion about surrogacy change:

I didn't have a very well-formed opinion before, and I saw a lot of comments, videos, and information about it on social networks that made me think in a different way. Maybe I thought it was alright and as I saw these things, I realized that maybe it was not so great. (P24)

Our interviewees are also more inclined to change their opinions when they find out more information about a given topic. In these cases, the change can be about anything since it hinges on the information the user voluntarily finds. For instance, Cristina, a dancer, states that certain discussions on social media triggered her to look for more information on a Spanish political party, which ultimately led her to change her opinion about it (P14). Likewise, Rosa points out that information and comments on Instagram

about the immigration crisis in the Canary Islands made her opinion change a little. Afterward, she stopped saying some things that she had learned were false (P20).

Notably, our testimonies highlight that, to be persuasive, arguments have to be coherent and documented. Furthermore, other interviewees mention the importance of personal narratives, which make users empathize with the narrator and identify with what is being argued. Blanca, for instance, acknowledges to have changed some mistaken attitudes thanks to users' experiences: "I didn't know that it's better to ask people for their preferred pronoun. So, if it makes them feel more comfortable, then I ask it, as now I know" (P16). Such perception suggests that participants may get lost in users' narratives which, following transportation theory (Green, 2008), may allow for the creation of rich mental images that enhance empathy and increase persuasive power. And, even though some participants do point out how they take more into consideration the arguments shared by strong ties, others display a tendency to consider users' posts as personal and close, which ultimately makes them more persuasive. In this regard, reflecting on online persuasion, David indicates:

Sometimes the deduction [that people make] I think is: "If this person has said it, it must be so. And he is a person like me, normal and ordinary. Well, maybe it is true after all and what he is saying makes sense." (P1)

Discussion and Conclusions

The widespread use of social media in citizens' everyday life triggers them to discuss politics and be simultaneously exposed to online persuasive effects intended to change their political attitudes and opinions (Diehl et al., 2016; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Our research complements these studies and, drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with social media users from Spain, provides a nuanced understanding of the behavior that users develop when facing political discussions on social media. Our findings also identify the content features and mechanisms by which political persuasion unfolds, ultimately changing users' political viewpoints.

First, our evidence indicates that users are inclined to be inactive and disengaged when they confront online political discussions. As argued before, studies have predominantly demonstrated social media use as a predictor of citizen engagement (Boulianne, 2019; Skoric et al., 2016). Our findings add nuance to this notion and are more aligned instead with research that illustrates the tendency of users to neglect online participation. Accordingly, our interviewees remain predominantly passive and only actively participate in specific circumstances. We conceptualize this twofold behavior as the *rear window effect* and examine its main antecedents and effects.

As part of the *rear window effect*, individuals engage on social media with a voyeuristic attitude, observing from their invisible position all the political discussions while forming their political opinion. On the one hand, this attitude questions the notion of considering these platforms a modern public sphere in which individuals feel encouraged to participate, become active players, and freely discuss public affairs and politics (Yamamoto et al., 2019). On the other hand, the *rear window effect* challenges the general assumptions on lurkers, which regards them as users who are hard to involve in the community and who

solely read others' users comments without contributing (Edelmann, 2013). By contrast, the second phase of this effect illustrates that when passive users ponder a given political topic as important or concerning, they are keen to abandon the rationales that prevent their regular engagement and make the most of social media's visibility affordance, either by directly taking action (posting and discussing their views with others), or by more subtle ways of posting, which includes practices such as retweeting or news sharing.

Second, our findings provide a better understanding of the reasons behind users' passivity. Extant research has noted the hostile and negative features that grow and expand on social media and has reflected that this inherent hostility, along with the preference of individuals to discuss politics in private or face-to-face settings, are the main reasons for users' disengagement (Goyanes & Skoric, 2021; Treré, 2020). In addition to this, our interviewees consider that the high number of active discussants makes their plausible participation fruitless and unnecessary, even though much research has systematically demonstrated how few users keep the online flow of information active (e.g., Van Mierlo, 2014). From a theoretical perspective, this belief is also consistent with the bystander effect of online knowledge communities (Yan & Jian, 2017).

In addition, the *rear window effect* contains a third aspect that other studies on online discussion have not considered. Few studies have suggested that lurkers become more embedded in the community over time (Muller, 2012), that both passive and active users may interchange roles of participation with time (Norman et al., 2015), and that observing users' political activities makes individuals more likely to participate in online political activities (Kim & Ellison, 2021). Other studies have also documented how passive users may sometimes express their political opinions in the face of disagreement or fabricated content (Goyanes & Skoric, 2021; Vraga et al., 2015). Our interviewees peruse and reflect on the political discussions, yet they show little inclination to vary their mostly passive social media behavior. In fact, their engagement does not seem to hinge on time or on their exposure to others' political participation, but instead on the topics tackled. In this sense, our interviewees intervene in the online exchange of ideas and opinions at given times, to later immediately return to their lurking role.

Specifically, our interviewees' engagement hinges on the personal relevance that they attribute to topics, regardless of veracity or their level of agreement. This contribution also aligns with the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In the same way users with strong opinions circumvent the spiral of silence, our participants are willing to abandon their lurking attitude on issues relevant to them. Moreover, this contribution provides a better understanding of the rationales that shape users' sporadic participation (Hampton et al., 2017).

Finally, our fourth contribution lies in the examination of how social media content persuades and changes users' political opinions. Extant research pointed to political discussion as an antecedent of political persuasion (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017). Users who participate in discussions may indeed change their viewpoints, but also mere observers, who may be eager to learn and reflect on viewpoints as much as active participants (Honeychurch et al., 2017), potentially being persuaded. Our evidence is aligned with research that highlights the persuasive power of social media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018; Penney, 2017) and adds to this literature by pointing to three interconnected features of persuasive posts. The first feature focuses on the ubiquity, immediacy, and wide variety of information posts by which citizens discover new viewpoints and different "realities" from their own. According to our findings, posts by weak ties or strangers, mainly

on Twitter, allow our participants to discover different “realities” that they had not previously considered, which could potentially change their worldviews. This finding suggests that social media may circumvent both the tendency of individuals to associate with similar others and the homogeneity that characterizes strong ties relationships (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Given that these connections tend to be politically similar, discussions among strong ties may be filled with reciprocal agreement and limited persuasion, both online and offline.

The second feature highlights the importance of personal narratives. Reading users’ experiences while learning about an issue evokes empathy and influences readers’ perceptions about it. In line with transportation theory (Green, 2008), users’ personal narratives allow our participants to experience strong emotions and be transported into stories. This experience links mental images with the beliefs implied in the narrative, turning events into personal experiences, which our participants feel part of (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). Transported individuals identify less downsides in narratives, which facilitates attitude change as a response. This leads to the last feature, that is, the “closeness” and “accessibility” of online posts. Regardless of the existing relationship, most of our interviewees think of online content as personal, which ultimately makes it more persuasive. Taken together, despite the fact that close ties may have greater persuasiveness potential (Krackhardt, 1992), social media facilitates the emergence of opinion change among all users.

In conclusion, as opposed to former studies, our empirical findings bring to the forefront the behavior that the silent majority of citizens adopt on social media. Specifically, the main theoretical contributions emanating from our evidence include (a) the nuances of users’ lurking behavior, which they only leave behind when salient topics are in the spotlight of discussions and (b) the content features and the narrative mechanisms by which users persuade.

Limitations and Future Studies

Although we believe that our results represent a step further in the study of online political discussion and persuasion, our work is naturally not without limitations. First, it is noteworthy to mention that being targets of persuasion may have contributed to the momentary dialogic openness of our participants, if they perceived low levels of attitude-challenging information (Kwak et al., 2021). In addition, the generalizability of our findings should be interpreted carefully, as we implemented snowball sampling. Although the subjects of our study have diverse profiles and belong to different social networks, future studies should conduct more systematic and randomized sampling methods. Future studies may also consider, for instance, further investigating the rationales of political persuasion on social media and its differences with traditional media. Similarly, research on political discussion should consider quantitatively examining the antecedents of active versus passive discussants.

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