



THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN VIRTUAL SOCIAL NETWORKS: Thematic Synthesis of Peruvian University Theses

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ABSTRACT

This study examines political discourse on social media in Peru, emphasizing the urgency of a deeper analysis in this field, particularly in university theses. Through a thematic synthesis of 26 thesis reports, it identifies key trends and approaches in digital political communication, investigating how political actors implement discursive strategies to influence public perception and address phenomena such as post-truth, disinformation, and digital activism. This approach underscores the need for a more responsible use of social media, which is crucial for protecting the quality of political discourse and the integrity of democratic debate.

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1. Introduction

Virtual social networks are essential to the study of communication owing to their impact on politics (Delfino et al., 2019). These platforms amplify political messages and mobilise emotions, transforming communication and relationships (Luque-Zabala et al., 2024). Political leaders manage their public image, shaping debate and increasing polarisation (Martínez-Bascuñán, 2015). Digitalisation promotes more horizontal communication and online spaces for debate (Caldevilla-Domínguez, 2009). However, the number of followers does not always indicate genuine political activity, which reveals both the democratising potential and the limitations of these networks (Baquerizo-Neira et al., 2021; Quevedo et al., 2021; Recalde et al., 2019). In the Global South, these dynamics profoundly affect democracy and peaceful coexistence, underscoring the importance of critically analysing their impact on politics and public opinion (León & García, 2024).

Social networks have transformed political communication by promoting citizen re-politicisation and reinforcing democratic legitimacy through more tangible participation (Arias, 2016). Unlike traditional media, the Internet, with its decentralised structure and individualised interface, offers new dynamics of interaction. Platforms such as Instagram have become essential for political self-branding, allowing politicians to construct a personal image by employing strategies typical of advertising and commercial influencer discourse. However, on these platforms, brands and celebrities predominate over political representatives and their governmental initiatives (Caro-Castaño et al., 2024; Madrid-Cánovas, 2022). On Twitter, the use of images has increased, fostering personalisation, polarisation and the emotional discourse of candidates during electoral periods, replacing self-referential content with more relevant visuals (Diez-Gracia et al., 2022; 2023; Ruiz-del-Olmo and Bustos, 2018). According to Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2019), there is a moderate relationship between social media use and civic and political participation, while Theocharis et al. (2015) note that Twitter facilitates the democratisation of political communication by improving the availability of information and encouraging interactive debate.

Citizen discourse on virtual social networks is reactive, influenced by messages from traditional media and politicians, as evidenced through mentions and hashtags (Gallardo & Engix, 2016). This type of communication originates in creative and fluid comments, facilitating interaction between unfamiliar peers and reinforcing the network's distributed structure (Caldevilla-Domínguez, 2009). When politicians fail to secure legitimacy through logical arguments, they tend to appeal to voters' emotions (Padilla-Herrada, 2015). This tendency, driven by the indignation of movements and new reformist parties, challenges traditional elitist politics (Ballesté, 2021; Castells, 2018; Flesher, 2020; Gutiérrez, 2020). Although indignation has driven more democratic models and the institutionalisation of protest (Graeber, 2011), digital political communication still shows limitations in bidirectionality and personalisation, reflecting patterns from traditional politics (Cabasés et al., 2018). Although Twitter use has increased and there is greater activity on social networks during campaigns, communication remains distant and unoriginal, with relatively low interaction relative to the total number of posts (Recalde et al., 2019).

Social networks, applications and websites have taken on a crucial role in creating and disseminating discourses that stigmatise, harm and spread hatred towards certain social groups. Although the phenomenon of fake news and hate speech is not new, these platforms have proven effective at disseminating messages of dubious veracity, significantly affecting public opinion (Nuevo-López et al., 2023). Although political practices in digital media have evolved slowly, with persistent depersonalisation in messaging, the increase in digital participation has not generated significant changes in political communication patterns compared with previous studies (Chaves-Montero, 2022; Martínez, 2018). Depersonalisation remains a relevant issue, as politicians and organisations avoid practices that could affect their credibility (Delfino et al., 2019). Social networks, with their growing influence, have become primary sources of information and socialisation (Hajli, 2014).

In the current climate of polarisation, political strategies based on fear and disqualification face ethical and legal limits, particularly in relation to hate speech and the glorification of terrorism. Social networks foster radicalisation and amplify hate speech, as populist movements use reductive and antagonistic messages that these platforms' algorithms intensify, creating extreme opinion niches and affecting social polarisation (Galindo-Domínguez et al., 2023). This phenomenon reflects a new paradigm of digital communication, marked by the delegitimisation of traditional media (Amorós-

García, 2019; Rúas-Araújo et al., 2018), the prevalence of disinformation and the virality of news, and the integration of hate speech into the public sphere (Velasco & Rodríguez-Alarcón, 2020). Concepts such as post-truth, disinformation and fake news demonstrate how emotions and personal beliefs supersede objective facts in public opinion (Del Fresno, 2019), with digital disinformation and hatred causing serious psychological harm, particularly to minorities (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

Virtual social networks play a crucial role in shaping political debates and polarising discourse by framing and highlighting the most relevant issues. These platforms enable a continuous communicative flow and, although they retain hierarchical structures, they also empower citizens as prosumers of content during electoral campaigns (Sánchez, 2020). This empowerment, together with the networks' capacity to create logical opportunities for improving organisation and counter-discourse spaces, has been widely documented (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; della Porta, 2013). Nevertheless, some researchers have questioned these capacities, arguing that social networks are limited to content management without any real impact on the empowerment of parties, although these perspectives may be outdated in the current context (Jensen, 2017).

The analysis of political discourse offers a profound insight into reality by unpacking the ways in which messages are constructed and understood, although not all analytical perspectives provide a uniform view (Buenfil-Burgos, 2019). Political discourse analysis adopts an epistemological stance that recognises that discourse transcends the words spoken, viewing it as a manifestation of a particular understanding of reality. This approach encompasses not only the spoken word, but also what is left unsaid, symbolism, omissions and actions that reflect a worldview (Vega-Ramírez, 2023). This approach allows for a thorough review of concepts such as discourse, hegemony, society and politics. In political campaigns, the use of platforms and social networks presents unique narrative challenges, where short videos and rhetorical devices generate persuasive messages that strengthen candidates' ethos and capture the attention of audiences, particularly young people, who were previously neglected (Peña et al., 2024).

Political discourse relies on rhetorical strategies and cultural resources that influence the community's will, becoming a powerful tool for political marketing (García-Barroso, 2015). Discursive strategies follow an enunciation plan with specific aims, involving grammatical and pragmatic aspects that require textual and discourse analysis (Peña et al., 2023; Wodak, 2000). Discourse does not merely reflect reality but seeks to impose an understanding of it, acting as a form of power that is established and validated through its capacity to override other understandings and consolidate itself as hegemonic (Juárez & Piedrahita-Bustamante, 2022; Wodak and Meyer, 2003). A lack of passion in political discourse can be perceived negatively, regardless of the semantic content of the message, since the voice and emotions conveyed must be congruent with the message to be effective. In representative democratic systems, politicians must use every resource available to persuade the electorate, making the use of vocal accompaniments crucial to achieving this objective (Pereiro, 2023).

In the analysis of political discourses, Renobell (2017) confirms that candidates with more followers tend to have greater preference on social networks, in line with previous studies (Chaves-Montero & Gadea, 2017; Theocharis et al., 2015). However, the relationship between interactions and votes is not always direct, suggesting that online presence may be maturing without necessarily translating into an increase in votes (Rendueles, 2013). Although originality in tweets is partly related to a higher number of followers, the trend towards depersonalisation of discourse and the use of images is confirmed, as is the prevalence of unidirectionality in interactions, reflecting patterns observed in previous studies (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2020; Renobell, 2021).

This paper analyses the construction of political discourse through the dynamics of social networks (Chenou & Restrepo, 2023). Despite the increase in social media use during electoral campaigns, academic analysis in Peru remains limited, particularly in university theses (Turpo-Gebera et al., 2024). This study seeks to address this gap through a thematic analysis and a synthesis of existing research to identify the main trends and approaches in Peruvian digital political communication (Turpo-Gebera & Gonzales-Miñán, 2019). It investigates how political actors construct and apply discursive strategies on social networks to influence public and media perception. In addition, it explores changes in political image during electoral processes, the manifestation of post-truth and disinformation, the influence of the media on public opinion, the evolution of activism and protest in the digital sphere, and the use of memes as a popular tool for debating Peru's social and political reality.

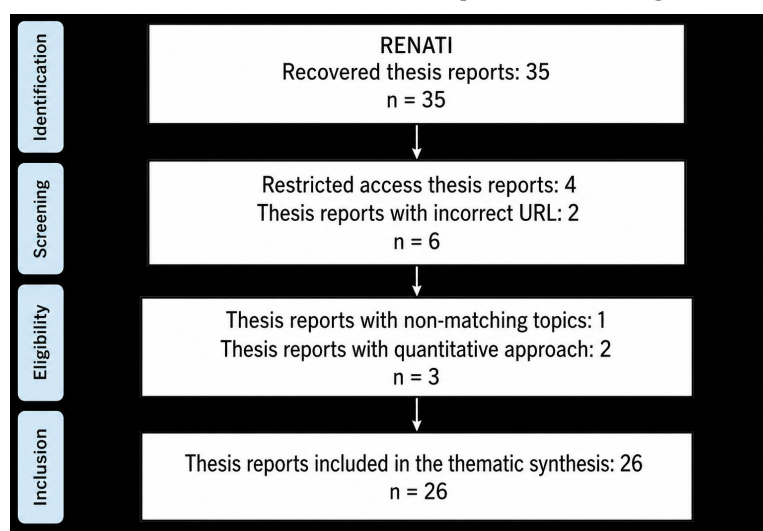
2. Metodología

Systematic review with thematic synthesis is a methodology that integrates findings from qualitative studies to answer specific research questions by identifying and grouping common themes in the literature. By organising themes into clusters, this method makes it possible to build an overall understanding of the phenomenon under study, contributing to an in-depth interpretation of data from different studies (Xiao & Watson, 2017).

Rather than broadly exploring a field of study, thematic synthesis focuses on answering specific questions, often with implications for policy or practice. The analytical themes generated aim to provide a clear, focused synthesis, allowing contextual meanings to be extracted from various studies in detail (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Thematic synthesis is developed through a series of methodological steps: i) relevant data are extracted from the selected studies, including qualitative findings and textual observations; ii) initial coding is carried out to identify preliminary themes through "codes" that group key ideas; iii) similar codes are grouped into broader themes or subthemes; and finally, iv) these themes are interpreted in relation to the research question, constructing a coherent narrative that addresses the objectives of the review (Neely et al., 2014).

Figure 1. Document identification and selection process according to the PRISMA Declaration



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2025.

The analytical documents comprising this study include a total of 26 thesis reports, selected as the study sample to analyse political discourse on social networks. All these reports correspond to qualitative studies retrieved from the National Research Repository (RENATI) in July 2024. A specific search of studies was carried out using the terms "political discourse" and "social networks", including only those that met the established inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure their relevance and methodological quality.

Inclusion criteria: Only postgraduate theses (master's and doctoral) conducted using a qualitative approach were included. This type of research provides a deeper understanding of perceptions and discourses in social and political contexts, allowing for the exploration of the meanings and discursive strategies that political actors employ on social networks, which is fundamental to addressing the questions raised in the research.

Exclusion criteria: Theses with a quantitative approach were excluded, as they focus on the measurement and comparison of data, which is incompatible with the qualitative aims of the thematic synthesis. Incomplete reports or those with restricted access were also discarded, since a systematic review requires full access to texts in order to rigorously assess their findings.

The application of these criteria ensured that the selected thesis reports provided the depth, accessibility and focus necessary to conduct a coherent thematic synthesis on political discourse on social networks in Peruvian universities.

Table 1. Distribution of thesis reports according to production characteristics

	Time period			University management			Regional location			
	2016-2018	2019-2021	2022-2024	Public	Associative (private non-profit)	Corporate (Private for-profit)	Lima Metropolitan Area	South	North	Amazon Region
n	3	11	12	9	10	7	19	2	3	1
%	12	42	46	35	38	27	76	8	12	4
Total	26 (100%)			26 (100%)			26 (100%)			

Fuente: Elaboración propia, 2025

In the study on the construction of political discourse on social networks, 85% of the theses correspond to Master's level (22 theses) and 15% to Doctoral level (4 theses), spanning various disciplines: Communication (27%), Sociology (23%), Political Science (19%), Literature (12%), Philosophy (8%), Art (8%) and Law (3%). Table 1 shows sustained growth in thesis production, increasing from 12% in the 2016–2018 triennium to 46% in 2022–2024. Regarding the type of university where the theses were defended, 38% come from non-profit associative universities, 35% from public universities and 27% from for-profit corporate universities. Location also shows strong centralization, as 76% of theses originate in Metropolitan Lima, while the Southern (8%), Northern (12%) and Amazonian (4%) regions have limited representation. This distribution reflects inequalities in academic production according to level, discipline, period, type of management and regional location.

The information retrieved was then systematized according to the defined research questions, which focus on analyzing and characterizing political discourse on social networks in the Peruvian context, as addressed in university theses. The research questions guiding the study are based on:

1. What are the key themes in political discourse on social networks and how do they impact public perception and citizen participation?
2. Which discursive strategies stand out in the analysis of political discourse on social networks within Peruvian university theses?
3. How did post-truth and disinformation manifest on social networks during electoral processes to influence voters' perceptions and electoral outcomes?
4. What functions are assigned to political discourse on social networks in shaping public opinion, according to Peruvian university theses?

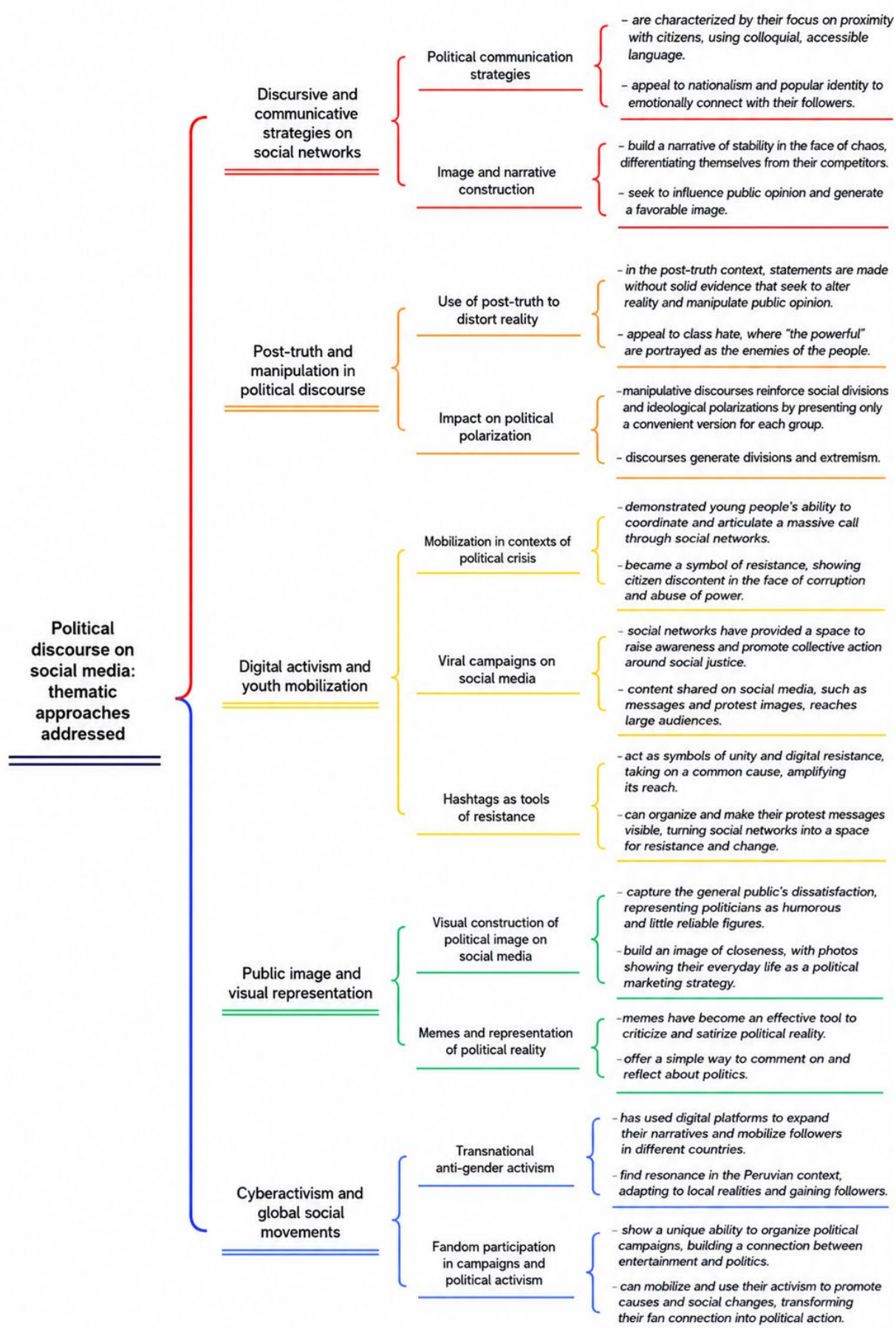
3. Results

The thematic synthesis of the theses identified key patterns, trends and approaches reflecting the evolution of political discourse on social networks in the contemporary context. The findings highlight the growing relevance of these platforms for citizen mobilization, the creation of political narratives and their impact on public opinion, as well as the dynamics of participation among various social actors and how these interactions shape the current political landscape in Peru.

3.1. Analysis of the key themes of political discourse on social networks

Political discourse on social networks has changed the way ideas are communicated, voters are mobilized and public opinion is formed. This analysis focuses on identifying the key themes emerging in these digital spaces, where immediacy and accessibility facilitate continuous interaction between politicians and citizens. Recurring themes and discursive strategies in political discourse on social networks are explored, with the aim of understanding their impact on voter perception and electoral dynamics. In an environment of rapid information dissemination and prevalent disinformation, analyzing these narratives is essential to unraveling the complexities of current democratic debate.

Figure 2. Key themes of political discourse on social networks



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2025

Figure 2 presents five central themes that structure political discourse on social networks. Firstly, Discursive and communication strategies highlight the role of politicians in constructing their image and narrative, using accessible language and appealing to national values to generate empathy and support. These strategies enable a favourable and distinctive image to be projected, tailored to social media audiences.

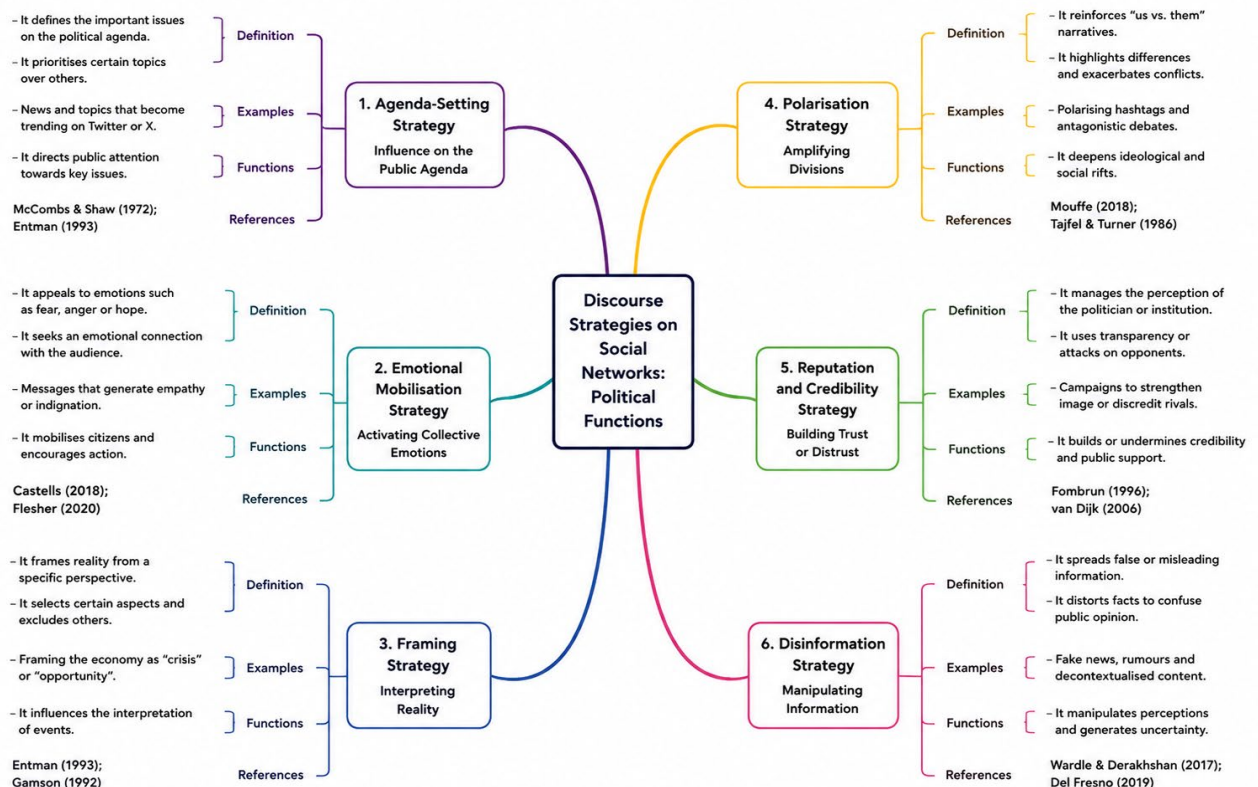
Post-truth and Manipulation emerges as a phenomenon that distorts reality and polarises opinions, through the dissemination of partial or manipulated "truths" that fuel ideological divisions. This type of discourse heightens fears and reinforces extremes, contributing to the fragmentation of Peruvian society and leading to political polarisation. On the other hand, Digital activism and Youth mobilisation makes use of these platforms for organisation and social resistance in times of crisis, employing viral campaigns and hashtags that strengthen unity around common causes, particularly among young people.

Virtual social networks also drive Public image and Visual representation, where politicians are presented in an accessible and humorous manner, using memes as a vehicle for criticism and reflection, seeking closeness with potential followers and voters. Finally, Cyberactivism and global social movements manifest on digital platforms to expand transnational causes, such as anti-gender activism, adapting to local contexts and promoting civic participation. Thus, social networks not only facilitate the manipulation and polarization of political discourses, but also citizen mobilization and empowerment.

3.2. Discursive strategies in political discourse on social networks

Discursive strategies in political discourse on social networks are essential to understanding contemporary communication. These platforms act as key spaces for interaction between politicians and citizens, where various rhetorical techniques are used to persuade and mobilize voters. They also reflect the emotions and tensions of current public debate. The analysis of these tactics reveals how political narratives are constructed and public images managed in a digital environment characterized by immediacy and virality, highlighting their impact on public opinion and democratic formation.

Figure 3. Main discursive strategies identified in political discourse on social networks



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2025

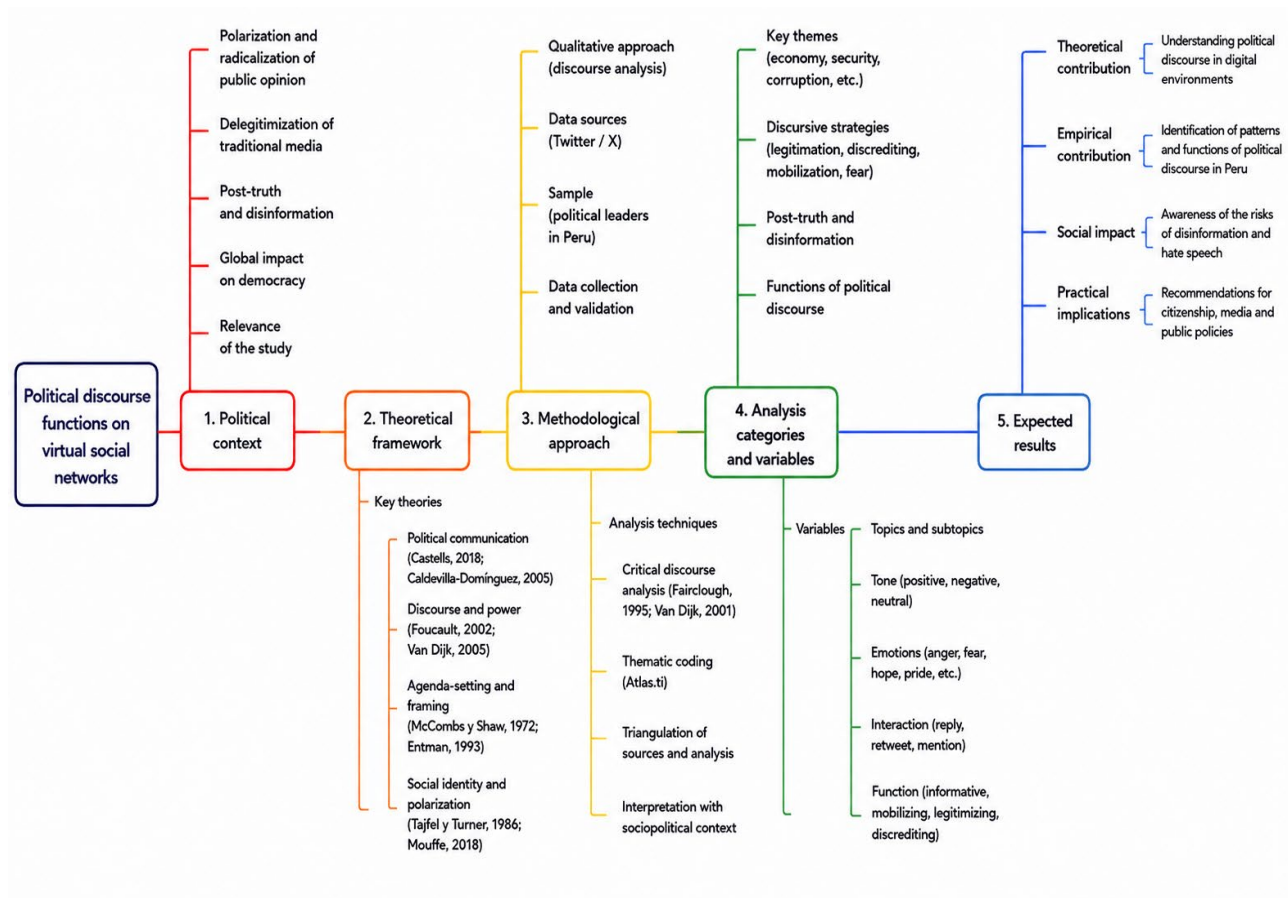
Figure 3 illustrates how social media have transformed political communication, affecting public perception and social activism. On the one hand, media influence on politics shows that media and social networks can shape opinions through news selection and citizen interaction, while cyberactivism and youth mobilisation highlight the power of digital platforms to articulate demands and facilitate effective collaborations that challenge traditional narratives.

In addition, phenomena such as post-truth and the spread of violence and hatred reveal how networks can distort reality and deepen social polarisation. On the other hand, political communication strategies emphasise the use of rhetorical resources and positive narratives that appeal emotionally to the electorate, strengthening the connection with voters and building trust. Campaigns also rely on variable media coverage and the construction of candidates' image to influence public perception, making use of textual and visual elements on social networks to maximise impact. Taken together, these tactics underscore the relevance of social networks as critical tools that shape electoral behaviour and redefine the dynamics of public opinion.

3.3. Post-truth and disinformation in electoral processes

Post-truth and disinformation are common phenomena in current electoral processes, where social networks facilitate discursive manipulation by prioritising emotions and beliefs over objective facts. These viral strategies appeal to feelings such as fear or hope, distorting reality, polarising the public and affecting perception and electoral outcomes, which makes it crucial to analyse their impact on public opinion and voting decisions.

Figure 4. Discursive strategies of electoral post-truth and disinformation



Source: Source: Author's own elaboration, 2025

Figure 4 highlights how post-truth and disinformation strategies in the electoral sphere are structured around emotional tactics, information manipulation, simplification and polarisation, the creation of alternative realities and personalized attacks. These tactics not only appeal to emotions such as fear, anger and hope to influence voters' decisions, but also distort facts through manipulated images,

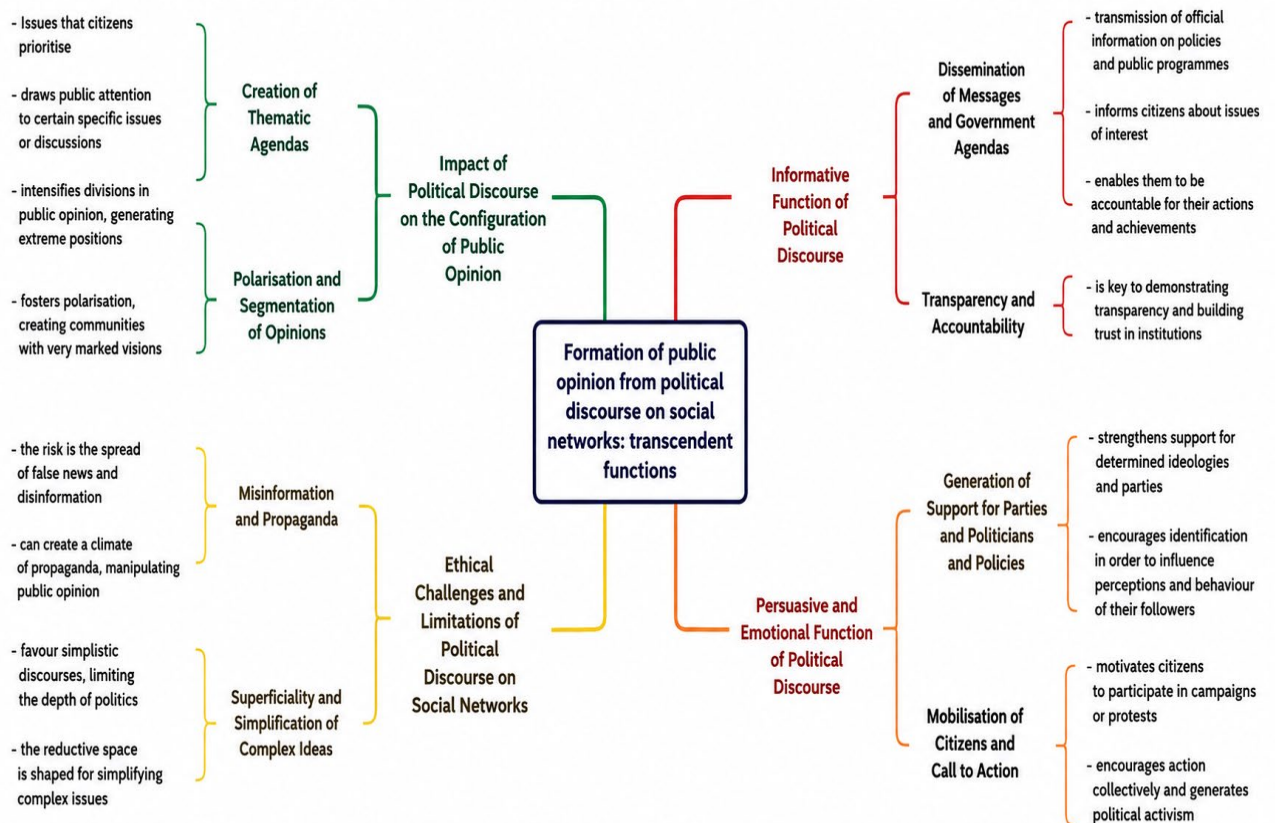
decontextualized data and fake news, generating a distorted view that damages candidates' perception. The simplification and polarisation of messages, through slogans and stereotypes, fosters divisions and a climate of confrontation in society.

The creation of alternative realities and the personalisation of attacks aggravate this distortion. Conspiratorial narratives and the denial of proven facts reinforce personal beliefs, fostering distrust in institutions. At the same time, direct attacks on candidates' private and professional lives, amplified by trolls and bots, seek to destroy their public image and destabilize them emotionally. Together, these strategies erode public trust and foster a climate of hostility and polarisation, seriously affecting the integrity of the democratic process.

3.4. Functions of political discourse on social networks in shaping public opinion

Political discourse on social networks is key to influencing public opinion, particularly in contexts of rapid information circulation. In Peru, university theses highlight how these discourses, disseminated on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, mobilise emotions, generate divisions and reinforce beliefs, contributing to a polarized public opinion prone to disinformation.

Figure 5. Impact of political discourse on social networks on public opinion



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2025

Figure 5 classifies the roles of political discourse on social networks into four key categories: informative function, persuasive and emotional function, impact on shaping public opinion, and ethical challenges and limitations. Through the dissemination of government messages and transparency, political discourse seeks to draw closer to citizens, promoting trust and accountability. In addition, social networks serve to mobilise citizens and generate support through emotional strategies, turning these platforms into active spaces for persuasion and activism.

However, the use of political discourse on social networks also faces significant ethical challenges. Agenda-setting and polarisation intensify divisions in public opinion, while disinformation and the oversimplification of complex ideas put the quality of information at risk and foster manipulation. These problems highlight the need for more responsible and ethical use of social networks to prevent the distortion of public perception and to protect the integrity of the democratic process.

4. Discussion

The construction of political discourse on social networks in the Peruvian context reveals, despite the growing use of these platforms during electoral campaigns, a notable limitation in academic analysis, resulting in a significant research gap (Chenou and Restrepo, 2023; Turpo-Gebera et al., 2024). By addressing this gap through a thematic analysis, this study identifies five central themes that structure political discourse on social networks.

The discursive and communication strategies employed by political actors are crucial to constructing an image and narrative that resonates with national values. This approach makes it possible to generate empathy and support among voters in an increasingly competitive political environment (Turpo-Gebera & Gonzales-Miñán, 2019). In this context, political communication becomes a deliberate act, in which politicians manage their public image with the aim of shaping debate and, at times, increasing polarisation (Martínez-Bascuñán, 2015). However, the mere accumulation of followers on these platforms does not always translate into genuine political participation, raising questions about the true democratising potential of social networks (Quevedo et al., 2021; Recalde et al., 2019).

Likewise, the issue of post-truth and manipulation stands out as a critical concern in the political sphere. The dissemination of partial "truths" not only polarises public opinion but also distorts reality, fuelling fears and divisions that contribute to the fragmentation of Peruvian society. This phenomenon raises serious concerns about the health of democratic discourse and highlights the need for a critical analysis of how social networks amplify these messages (Delfino et al., 2019; Nuevo-López et al., 2023). Political strategies based on fear and disqualification face ethical and legal limits in a climate of polarisation, in which hate speech spreads easily (Galindo-Domínguez et al., 2023).

Digital activism and youth mobilisation also emerge as relevant aspects of the analysis of political discourse. Social networks have taken on a fundamental role as tools for social organisation, particularly among young people, who use them to articulate demands and foster resistance in times of crisis (Arias, 2016; Luque-Zabala et al., 2024). However, this communication is not without its challenges, such as the depersonalisation of messages and the lack of genuine interactions, patterns that have been observed in previous studies (Martínez, 2018; Recalde et al., 2019).

With regard to public image and visual representation, it has become evident that politicians are adopting memes and other humorous formats to connect with voters, thereby facilitating more effective social criticism (Madrid-Cánovas, 2022). This strategy not only humanises politicians but also allows for deeper reflection on political reality. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, although the use of platforms such as Instagram and Twitter has increased, the relationship between interactions and votes is not always direct, suggesting that online presence may be evolving without necessarily translating into an increase in votes (Rendueles, 2013; Renobell, 2021).

Finally, cyberactivism and global social movements manifest on digital platforms, where transnational causes adapt to local contexts, promoting civic participation and fostering greater social awareness. This phenomenon reflects a new paradigm of digital communication in which social networks become primary sources of information and socialisation, challenging traditional narratives and empowering citizens as prosumers of content (Sánchez, 2020).

5. Conclusions

This study seeks not only to contribute to the understanding of political discourse in Peru, but also to the promotion of more ethical practices in digital political communication. This approach highlights the need for more responsible use of social networks, which is essential to safeguarding the quality of political discourse and the integrity of democratic debate. Furthermore, it recognises the significant impact that the dynamics of social networks have on politics and public opinion, particularly in the context of the Global South (León & García, 2024). In sum, it is imperative that both academics and politicians recognise the power and responsibility that comes with the use of these platforms, thereby ensuring that political communication contributes to strengthening democracy in Peru.

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