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FROM DEMOCRATIC DECLINE TO VISUAL AUTHORITARIZATION: How Social Media Algorithms, Disinformation, and Dystopian Memes Reshape Political Trust Among Spanish University Students

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how algorithmically curated visual culture is eroding young Europeans' democratic trust. Using a mixed-methods design (243 surveys and an analysis of 427 memes and videos), it finds that Spanish university students are predominantly exposed to authoritarian and dystopian messages, far outweighing democratic ones. Three profiles of visual socialization are identified, each with differing vulnerabilities to disinformation. Algorithmic personalization amplifies narratives of institutional collapse, fostering "symbolic authoritarization." Exposure to such content predicts illiberal attitudes and lower institutional trust, underscoring the urgent need for digital literacy initiatives and greater algorithmic transparency.

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1. Introduction

The intensification of political polarization, and particularly affective polarization, has become consolidated as one of the principal challenges facing European democracies, with the Spanish case proving paradigmatic given the combination of fragmented multipartidism, representational crisis, and intensive use of social media for political communication (Torcal & Comellas, 2022; Renobell, 2025). Recent literature demonstrates that young Spanish citizens exhibit declining levels of diffuse support for democracy and increased openness to authoritarian positions, especially among those who trust the contents circulating on social media (Grassi et al., 2024; Lorente & Jiménez-Bravo, 2025; Zagórski et al., 2021). Concurrently, numerous studies have underscored the role of digital environments in the configuration of echo chambers, selective exposure, and attitude radicalization, even when interaction occurs with ideologically dissonant messages (Bail et al., 2018). Within this context, it becomes essential to analyze how perceived polarization, ideological self-positioning, and media consumption practices articulate among university students—a cohort situated at a critical phase of political socialization.

Digital visual culture, encompassing memes, reels, short videos, and other shareable visual objects, has become a central vector of youth political socialization. Research on political memes in Spain has demonstrated that these materials do not serve a subversive function; rather, they reinforce confrontation and fragmentation of the digital public sphere through predominantly delegitimizing and emotionalized frames (Benaim, 2018; Cepeda, 2018; Johann & Bülow, 2019; Paz, Mayagoitia-Soria, & González-Aguilar, 2021). Simultaneously, studies on minors and young people reveal high exposure to disinformation, coupled with excessive confidence in one's own capacity to detect false news and very limited verification practices (Zozaya-Durazo et al., 2023). In Spain, 80% of young people report encountering disinformation frequently on social media, whilst only 13% assert that they always verify information (RTVE, 2025). Conversely, interventions grounded in collective intelligence demonstrate that it is possible to significantly improve youth strategies for confronting fake news through collaborative dynamics in digital environments that simulate social media (Aïmeur, 2023; Cebollero-Salinas et al., 2025; Demuyakor & Opata, 2022; Herrero-Diz et al., 2021; Hjort & Adler-Nissen, 2021; Marengo et al., 2018; Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020). Nevertheless, a deficit persists in empirical research that systematically connects, in the Spanish context, perceived polarization, ideological fragmentation, digital visual culture, and democratic confidence among university students.

Within this framework, the research aims to analyze in an integrated manner how the interaction between social media, disinformation, and visual culture contributes to configuring political polarization, ideological fragmentation, participation patterns, and levels of democratic confidence among Spanish university students. In alignment with this approach, the specific objectives of the study are, first, to describe the distribution of ideological self-positioning and perceived polarization within a representative sample of university students from Spain. Second, to examine the relationship between intensity and type of social media use, exposure to disinformation, and consumption of political visual content (particularly memes) with perceived polarization, political participation, and confidence in democratic institutions. Third, to identify significant differences in these processes according to gender, type of university, and partisan affiliation. Finally, to explore the conditions under which polarization functions as a demobilization factor or, conversely, as a catalyst for activist engagement, in order to formulate recommendations for designing media and visual literacy interventions and for creating pluralistic deliberative spaces within universities aimed at mitigating youth polarization and strengthening democratic confidence.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is situated at the confluence of research on political polarization, digital visual communication, and the emerging literature on visual disinformation and youth media literacy. First, a multimodal conception of the public sphere is adopted, in which the circulation of images, short videos, and memes decisively structures the political socialization of young people and the configuration of collective identities. Recent work on affective polarization in Spain has demonstrated that the growing emotional distance between ideological blocs articulates itself through strongly emotionalized communicative repertoires, in which the figure of the leader and the aestheticization of confrontation acquire central weight (Torcal & Comellas, 2022; Lorente & Jiménez-Bravo, 2025). This shift toward

"visualized politics" is clearly observed in studies on political memes and digital culture, which describe how humorous and satirical frames reinforce the delegitimization of the opponent, the naturalization of stereotypes, and the consolidation of closed interpretive communities among young people (Paz, Mayagoitia-Soria, & González-Aguilar, 2021).

Within this visual turn, the personalization and automation of content occupy a structuring position. The literature on recommendation algorithms has demonstrated that the combination of homophily in personal networks and algorithmic ranking generates filtered informational environments, in which exposure to ideologically dissonant perspectives is reduced and consumption concentrates on content congruent with prior predispositions (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). On platforms centered on imagery and short-form video, this logic translates into highly personalized flows of visual content—stories, reels, TikTok videos—whose automated selection and hierarchization intensify both the centrality of leadership figures and the spectacularization of political conflict (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). Recent research on the campaign for the 2023 general elections in Spain demonstrates that major political parties employed Instagram to articulate a strategic visual polarization, grounded in symbolic resources that reinforce collective identities and in the reiteration of images centered on leaders, rather than on parties or policy proposals (Marcos-García, Zamora-Medina, & Egea Barquero, 2025). Simultaneously, studies on the use of synthetic imagery and artificially generated memes in recent campaigns point toward a process of "generative memetic weaponization," in which AI tools enable the mass production and adaptation of personalized visual content for distinct ideological niches. This framework suggests that the personalization and automation of visual content not only segment youth audiences but introduce a systematic bias toward highly emotionalized and simplified formats that may amplify perceived polarization and ideological fragmentation.

Second, the study draws upon specific literature on visual disinformation. Recent research has demonstrated that misleading images and videos possess cognitive and affective properties differentiated from textual disinformation: they are processed with greater speed, are perceived as indexical evidence of reality, and tend to be subjected to less critical questioning, thereby increasing their persuasive power and the persistence of their effects even after correction (Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). This literature distinguishes various forms of visual disinformation—recontextualization of authentic images, photographic or video manipulation, deepfakes, and memes containing false data or quotations—and emphasizes that the combination of modal richness and manipulative sophistication modulates both perceived credibility and impact on political attitudes and behaviors (Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). Large-scale analysis of political images on Facebook has further demonstrated that visual disinformation is not marginal: approximately 20–25 percent of political images disseminated on the platform contain deceptive elements, with strong partisan asymmetry in the production and circulation of such content (Yang, Davis, & Hindman, 2023). From a normative perspective, these findings converge with diagnoses of deepfakes as a systemic threat to democracy, insofar as they erode shared standards of veracity and generate what Chesney and Citron (2019) term the "liar's dividend"—the capacity to invoke the possibility of audiovisual manipulation in order to delegitimize even authentic evidence.

Lastly, research on youth and disinformation highlights a tension between high technological competence and specific vulnerability to deceptive messages. Recent reviews indicate that young people are intensely exposed to false information, manifest elevated confidence in their own capacity to detect it, yet in practice display difficulties in recognizing it and tend to respond passively, ignoring rather than actively refuting problematic content (Kops, Schittenhelm, & Wachs, 2025). Qualitative studies on adolescents' everyday encounters with deepfakes and other AI-generated content demonstrate that exposure occurs serendipitously, fundamentally through social media, and that interactions with these materials are characterized by a mixture of playful curiosity and partial comprehension of their social and political implications (Lao, Hirvonen, & Larsson, 2025). In the Spanish context, prior work has revealed both the high presence of disinformation in youth digital environments and the limited systematic recourse to verification practices, despite declared awareness of the problem (Zozaya-Durazo, Sádaba-Chalezquer, & Feijoo-Fernández, 2023; Cebollero-Salinas et al., 2025).

Within this convergent framework of algorithmic personalization, visual disinformation, and youth media practices, we introduce symbolic authoritarization as a central theoretical construct through which to understand the pathway from exposure to dystopian visual content to shifts in democratic orientations. Symbolic authoritarization refers to the progressive internalization and normalization of authoritarian aesthetic registers, narrative frames, and symbolic repertoires (military imagery,

strongman leadership aesthetics, delegitimization of democratic processes, and narratives of institutional decay) without necessarily entailing conscious ideological commitment to authoritarianism as a political project. This construct operates at the level of cultural aesthetics and affective resonance rather than explicit programmatic ideology. Theoretically, it emerges as a latent process through which repeated exposure to visually compelling authoritarian imaginaries, particularly when algorithmically amplified and framed through humorous or ironic keys that lower critical resistance, gradually reshapes the horizon of political possibility available to young people. The mechanism is distinctly visual: where textual authoritarianism requires explicit argumentation and ideological coherence, visual authoritarization proceeds through aesthetic seduction, emotional congruence, and the naturalization of authoritarian symbols as stylistic repertoires detached from their historical or political moorings.

We theorize three observable dimensions of this construct: (1) Aesthetic Receptivity, comfort with and attraction to authoritarian visual registers (military uniforms, hierarchical compositions, aesthetics of order and strength); (2) Narrative Vulnerability, susceptibility to dystopian frames and stories of institutional collapse without proportionate exposure to counter-narratives; and (3) Symbolic Detachment, the capacity to consume authoritarian imagery as entertainment or ironic commentary whilst remaining cognitively and affectively shaped by its underlying political messages. Critically, symbolic authoritarization is conceptualized as distinct from explicit authoritarianism (ideological commitment to authoritarian rule): students may exhibit high symbolic authoritarization whilst maintaining formal support for democratic institutions, thereby representing a form of latent authoritarianism particularly difficult to detect through conventional survey measures of regime preference. We hypothesize that algorithmic personalization and visual disinformation constitute primary drivers of symbolic authoritarization, operating through both direct pathways (repeated exposure to authoritarian content) and indirect pathways (algorithmic suppression of competing democratic or pluralistic imagery).

Furthermore, we expect that symbolic authoritarization will mediate the relationship between social media use intensity and erosion of democratic confidence, that is, perceived polarization and institutional distrust are not direct effects of platform use but rather flow through the internalization of authoritarian visual culture. This framework integrates insights from research on affective polarization (Torcal & Comellas, 2022), visual political communication (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021), and the sociology of aesthetics and political culture (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Rancière, 2004) to propose that contemporary democratic erosion among youth operates substantially through visual-affective channels rather than through traditional ideological argumentation.

From this framework, it is plausible to expect that the combination of algorithmic personalization, automation of visual production, and low specific literacy regarding visual disinformation configure an ecosystem in which university students perceive mounting polarization, experience fine-grained ideological fragmentation, and calibrate their levels of democratic confidence and political participation as a function of their exposure to and interpretation of these contents.

2. Research design and methods

2.1 Research Object and Methodological Approach

Drawing on a mixed-methods design combining quantitative analysis (n = 243), with qualitative content analysis of 427 political memes and short-form videos, we document how Spanish university students encounter strikingly asymmetric visual. The study comprised a stratified random sample of 243 university students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs across public and private institutions in Spain during 2024-2025. Inclusion criteria were: (1) active enrollment in degree programs at participating universities, (2) age 18 years or older, and (3) willingness to complete the online questionnaire. Exclusion criteria included: (1) incomplete responses (>20% missing data), and (2) duplicate submissions. The response rate was 68%, with a margin of error of ±3.4% at a 95% confidence level. The sample composition reflected the broader university population structure in Spain, with 50% from public institutions and 50&% from private institutions, 48% male and 52% female participants, and distributed across humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields.

The formal object of the investigation comprises the processes through which the personalization and automation of visual content, together with the circulation of visual disinformation, contribute to

configuring perceived polarization, ideological fragmentation, and democratic attitudes among Spanish university students. The perspective adopted is explanatory and relational: to analyze how specific media practices—intensive use of visual social media, exposure to political memes, interaction with manipulated or synthetic imagery—articulate with subjective constructions of polarization and with differentiated patterns of participation and institutional confidence. To this end, a convergent mixed-methods design was employed, combining a quantitative survey study with quantitative and qualitative content analysis of political visual culture consumed and produced by the student body itself.

From a typological standpoint, the research is non-experimental, cross-sectional, and primarily explanatory, although it incorporates descriptive and exploratory components in the analysis of emergent visual materials (memes and AI-generated content). The empirical scope is circumscribed to Spanish territory, taking as the universe all students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at public and private universities located in that region. The unit of analysis in the quantitative component consists of individuals, while in the content analysis component it comprises visual pieces (static images and short-form videos) with political or ideological content circulating on the platforms most frequently used by young people (primarily Instagram, TikTok, and X). The student sample was constructed through stratified sampling by university type, field of study, and gender, such that the final composition reflected the structure of the Spanish territory university system in balanced fashion. Data collection was conducted through a self-administered online questionnaire distributed via institutional channels and student associations, enabling high coverage across different institutions and minimizing self-selection bias.

2.2 Variables and Measurement Instruments

The study's key variables were derived directly from the theoretical framework. As dependent variables, the investigation first considered perceived polarization in the social and media environment and subjective ideological fragmentation, measured through self-positioning scales and perceptions of distance between ideological blocs that adapted prior proposals on affective polarization (Torcal & Comellas, 2022; Lorente & Jiménez-Bravo, 2025). Second, indicators of political participation encompassing both conventional forms (interest, discussion, voting, and activism) and connective and digital forms (online activism, content dissemination, participation in online campaigns) were incorporated. Third, democratic confidence in key institutions (parliament, government, political parties, media) was measured through batteries of Likert-type items commonly employed in comparative surveys.

As primary independent variables, the investigation incorporated the intensity and modality of visual social media use, frequency of exposure to and production of political memes, perception of algorithmic personalization of feeds, declared experiences with manipulated or AI-generated content, and various indicators of media and visual literacy, including specific dimensions of competence regarding visual disinformation (Dan et al., 2021; Kops, Schittenhelm, & Wachs, 2025; Lao, Hirvonen, & Larsson, 2025). These scales were constructed from previously validated instruments, adapted to the Spanish context and the age group studied, and subjected to a prior piloting process to ensure clarity and appropriateness.

To operationalize symbolic authoritarization for empirical measurement, we constructed a latent variable composite drawing on three indicator batteries: (1) a 7-item scale assessing aesthetic appeal of authoritarian visual registers (e.g., "I find images of strong, decisive leadership compelling"; "Military aesthetics convey strength and order"), with responses on 5-point Likert scales; (2) a 6-item narrative vulnerability scale measuring susceptibility to dystopian and collapse narratives (e.g., "Democratic institutions are fundamentally broken"; "The future of our society looks increasingly chaotic"), adapted from prior work on political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 2002); and (3) a 5-item symbolic detachment scale assessing the degree to which respondents engage with authoritarian content ironically or entertainingly whilst acknowledging its political implications (e.g., "I often share memes about authoritarianism for humor, but I'm aware of their political message"; "Dystopian political content is entertaining, but I recognize it shapes how I think about democracy"). These three indicator batteries were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis to validate the latent construct, with model fit evaluated through standard criteria (CFI ≥ .95, RMSEA ≤ .06). The resulting latent factor score was then employed as both a dependent variable (modeled as a function of algorithmic personalization, disinformation

exposure, and platform use intensity) and as a mediator in path models predicting democratic confidence and political participation outcomes.

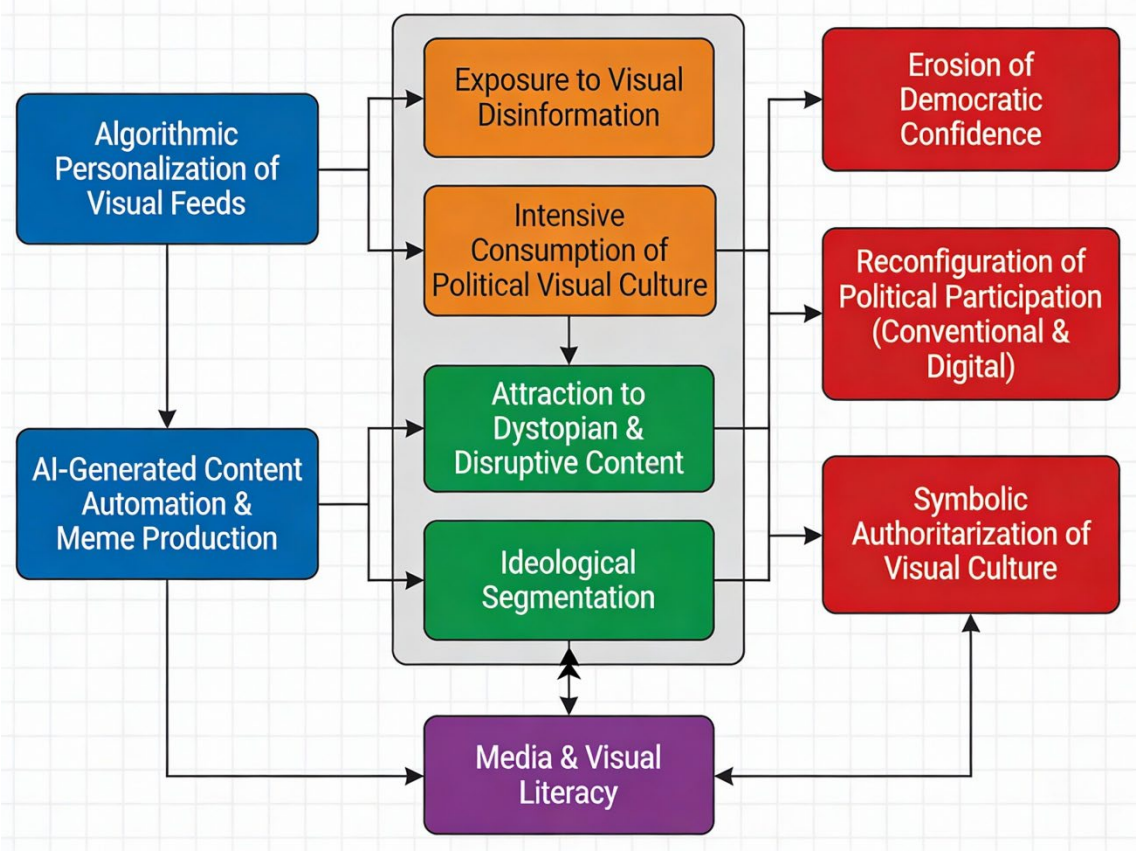
2.3 Qualitative Component and Content Analysis

The qualitative component and content analysis component articulated around a corpus of political visual pieces closely linked to the consumption repertoires of the student body itself. Based on survey responses, the accounts, hashtags, and visual formats most frequently cited as habitual sources of political information were identified, and an intentional sample of memes, images, and short videos disseminated in those environments during periods of high political intensity—such as recent electoral campaigns—was constructed. The coding strategy combined categories derived from the literature on visual polarization—for example, presence of antagonistic frames, extreme personalization around leadership figures, spectacularization, and negative attack (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021; Marcos-García, Zamora-Medina, & Egea Barquero, 2025) with specific categories of visual disinformation, which distinguished between deceptive recontextualization, graphic manipulation, deepfakes, and memes containing false data or quotations (Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023; Yang, Davis, & Hindman, 2023). The coding protocol was applied by at least two independent coders and was iteratively revised to ensure interpretive consistency; disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensually adjusted operational definitions.

2.4 Integrated Analysis and Data Integration

Finally, the analysis integrated both methodological strands. On the quantitative plane, multivariate regression models were employed to estimate the association between exposure to personalized and disinformative visual content, on the one hand, and perceived polarization, ideological fragmentation, participation, and democratic confidence, on the other, while controlling for sociodemographic variables, partisan identification, and ideological orientation. On the qualitative plane, the narrative and aesthetic logics of visual culture consumed and produced by students were explored in depth, with particular attention to how personalization and content automation devices shape the repertoires of available imagery and how visual disinformation inserts itself, often in humorous or trivialized fashion, into their everyday practices. This triangulation enabled the testing of hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework and offered a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which digital visual culture contributes to the perception of polarization and to the reconfiguration of democratic socialization among the university youth population.

Figure 1: Visual Disinformation and Democratic Attitudes: A Model of Algorithmic Personalization Effects



Source: Renobell, 2026.

This causal model presents the core theoretical architecture of the study, depicting the pathways through which social media algorithmic systems, visual disinformation exposure, and patterns of political content consumption jointly shape attitudes toward democratic institutions and governance. The diagram operates as a simplified representation of a complex feedback ecosystem, warranting careful unpacking of its constituent mechanisms.

The model's leftmost tier identifies the initial structural conditions: algorithmic personalization (the automated curation of content feeds based on user behavior and engagement patterns) and visual disinformation exposure (the frequency and intensity with which manipulated, miscontextualized, or artificially generated imagery enters students' information environments). These are conceptualized not as independent variables but as systemic features of contemporary social media architecture that, by design and operation, tend toward personalization and sensationalism. The model indicates that both operate bidirectionally: personalization algorithms, optimized for engagement, preferentially circulate emotionally charged content, including disinformation; conversely, high exposure to disinformation signals to algorithmic systems that such material generates user engagement, thereby triggering further algorithmic amplification—a self-reinforcing loop.

The central node of the model represents perceived polarization and ideological fragmentation, the subjective sense among students that political distances are insurmountable, that the political landscape is characterized by unbridgeable conflict, and that ideological compromise is impossible or undesirable. Critically, this construct does not measure actual ideological positioning along a left-right continuum but rather the perception of polarization, which may diverge substantially from objective political reality. The model posits that algorithmic personalization and disinformation exposure do not directly reduce ideological diversity in students' networks in some cases, platforms inadvertently expose users to contrary perspectives through algorithmic mechanisms, but rather generate a perceptual framing in which whatever diversity exists is interpreted as evidence of profound, irreconcilable conflict. Visual disinformation intensifies this perception by presenting dystopian, catastrophic, or conflict-saturated imagery as documentary evidence of systemic breakdown.

The model's rightmost pathway connects perceived polarization to the ultimate dependent variable: democratic confidence and support for liberal institutions. The proposition encoded here is that

heightened perception of polarization, particularly when mediated through repeated exposure to delegitimizing visual content and dystopianism, erodes normative commitment to representative democracy and increases receptivity to authoritarian alternatives. Notably, the pathway is not deterministic; rather, it indicates probability and tendency. Not all students exposed to high disinformation and personalization experience equivalent erosion of democratic attitudes, a heterogeneity that the study's three-profile typology (Dystopic-Cynical Spectators, Moderate Critical Consumers, Hypervisually-Polarized Proselytes) is designed to illuminate.

The dashed bidirectional arrows represent feedback loops that are critical to understanding the model's dynamics. The cycle between democratic disengagement and increased consumption of dystopian content reflects a documented pattern: as students lose confidence in institutional solutions, they seek validation in digital communities organized around dystopian or cynical interpretive frames, which in turn further corrode their institutional trust. Similarly, the cycle between algorithmic personalization and symbolic authoritarization indicates that as algorithmic systems learn that authoritarian aesthetics (military imagery, strongman leadership, narratives of order) generate engagement among specific user segments, they amplify such content, which normalizes authoritarian symbolic registers as ordinary aesthetic repertoires rather than transgressive or dangerous material.

The model deliberately excludes certain variables that might be considered confounding (partisan ideology, sociodemographic characteristics, pre-existing media distrust) not because these are unimportant but because the study's multivariate analysis (detailed in Results section 4.4) controls for such factors and demonstrates that the relationships specified in the model persist even after accounting for ideological positioning and demographic variation. The model's theoretical parsimony (its reduction of a complex phenomenon to three primary mechanisms) is intentional and serves a communicative function: it isolates the mechanisms through which algorithmic visual culture contributes specifically to democratic erosion, separate from broader causes of institutional distrust.

4. Results

4.1. Algorithmic Visual Culture and Attraction to Dystopian Content

Descriptive analysis of social media usage patterns reveals that the majority of students organize their political consumption around strongly visual platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, whilst X and other text-based networks occupy a distinctly secondary position. Within these environments, the political feed is configured as a continuous sequence of images, short videos, and memes in which the boundary between entertainment and political commentary becomes blurred. A substantial proportion of the student population reports being drawn more intensely toward content representing dystopian futures, scenarios of institutional collapse, or figures of strong and punitive leadership than toward institutional messages or information focused on public policy proposals. This preference manifests both in self-identification with particular visual imaginaries (aesthetics of cultural warfare, dark humor, references to historical or fictional authoritarian regimes) and in greater propensity to follow accounts and channels that exploit these registers.

Table 1: Typology of Political Visual Messages—Authoritarian/Dystopian Orientation and Narrative Framing Mechanisms

Classification	N	% of Corpus	Primary Platform
Glorification of Strong Leaders	87	23.1%	Instagram
Nostalgia for Dictatorial Regimes	45	11.9%	TikTok

Source: Renobell, 2026.

The data presented in Table 2 and Table 3 systematically categorizes the types of visual messages circulating among the sample, distinguishing between authoritarian/dystopian orientation and democratic/guarantor orientation. On the authoritarian/dystopian side, messages of glorified strong leaders, nostalgia for dictatorial regimes, delegitimization of democratic processes, aestheticization of institutional collapse, and hatred directed toward specific groups predominate. In each case, the visual framing (through military uniforms, idealized historical imagery, darkened filters, and dehumanizing representations) constructs narratives in which democratic governance appears as chaos, weakness, or

decadence, whilst authoritarian solutions are presented as ordered, decisive, and aesthetically compelling.

Conversely, the democratic/guarantor orientation encompasses explicit defenses of democracy, democratic criticism of institutions and elites, visualizations of inclusive participation, and counter-messaging against disinformation. These materials, however, occupy a quantitatively and qualitatively subordinate position within the student's typical media diet. The imbalance itself proves significant: students report encountering dystopian and disruptive content at substantially higher frequencies than pro-democratic or corrective messaging.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that perception of algorithmic personalization of the feed acts as a reinforcing mechanism for this drift. A significant portion of the sample believes that the platforms "get it right" in displaying content aligned with their emotional state and political preoccupations, and tends to interpret the recurrence of dystopian or disruptive materials as a faithful reflection of the political situation rather than as the result of segmentation strategies. In this sense, the students' everyday visual culture appears traversed by narratives of democratic crisis and social decomposition, presented through humorous or ironic keys, yet ultimately configuring a horizon of expectations in which liberal democracy is perceived as fragile, inefficacious, or even obsolete when set against imaginaries of order, strength, and authoritarian simplification.

Table 2: Visual Messages with Authoritarian/Dystopian Orientation

Classification	Visual Content Example	Political/Interpretive Context
1. Glorification of Strong Leaders	Digital montage in which a national leader appears in military uniform, surrounded by troops, with the superimposed slogan "Only one can bring order."	Rejection of parliamentary negotiation and presentation of charismatic leadership as the sole pathway for resolving the perceived "decadence" of the nation. The image constructs authority as singular, decisive, and militarized—qualities presented as necessary solutions to political dysfunction.
2. Nostalgia for Dictatorial Regimes	Meme juxtaposing idealized images of Francoist Spain (orderly streets, flags, military parades) with scenes of contemporary protests and perceived chaos, captioned "We lived better before."	Positive reinterpretation of an authoritarian past, suggesting that democracy has brought disorder, corruption, and loss of values. This narrative frame normalizes historical dictatorship by contrasting it favorably with purported contemporary democratic malfunction.
3. Delegitimization of Democratic Processes	Short-form reel-style video depicting ballot boxes transformed into trash bins, accompanied by the text "Vote however you wish, the same people rule anyway."	Message of voting futility and oligarchic capture of institutions, which cultivates disaffection and strategic abstention. The visual suggests that democratic mechanisms are cosmetic performances masking systemic manipulation.
4. Aestheticization of Institutional Collapse	Sequence of images showing parliament buildings in ruins, interspersed with scenes from dystopian fiction, captioned "Here's what's coming."	Projection of a future characterized by complete failure of liberal democracy, presented as a scenario simultaneously inevitable and potentially desirable. The aesthetic merging of fictional and institutional imagery naturalizes democratic breakdown as foregone conclusion.
5. Hate Directed Toward Specific Groups	Meme representing migrants, feminists, or LGBTQ+ persons as puppets manipulated by foreign powers, accompanied by text accusing them of "destroying the nation."	Construction of internal enemies whose existence would justify exceptional measures and severe restrictions of rights in the name of security and national unity. This framing permits justification of authoritarian responses through securitization rhetoric.

Source: Renobell, 2026.

Table3: Visual Messages with Democratic/ Guarantor Orientation

Classification	Visual Content Example	Political/Interpretive Context
6. Explicit Defense of Democracy	Animated infographic depicting the evolution of rights and liberties from the Franco dictatorship to the present, with emphasis on universal suffrage and pluralism.	Reinforcement of the intrinsic value of representative democracy and of achievements associated with the democratic transition and expansion of rights. This messaging functions to normalize democratic institutions and celebrate historical progress toward more inclusive governance.
7. Democratic Critique of Institutions and Elites	Meme ridiculing a political party for corruption cases, accompanied by the phrase "Theft is not ideology," whilst preserving the necessity of parliament, elections, and institutional checks.	Denunciation of concrete abuses seeking to improve systemic functioning rather than replace the regime with authoritarian alternatives. This frame maintains the legitimacy of democratic structures while criticizing specific actors and behaviors within them.
8. Visualizations of Inclusive Participation	Collage of photographs from peaceful student demonstrations, university debate forums, and open assemblies, captioned "Democracy is also us."	Normalization of pluralist and horizontal participation repertoires, especially those connected to feminist, ecological, and social justice agendas. This messaging emphasizes democratic participation as distributed and embodied practice rather than elite-managed procedure.
9. Counter-messaging Against Disinformation	Screenshot from a social media thread debunking a deepfake or manipulated image, combining a "fake" label with links to verified sources.	Critical response aimed at halting the circulation of visual disinformation and strengthening peer-to-peer verification practices. This content models epistemic accountability and collective responsibility for information integrity.

Source: Renobell, 2026.

The analysis of social media usage patterns reveals a striking asymmetry in the visual political ecosystem encountered by Spanish university students. The majority of respondents organize their political information diet around visually dominated platforms (Instagram and TikTok) where the boundary between entertainment and political commentary dissolves. Critically, students report sustained attraction to dystopian futures, institutional collapse scenarios, and authoritarian leadership aesthetics at substantially higher rates than to institutional messaging or policy-focused content. Rather than this preference resulting from students' active ideological choice, the findings demonstrate that algorithmic personalization functions as a self-reinforcing mechanism: platforms optimize for engagement by amplifying emotionally charged content, students interpret algorithmic feed composition as an objective reflection of political reality rather than a curated segment, and this misattribution leads them to perceive the political situation as more chaotic and democratic institutions as more fragile than alternative data sources might suggest. The visual framing of dystopian content (through military imagery, darkened filters, and dehumanizing representations) constructs narratives in which democratic governance appears inherently weak or decadent, whilst authoritarian solutions are presented as aesthetically compelling, ordered, and decisive alternatives. This section establishes the structural foundation for understanding symbolic authoritarization: not as explicit ideological commitment but as the internalization of authoritarian aesthetic and narrative registers through repeated algorithmic exposure to visually compelling dystopian imaginaries.

4.2. Profiles of Visual Socialization and Democratic Orientations

Cluster analysis on variables of visual consumption, disinformation exposure, and political attitudes permits identification of three major profiles of visual socialization among the university student body. These profiles are synthesized in Table 4.

Table 4: Profiles of Visual Socialization Among University Students

Profile	Characteristics of Political Visual Consumption	Relationship with Perceived Polarization	Orientation Toward Liberal Democracy
Moderate Critical Consumers	Intermittent political consumption; combination of institutional and meme-based sources; basic verification practices deployed when content is perceived as potentially deceptive. Media diet characterized by selective attention to diverse sources and occasional fact-checking behaviors.	Perceived polarization is reported as high, yet recognition of nuance and pluralistic positioning remains intact. Capable of acknowledging areas of agreement across ideological boundaries and the legitimacy of divergent perspectives. Framework emphasizes recognition that extremism exists but does not characterize the majority of the political landscape.	Strong normative support for representative democracy; explicit rejection of authoritarian alternatives. High confidence in democratic institutions despite critique of specific policies or actors. Maintains orientation toward reform within democratic parameters rather than systemic replacement.
Dystopic-Cynical Spectators	High exposure to dystopian memes and short-form videos; weak distinction between fictional narratives and political commentary; minimal verification practices. Political understanding is filtered through aesthetics of decline, societal collapse, and institutional failure presented in entertainment-inflected formats. Feed dominated by sensationalized content, dark humor, and ironic detachment from conventional political messaging.	Perceived polarization is reported as extreme and generalized; perception of a "broken system" incapable of remedy through normal channels. Political landscape understood through narrative frame of inevitable decay rather than contestable choices. Emphasis on systemic corruption and the absence of viable alternatives creates perception of comprehensive crisis.	Democratic disaffection; instrumental openness to authoritarian leadership. Willingness to consider force-based solutions if promising restoration of lost order. Maintenance of formal nominalism regarding democracy—not explicit antidemocratic identification—but accompanied by disposition toward extrainstitutional solutions and skepticism that democratic procedures can address perceived problems.
Hypervisually-Polarized Proselytes	Intensive and militant consumption of ideologically aligned visual content; active production of memes, strategic use of light deepfakes and photomontages; integration of automated image-generation tools into expressive repertoire. Political identity expressed through creative appropriation and circulation of visual materials. Consumption and production are tightly linked in networks of political affinity.	Perceived polarization is highly segmented and sharply focused on specific enemies or antagonists rather than generalized system critique. Clear delineation of in-group and out-group, with political reality understood as structured conflict centered on particular figures or movements. Polarization functions as organizing principle for identity and mobilization rather than source of system-level distrust.	Conditional justification of rights restrictions in the name of "order" or protection of the "authentic people." Do not self-identify as anti-democratic but rather as defending democracy against threats embodied in specific groups. Orientation toward illiberal democracy model: support for democratic procedures limited to "genuine" members of the political community, with exclusionary or restrictive implications for minority groups or perceived enemies. Willingness to prioritize security and unity over liberal guarantees of pluralism.

Source: Renobell, 2026.

The "moderate critical consumers" profile groups students who combine traditional and digital sources, utilize memetic culture as a playful complement, and deploy minimal verification practices when perceiving content as potentially deceptive. These subjects demonstrate high levels of perceived polarization yet maintain capacity to recognize areas of agreement and the legitimacy of pluralistic positioning. At the opposite extreme are situated the "dystopic-cynical spectators," characterized by high exposure to dystopian memes and videos, low distinction between fiction and political commentary, and scant verification practices. Between these poles lie the "hypervisu ally-polarized proselytes," whose consumption is intensively militant and whose production actively integrates memes, strategic use of light deepfakes, and montages into their expressive repertoire.

The differences between profiles manifest with striking clarity in democratic orientations. Whilst moderate critical consumers maintain strong normative support for representative democracy and express high levels of rejection toward authoritarian alternatives, dystopic-cynical spectators tend to adopt a position of generalized cynicism: they consider "all options to be bad" and express willingness

to accept forceful solutions if they promise to restore a perceived lost order. The hypervisu ally-polarized proselytes, for their part, do not necessarily self-identify as anti-democratic, yet conditionally justify restrictions of rights and freedoms for collectives defined as threats to the "authentic people," a positioning that approximates illiberal models.

Cluster analysis of visual consumption patterns, disinformation exposure, and political attitudes identifies three distinct and internally coherent profiles of political visual socialization, each characterized by differential vulnerabilities to dystopian content and divergent trajectories toward either democratic disengagement or militant polarization. The Moderate Critical Consumers, (positioned as the normative democratic profile) maintain cognitive differentiation between entertainment and reliable information, practice selective verification of claims, and preserve normative commitment to representative democracy even whilst critiquing specific institutions and actors. The Dystopic-Cynical Spectators, by contrast, demonstrate weak differentiation between fictional dystopian scenarios and actual political conditions, exhibit minimal verification practices despite declared awareness of disinformation risks, and adopt positions of generalized hopelessness regarding institutional solutions, creating psychological receptivity to authoritarian alternatives presented as escape routes from perceived systemic failure. The Hypervisually-Polarized Proselytes represent an alternative erosion pathway: rather than withdrawing in cynicism, these students actively produce and circulate divisive visual content, integrate meme creation into their primary political identity expression, and justify rights restrictions and exclusionary political definitions as necessary defensive responses to perceived threats. Critically, all three profiles diverge from the normative model of democratic citizenship, yet operate through distinct mechanisms (disaffection, activism, and defensive polarization) suggesting that interventions must be tailored to profile-specific vulnerabilities rather than applying uniform media literacy approaches across heterogeneous populations.

4.3. Visual Disinformation, Dystopia, and Democratic Confidence

Bivariate analyses reveal a consistent association between intensity of visual disinformation exposure and declared attraction to dystopian and disruptive content. As the frequency with which students identify manipulated images, memes containing dubious data, or synthetic-appearing videos in their feed increases, so too does preference for materials depicting acute political crisis scenarios, institutional collapse, or imposition of authoritarian solutions. This linkage cannot be explained solely by distrust toward media or institutions; rather, it appears to function also through an aesthetic key: many students find content that distorts reality to the threshold of verisimilitude more "interesting," "creative," or "impactful" than more sober or institutional representations.

In terms of democratic attitudes, repeated exposure to visual disinformation associates with significant erosion of confidence in key institutions, especially political parties, parliaments, and media organizations. Within the dystopic-cynical spectators and hypervisu ally-polarized proselytes groups, one observes a combination of disbelief toward traditional sources and receptivity to alternative narratives presenting the democratic regime as intrinsically corrupt, captured by elites, or condemned to inefficacy. In these segments, reference to historical dictatorships or contemporary authoritarian regimes appears more frequently in a key of "advantageous" comparison in terms of order, clarity of command, or decisiveness, though without explicit adhesion to complete suppression of freedoms.

Content analysis of visual materials most frequently shared by these groups corroborates this symbolic displacement. Images predominate in which democratic iconography (ballot boxes, hemicycles, national flags in institutional contexts) is resemantized through dark filters, cynical textual overlays, or montages equating parliamentarism with chaos, corruption, or decadence. By contrast, authoritarian figures (whether historical or fictional), armed forces, or "iron hand" figures appear in more ordered, clean, and aesthetically attractive visual compositions, suggesting an implicit association between aesthetics of discipline and political desirability.

Multivariate analyses confirm robust associations between exposure to visual disinformation, attraction to dystopian imagery, and erosion of democratic confidence, relationships that persist even after controlling for partisan ideology, demographic characteristics, and prior institutional distrust. The pathway from disinformation exposure to democratic disaffection operates substantially through the internalization of dystopian narratives and authoritarian aesthetic registers (what the study operationalizes as symbolic authoritarization) rather than through direct ideological conversion to explicit authoritarianism. Students exhibiting high scores on the symbolic authoritarization latent

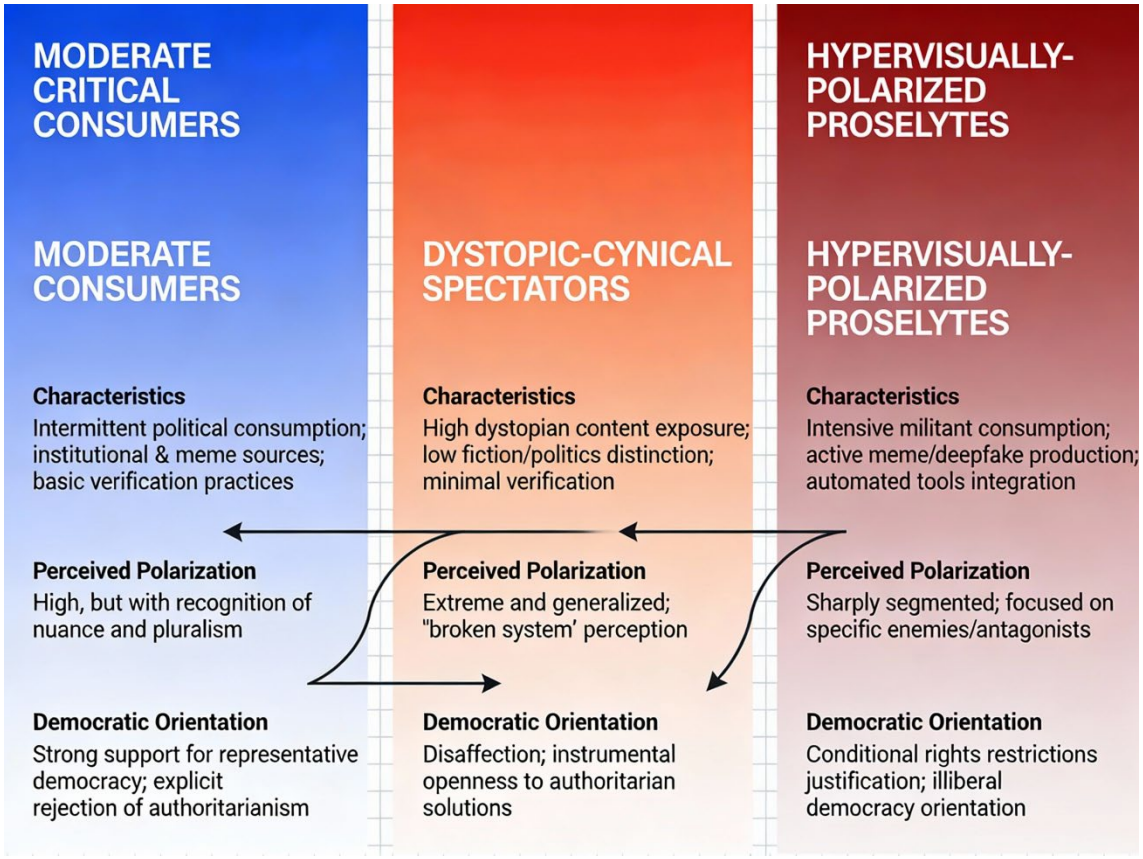
construct demonstrate high aesthetic receptivity to authoritarian visual registers (military uniforms, hierarchical compositions, strongman leadership aesthetics), high narrative vulnerability to collapse and chaos narratives without proportionate counter-narrative exposure, and high symbolic detachment (consuming authoritarian content as entertainment whilst remaining cognitively and affectively shaped by its messages). Importantly, symbolic authoritarization predicts erosion of democratic confidence even amongst students who formally maintain support for democratic procedures, revealing a form of latent authoritarianism difficult to detect through conventional survey measures of regime preference. The analysis further demonstrates that algorithmic personalization intensity mediates the relationship between overall social media use and democratic attitude erosion: heavy social media consumption does not uniformly predict disaffection, but rather consumption heavily mediated by algorithmic curation of disinformation-laden dystopian visual content does. These findings underscore an urgent gap in democratic literacy specific to visual domains: young people demonstrate sophisticated technical competence in platform navigation yet exhibit pronounced vulnerability to visual manipulation and limited capacity to interrogate the political implications of their algorithmic feeds.

4.4. Multivariate Models and Dynamics of Symbolic Authoritarization

Multivariate models confirm that attraction to dystopian visual content and exposure to visual disinformation constitute robust predictors of illiberal orientations, even once controlling for ideological positioning, partisan identification, gender, university type, and level of politicization. The probability of expressing agreement with statements prioritizing order over liberties, relativizing the importance of separation of powers, or justifying concentration of authority in strong leaders increases substantially among those who consume intensive memes and dystopian videos, feel comfortable in environments saturated with visual disinformation, and perceive their feed as highly personalized.

Second-order factor analysis on scales of media practices and political attitudes suggests the existence of a latent construct interpretable as "symbolic authoritarization of visual culture"—a disposition to organize the experience of digital politics around visual narratives of democratic collapse and authoritarian restoration. This latent factor links both to preference for dystopian aesthetics and to normalization of instrumental use of visual disinformation in political debate, and associates significantly with higher levels of affective polarization and lower support for basic democratic principles.

Figure 2: Visual Socialization Profiles and Democratic Orientation: A Typology of University Students' Media Consumption Patterns



Source: Renobell, 2026.

This typology presents a multi-dimensional clustering of Spanish university students according to their distinctive patterns of political visual consumption, exposure to disinformation, engagement with memes and dystopian content, and resulting orientations toward liberal democratic institutions. Rather than depicting a linear spectrum from "pro-democratic" to "anti-democratic," the figure conceptualizes democratic attitudes as multidimensional, with distinct populations occupying differentiated positions not just on an ideological axis but across dimensions of media literacy, affective investment in political imagery, and normative orientation toward institutional pluralism.

The three profiles should be understood as ideal types in the Weberian sense: analytically distinct categories that highlight internally coherent patterns of political behavior and attitude, while acknowledging that individual students may exhibit characteristics from multiple profiles depending on context, specific topics, or temporal variation in their media consumption. The model's spatial representation—positioning the three profiles in a two-dimensional space—is intentionally schematic rather than precisely quantitative; it aims to convey relational differences rather than to measure exact distances or proportions.

The Moderate Critical Consumers profile (positioned centrally-left in the figure) encompasses students who curate media diets combining institutional sources, traditional journalism, and selective engagement with meme culture. Critically, these students recognize memes as entertainment and commentary distinct from reliable political information; they demonstrate capacity, however inconsistent, for verification practices and corroboration of claims. Their attraction to visual political culture is real and documented, but it operates within interpretive frames that preserve institutional legitimacy: they consume and may even produce satirical critique of specific parties, leaders, or policies, but such critique functions to improve democratic functioning rather than to delegitimize the institutional framework itself. Within this group, perceived polarization is reported as high—they are not oblivious to ideological conflict—yet this perception coexists with recognition of nuance, acknowledgment of areas of agreement across ideological lines, and acceptance of the necessity of democratic negotiation among pluralistic political actors. Democratic confidence in this segment remains robust; these students express strong normative commitment to representative democracy and

explicit rejection of authoritarian alternatives, even when frustrated with specific institutional manifestations.

The Dystopic-Cynical Spectators profile (positioned lower-right) identifies students for whom political understanding has become increasingly filtered through a distinctly apocalyptic visual vocabulary. These subjects report heavy consumption of memes and short-form videos depicting institutional collapse, societal decay, and the purported inevitability of systemic breakdown. Critically, they demonstrate weak cognitive differentiation between fictional dystopian scenarios (drawn from cinema, literature, video games) and actual political conditions; a meme depicting a parliament building in ruins may derive from a dystopian film, yet functions in their political imagination as evidence of actual institutional failure. Verification practices are minimal; when questioned, many students in this segment acknowledge uncertainty about the veracity of content they consume regularly, yet continue consuming it, suggesting that plausibility and emotional resonance matter more than factual accuracy. The affective stance is one of generalized cynicism and learned helplessness: all political options appear equally corrupt or inefficacious; the system is perceived as comprehensively broken. Notably, this pessimism about democracy does not translate uniformly into explicit authoritarianism, but rather into openness to force-based, extrainstitutional, or strongman solutions presented as alternatives to perceived systemic failure. These students represent a critical vulnerability: they are not animated by positive commitment to authoritarian ideology but by despair regarding democratic capacity, a psychological disposition that creates receptivity to any proposed solution promising to break the status quo. Their consumption of dystopian content functions not only as political information but as emotional validation of their sense that institutional politics is theatricality masking powerlessness.

The Hypervisually-Polarized Proselytes profile (positioned upper-right) characterizes students whose political identity is expressed through intensive and often militant production and circulation of politically aligned visual content. Unlike the Moderate Critical Consumers, who consume memes passively or produce them as occasional commentary, these students have integrated meme creation, strategic use of lightened deepfakes, photomontages, and increasingly, automated image-generation tools into their primary political repertoire. Politics becomes creative expression; political identity becomes artistic and communicative identity. Critically, these students are not detached observers but active participants in the segmentation and polarization of the digital public sphere; they consciously produce and circulate content designed to mobilize ideological allies, ridicule opponents, and sharpen in-group/out-group boundaries. Their perception of polarization is highly focused and directional: rather than a generalized sense that the system is failing (as among Dystopic-Cynical Spectators), they perceive specific enemies or antagonistic blocs as threatening, and polarization functions as an organizing principle for identity and action. They do not self-identify as anti-democratic but rather as "defending democracy" against perceived threats embodied in specific groups, movements, or ideological positions. This rhetorical positioning permits justification of rights restrictions, exclusionary definitions of legitimate political community, and illiberal practices as defensive rather than transgressive. Democratically, this profile represents a different kind of vulnerability: not disaffection but militant illiberalism, conditional support for democratic procedures limited to perceived genuine members of the political community, and willingness to sacrifice liberal guarantees of minority rights in the name of security, authenticity, or protection of the national community.

Positioned between the Dystopic-Cynical Spectators and Hypervisually-Polarized Proselytes, the figure suggests that both groups, despite divergent ideological commitments, converge on a shared erosion of liberal democratic norms. Where Dystopic-Cynical Spectators withdraw from engagement in pessimism, Hypervisually-Polarized Proselytes channel political engagement through exclusionary and often dehumanizing symbolic repertoires. Both represent departures from the Moderate Critical Consumer model, in which perceived polarization coexists with normative commitment to democratic pluralism and institutional legitimacy. The typology implies, moreover, a degree of instability: students may shift between profiles as their media exposure, peer networks, or affective orientations change, suggesting that the identified patterns are potentially reversible through targeted interventions in visual literacy, deliberative environments, and exposure to counter-narratives.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

5.1. Conclusions

The analysis conducted confirms that the political experience of Spanish university students is increasingly configured through a visual culture heavily mediated by algorithmic personalization and automation of content production. Within this framework, polarization does not predominantly adopt the form of classic binary confrontation but rather fine-grained ideological fragmentation, combined with highly elevated perception of generalized political conflict. The majority of the student body positions itself at intermediate points on the left–right axis, yet interprets the political, media, and digital environment as increasingly polarized, producing a dissociation between self-positioning and system diagnosis.

Second, the findings demonstrate that the nucleus of the analyzed process resides in articulation between three dynamics: algorithmic personalization of the visual feed, repeated exposure to visual disinformation, and aesthetic attraction to dystopian and disruptive content. The combination of these dynamics configures informational environments where narratives of institutional collapse, systemic corruption, and constant threat acquire disproportionate centrality, presented through humorous, ironic, or openly sensationalist resources. The student population not only exposes itself to such content but tends to consider it more interesting, creative, and emotionally significant than institutional or conventional informational messages, thereby shifting the center of gravity of political socialization toward imaginaries distant from democratic normalcy.

Third, the study identifies differentiated profiles of visual socialization with contrasting implications for democratic attitudes. Alongside a segment of moderate critical consumers capable of combining diverse sources and maintaining solid normative support for representative democracy, two groups of particular relevance emerge: dystopic-cynical spectators, for whom politics reduces to a spectacle of irresoluble decadence and conflict, and hypervisu ally-polarized proselytes, who integrate production and strategic circulation of memes, montages, and AI-generated content into their everyday political repertoire. In both cases, normalization of dystopian aesthetics associates with greater openness toward force-based solutions, relativization of liberal guarantees, and conditional justification of rights restrictions.

Fourth, multivariate models permit conclusion that attraction to dystopian visual content and exposure to visual disinformation constitute robust predictors of illiberal orientations, even after controlling for ideology, partisan identification, and sociodemographic variables. A process of symbolic authoritarization of visual culture is observed: part of the student body reorders its political interpretation frameworks around visual narratives presenting liberal democracy as an inherently inefficacious, weak, or corrupt regime, whilst endowing aesthetic and emotional appeal to figures and solutions proximate to dictatorships or "iron hand" governance models. This process does not necessarily express itself in explicit demand for abolition of democracy, but rather in gradual erosion of the normative boundaries separating democratic from authoritarian responses.

Finally, the investigation shows that media and visual literacy indeed acts as a protective factor, but its distribution is unequal and its impact falls far short of neutralizing the described dynamics. Students with greater specific critical competencies regarding visual disinformation present lower levels of symbolic authoritarization and greater reservations about political use of deceptive content; nonetheless, even in this group prolonged exposure to an ecosystem saturated with dystopian narratives leaves traces on perception of political reality. Collectively, the findings suggest that the research objectives are fulfilled: the configuration of perceived polarization and ideological fragmentation among university students has been described; the visual and algorithmic mechanisms feeding it have been identified; and the conditions under which polarization transforms into disaffection or, to lesser extent, militant mobilization have been highlighted.

5.2. Discussion

These findings inscribe themselves in recent literature on affective polarization and youth in Spain, reinforcing the thesis that emotional distance between political blocs is amplified by highly visual and emotionalized communicative repertoires rather than by massive ideological radicalization in classical terms, as Torcal and Comellas note in their comparative analysis of affective polarization, or as Lorente and Jiménez-Bravo document when charting growing youth distrust in liberal democracy. The evidence

obtained suggests that algorithmic visual culture constitutes one of the privileged channels through which that affective polarization and illiberal drift become sedimented in the university-aged cohort.

The observed centrality of memes, short videos, and visual montages articulates with work by Paz, Mayagoitia-Soria, and González-Aguilar on the role of political memes in transition from polarization to hatred, as well as with analyses by Marcos-García and colleagues regarding visual polarization on Instagram during the 2023 general election campaign. Both bodies of research point toward a logic of aesthetic confrontation in which the adversary is constructed as a ridiculous and contemptible figure while the in-group is symbolically strengthened through appealing visual resources. The present study extends that perspective by demonstrating that in the university context, these devices not only structure political expression but influence how imagined possible political futures are constructed, bestowing disproportionate presence upon dystopian scenarios and authoritarian solutions.

From the standpoint of technological mediation, the results dialogue with investigations by Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic on selective exposure to ideologically diverse news on Facebook, confirming that algorithmic personalization conditions not only the diversity of perspectives accessible but also the emotional and aesthetic texture of political content. In combination with automation of visual production through artificial intelligence tools, documented in recent analyses of election campaigns grounded in "generative memesis," this process produces an ecosystem in which the boundary between fiction and political commentary blurs, and visual disinformation integrates organically into youth political culture.

The specific literature on visual disinformation provides a key interpretive framework for understanding the differential impact of such content. The synthesis by Dan and colleagues on visual mis- and disinformation, together with the research agenda proposed by Weikmann and Lecheler, underscore that deceptive images combine high attentional capture capacity, strong affective charge, and presumption of veracity derived from apparent indexicality. More recent studies such as that by Yang, Davis, and Hindman on visual disinformation on Facebook demonstrate the magnitude of the phenomenon and its asymmetric distribution across the political space. The present work situates itself in that line by evidencing that among university students, repeated exposure to visual disinformation is perceived not solely as a cognitive or informational problem but also as a source of "attractive" content reinforcing dystopian frames and feeding erosion of democratic confidence.

Finally, the investigation aligns with diagnoses of youth vulnerability to disinformation formulated by Zozaya-Durazo, Sádaba-Chalezquer, and Feijoo-Fernández, as well as with the map of responses and influential factors synthesized by Kops, Schittenhelm, and Wachs, and with analyses by Lao and colleagues on young people's everyday encounters with deepfakes and other AI-generated content. Collectively, these works demonstrate that general media literacy proves insufficient to confront specific challenges posed by visual disinformation and algorithmic hypervisu al culture. The study presented here reinforces that conclusion and adds a relevant nuance: the necessity to explicitly incorporate the authoritarian dimension of visual imaginaries within media and visual literacy programs, as well as to intervene in university environments themselves to generate alternative repertoires of visual representation of democracy that compete, in aesthetic and emotional terms, with the dystopian and disruptive narratives today hegemonic in substantial portions of youth consumption.

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DATA AND MATERIALS AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Each participant was informed about the purpose of the survey. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured that their privacy would be strictly protected.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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