THE POLITICS OF MEMES AND THE MEMES OF POLITICS: THE VIRAL FEVER OF THE "VÃO GOSTAR" SLOGAN IN THE 2022 ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN IN ANGOLA ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

A POLÍTICA DOS MEMES E OS MEMES DA POLÍTICA: A FEBRE VIRAL DO SLOGAN "VÃO GOSTAR" NA CAMPANHA ELEITORAL DE 2022 EM ANGOLA NAS PLATAFORMAS DIGITAIS

LA POLÍTICA DE LOS MEMES Y LOS MEMES DE LA POLÍTICA: LA FIEBRE VIRAL DEL ESLOGAN "VÃO GOSTAR" EN LA CAMPAÑA ELECTORAL DE 2022 EN ANGOLA EN LAS PLATAFORMAS DIGITALES

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ABSTRACT: In August 2022, Angola held its fifth general election since the regime transition of 1991-1992. This election was marked by high polarization and intense mobilization on digital platforms. This study analyses the role of memes, with an emphasis on the slogan "*Vão Gostar*" as a tool of political action during the electoral period. This slogan represents a transformation in political communication, with memes emerging as relevant forms of social and political engagement in the digital age. The research adopted a qualitative approach, with data collected through algorithms, screenshots, and caricatures obtained between 2020 and 2024 from profiles, pages, and groups on Facebook and Instagram. We conclude that the political meme "*Vão Gostar*" adapted political discourse to the digital environment, making it more accessible, especially to young people, and challenging the status quo by questioning political structures and influencing public opinion. Therefore, political leaders and parties have used political memes as a strategic tool to win over new voters and activists. However, this practice is also part of a culture of hatred and misinformation.

KEYWORDS: Memes. Internet. Collective Action. Electoral Campaign. Political Marketing.

RESUMO: Em agosto de 2022, Angola realizou a sua quinta eleição geral desde a transição de regime em 1991-1992. Esta eleição destacou-se pela elevada polarização e intensa mobilização nas plataformas digitais. O presente estudo analisa o papel dos memes, com ênfase no slogan "Vão Gostar" como ferramenta de ação política durante o período eleitoral. Este slogan representa uma transformação na comunicação política, com os memes a emergirem como formas relevantes de engajamento social e político na era digital. A pesquisa adotou uma abordagem qualitativa, com recolha de dados mediante algoritmos, capturas de ecrã e caricaturas, obtidas entre 2020 e 2024, em perfis, páginas e grupos do Facebook e Instagram. Concluímos que o meme político "Vão Gostar" adaptou o discurso político ao ambiente digital, tornando-o mais acessível, especialmente aos jovens, e desafiando o status quo ao questionar estruturas políticas e influenciar a opinião pública. Sendo assim, líderes políticos e partidos têm utilizado os memes políticos como uma ferramenta estratégica para conquistar novos eleitores e militantes. Contudo, essa prática também se insere numa cultura de ódio e desinformação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Memes. Internet. Ação Coletiva. Campanha Eleitoral. Marketing Político.

RESUMEN: En agosto de 2022, Angola celebró sus quintas elecciones generales desde la transición de régimen en 1991-1992. Estas elecciones se caracterizaron por una alta polarización y una intensa movilización en las plataformas digitales. Este estudio analiza el papel de los memes, con énfasis en el eslogan "Vão Gostar" como herramienta de acción política durante el período electoral. Este eslogan representa una transformación en la comunicación política, con los memes emergiendo como formas relevantes de participación social y política en la era digital. La investigación adoptó un enfoque cualitativo, con

recolección de datos mediante algoritmos, capturas de pantalla y caricaturas obtenidas entre 2020 y 2024 en perfiles, páginas y grupos de Facebook e Instagram. Concluimos que el meme político "Vão Gostar" adaptó el discurso político al entorno digital, haciéndolo más accesible, especialmente para los jóvenes, y desafiando al statu quo al cuestionar las estructuras políticas e influir en la opinión pública. Sin embargo, también se inserta en una cultura de odio y desinformación. Por lo tanto, los líderes y partidos políticos han utilizado los memes políticos como una herramienta estratégica para ganar nuevos votantes y activistas. Sin embargo, esta práctica también forma parte de una cultura de odio y desinformación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Memes. Internet. Acción Colectiva. Campaña Electoral. Marketing Político.*

Introduction

In August 2022, Angola held its fifth general election to select the President of the Republic and the members of the National Assembly since the transition to a multiparty system in 1992. This election was marked by unprecedented polarization, particularly in terms of popular engagement and collective mobilization. Within this context, digital platforms played a singular role, assuming a central position both in mobilizing citizens, civil society, and activists, and in reshaping the discourses of political parties and their candidates, who were compelled to adapt to the new dynamics of political socialization mediated by the digital environment.

This study examines the role of memes as instruments of political and social action in the digital age, with a focus on the slogan "*Vão Gostar*" ("You Will Like It") and its variations, disseminated during the 2022 Angolan electoral process. The digital era, characterized by the accelerated dissemination of communication technologies, highlights the growing influence of digital media—such as social networks and online platforms—in shaping the public sphere and contemporary political processes (Castells, 2000).

Within the field of social sciences, it is essential to distinguish between the concepts of social networks and digital platforms, often used interchangeably yet carrying distinct meanings. In this study, social networks are understood as virtual spaces for interaction and content sharing among individuals, while digital platforms are defined as technological infrastructures that enable, regulate, and organize these interactions, as exemplified by Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) (Delmazo; Valente, 2018). Accordingly, throughout this analysis, both concepts will be employed with differentiated meanings.

The slogan "*Vão Gostar*" presents variations that illustrate the creative uses of memes in the Angolan political and social context. In this study, the expression is adopted as a generic reference, with its variants—such as "*Vais Gostar*"—mentioned whenever necessary, as identified in personal profiles, pages, and public Facebook groups. These variations can be analyzed from two main dimensions: the collective dimension, represented by expressions such as "*Vão Gostar*," associated with the ruling party since independence, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), generally employed in a critical tone—as in the case of

poet and artivist Joyce Zau[2]; and the individual dimension, expressed as "*Vais Gostar*," used as a direct criticism of public figures, including members of parliament, ministers, the President of the Republic, opposition party members, and cultural personalities such as musicians, comedians, and artists.

During the electoral period, these figures—particularly musicians and comedians who expressed support for the ruling party—were (or continue to be) targets of cancel culture, acts of intolerance, and threats. A notable example was the song by activist and kuduro artist Tanaice Neutro[3], which employed the phrase "*JLO, em 2022 vais gostar*" ("JLO, in 2022 you will like it") to refer directly to the MPLA candidate at the time, João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço (JLO), the current President of the Republic.

From a sociological perspective, the politics of memes and humor can be analyzed through the lens of symbolic interactionism, as developed by authors such as Howard S. Becker and Erving Goffman. This perspective emphasizes the processes through which individuals and groups construct and interpret meanings within their social interactions. In this logic, political memes are understood as forms of engagement and interaction in public and private spaces, mediated by a playful dimension on digital platforms. Such dynamics contribute to blurring the boundaries between what is and is not recognized as engaged political action (Chagas, 2017).

The rationale for this study emerged from the search for bibliographic references and documents addressing memes and humor as phenomena of political critique and electoral marketing strategies. However, in the Angolan context, a lack of dedicated studies on this topic was identified, although this does not imply the absence of related research. In light of this scenario, this article constitutes an initial contribution to the debate within the social and political sciences in Angola by isolating the meme associated with the slogan as a relevant variable for political mobilization. Despite the inherent limitations of this research, the findings underscore the pertinence and relevance of the theme for future studies.

This investigation adopts a qualitative approach. Data collection involved capturing images—including screenshots and caricatures—using a mobile device. The images were collected from Facebook and Instagram profiles, pages, and groups between 2020 and 2024. The analysis assumes that without active subjects on these platforms, there is no sociocultural

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[2] The term artivist is used to describe individuals who combine their artistic production with political, social, or cultural activism. See the poem: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN8uHfVGiCs. Accessed in: 15 Nov. 2024.
[3] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I8QlSwablc. Accessed in: 15 Nov. 2024.

production, as life in society is shaped by the "presentation of self in everyday life," through social performances (Goffman, 2004).

In Angola, one of the most prominent figures in political satire and meme culture is Sérgio Piçarra, renowned for his political caricatures and cartoons featured on the Instagram account "MankikoOficial" and the Facebook page "Mankiko Cartoon." His work has established itself as a significant instrument of political humor in the country. For the purposes of this research, some of his banners were utilized, in addition to visits to profiles of activists, politicians, and citizens, randomly selected through algorithmic search mechanisms and hashtags such as #vaisgostar, #vãogostar, #mpla, #unita, #acj, #jlo, and #eleicoesemangola2022. These algorithms personalize the content displayed in users' feeds based on their interactions and preferences, contributing to the diversification of the data observed.

Considering ethical and methodological aspects, personal profiles were safeguarded, maintaining public visibility only for content originating from politically exposed pages and profiles, such as XAA, Mankiko, and open Facebook groups.

The central research question guiding this study is: How did political memes, particularly the viral trend of the slogan "*Vão Gostar*," influence the construction of electoral narratives and public mobilization on digital platforms during the 2022 electoral campaign?

Beyond this introduction and the concluding remarks, the study is structured into three sections. The first presents the theoretical foundations regarding memes and political humor, contextualizing them historically and analyzing their developments in the contemporary world. The second section examines the slogan "*Vão Gostar*" through the lens of political and electoral marketing theory. Finally, the third section presents the results of the analysis of data obtained from the Facebook and Instagram profiles of citizens, activists, pages, and groups, discussing the meanings, challenges, and controversies associated with the political use of memes in Angola.

Theory – Political memes and political humor: some considerations

In the contemporary digital era, political memes have emerged as a significant challenge for countries that previously adhered to traditional political practices. This new phenomenon communicates through a language that blends entertainment with political information (Miguel, 1999).

The concept of the "meme," originating in the work The Selfish Gene by British biologist Richard Dawkins, was initially proposed to describe a unit of cultural information transmitted from one mind to another, analogous to genetic transmission. For Dawkins, a meme functions as a cultural replicator that can be replicated, mutated, and subjected to a process of natural selection, resulting in the diffusion of some ideas and the disappearance of others. He posits that, like genes, memes possess the capacity to multiply and evolve over time.

Dawkins (2007) does not limit the concept of the meme to a mere idea or any particular aspect of reality. The term originates from the Latin *mimeme*, meaning that which is imitated, copied, and transmitted. Essentially, a meme is information propagated through imitation. Imitation serves as the essential mechanism for meme transmission, characterizing them as living structures with a technical and evolutionary basis rather than a mere metaphor. Dawkins suggests that, as with gene evolution, memes do not necessarily succeed in replication, implying that not all memes achieve the same level of dissemination or social impact. Some memes possess a greater capacity for propagation and adherence, making them more communicatively effective, analogous to a process of natural selection.

Moreover, the circulation of memes does not follow a linear trajectory, being subject to constant mutation and recombination. As memes are reinterpreted, re-signified, and adapted by different actors and sociocultural contexts, they become increasingly fluid and dynamic (Dawkins, 2007; Franco; Granger, 2009). The flexibility and adaptability of memes confer upon them growing relevance in contemporary political debate, particularly under authoritarian regimes, where the circulation of ideas—often restricted or controlled—is challenged by these viral forms of communication, reflecting tensions between control and freedom of expression in an increasingly digital landscape.

The emergence of memes as they are known today dates back to the 1990s, although at that time they were not yet identified by this term (Gutiérrez, 2019). During this decade, animated GIFs began to circulate extensively via email, marking a significant shift in modes of

communication. Since then, memes have evolved, constituting a distinct language within the digital context.

Memes, in their essence, are cultural expressions conveyed through a combination of images, words, sounds, and GIFs. To understand them, it is insufficient merely to identify the symbols that constitute the image or content; one must also comprehend the narrative context in which they are embedded. In this process, repetition and imitation are not merely formal characteristics of memes but fundamental components of the emotional experience generated by this form of communication (Freire, 2016). These features confer upon memes a communicative dynamic that transcends the simple transmission of information, rendering them powerful vehicles for social expression and reflection.

Beyond their relevance as forms of political socialization, memes have emerged as instruments of media and political literacy. Although often associated with humorous language, contemporary political memes have been employed by populist leaders. In this context, memes can sometimes conceal extremist positions and hate speech under the guise of humor, contributing to the spread of fake news and political disinformation (Delmazo; Valente, 2018; Assis; Rocha, 2022; Quental, 2022).

It is crucial to emphasize that candidates, political leaders, and parties have utilized political memes strategically to attract new voters and supporters, whether by engaging with their target audience or by attacking opponents. In this regard, "the language of the meme is undoubtedly one of the essential factors for humor, which relies, among other aspects, on rhetorical elements" (Freire, 2016, p. 67, our translation). Political memes thus extend beyond mere entertainment, becoming instruments of mobilization and persuasion within contemporary political arenas.

The use of memes and humor by politicians has proven particularly significant during electoral periods. A notable example occurred during the 2010 Brazilian elections, with the candidacy of Federal Deputy Francisco Everardo Oliveira Silva, known as Tiririca. During his campaign, Tiririca innovatively conveyed his political message through humor, leveraging his clown persona. This approach led to his election with an average of 71,754 votes (0.30%) for his fourth term (Carvalho, 2010)[4]. Humor enabled Tiririca to connect with the electorate, employing accessible and emotionally resonant language that engaged voters across diverse societal segments.

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[4] See more at: https://noticias.uol.com.br/eleicoes/2022/10/03/tiririca-vai-de-campeao-de-votos-a-deputado-menos-votado-de-sp.htm?cmpid=copiaecola.

Similarly, in the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections, Jair Bolsonaro strategically employed humor as a tool for electoral success. The construction of a caricatured persona and the use of memes were crucial in popularizing his often controversial and anti-democratic ideas. Humor enhanced the visibility of his proposals, allowing his positions to reach a broader audience, particularly on social media platforms, where memes propagate virally (Chagas, 2021). In both cases, humor not only brought candidates closer to their electorate but also played a central role in disseminating their messages and ideologies, directly influencing electoral outcomes.

Political humor has assumed an increasingly significant role in discussions on democratic participation, especially within digital information and communication contexts. In a scenario where public disengagement and the lack of trust and mobilization are considered threats to the legitimacy of democratic institutions, humor emerges as an alternative form of engagement. It alleviates tensions during critical moments and strengthens social bonds, promoting learning in a fun and accessible manner (Chagas, 2017).

Freire (2016) highlights that humor functions as an effective persuasive tool, capable of making subjects more engaging and arguments more comprehensible. By incorporating humorous elements, political messages become more attractive, facilitating the absorption of complex ideas and fostering a lighter, more immediate form of engagement. Such humorous propaganda significantly influences citizens, particularly young voters, in their political decision-making, including the act of voting.

> Within the logic of memes, humor intersects with popular language and visual appeal, which trivializes, if not ridicules, political figures. This constitutes a strategy—or counter-strategy, insofar as it is circulated by the "casual internet user"—of engagement that highlights sensational events, **situational jokes**, and elements of popular culture, while contrasting and competing with the **radicalization** or **rhetorical-discursive contestation** of spontaneous political militancy around "moral forms." Memes function simultaneously as instruments of political critique and trivialization, while also facilitating partisan polarization (Chagas, 2017, p. 181, my highlights, our translation).

Humor is an intrinsic part of social relations, disseminated through media channels that convey informal, comedic information and lifestyles in which excessive seriousness can be perceived as a lack of a sense of humor. In this context, "laughter is present in various social spheres, such as advertising, politics, newspapers, television broadcasts, and, more recently, social media on the Internet" (Freire, 2016, p. 42, our translation).

Microsociology of memes, political humor, memory, and resistance in democratic and authoritarian contexts

From a sociological perspective, humor and memes emerge as new forms of socialization, rooted in the meanings individuals construct and the social interactions they maintain (Carvalho, 2010). These meanings result from a continuous negotiation within human relationships, whether in family, school, reference groups, or, more recently, on social media platforms. Continuous social interaction, according to Lenhard (1973), creates behavioral patterns that are valid within reciprocal relationships among individuals.

Becker (2008) asserts that social interactions are shaped by norms and rules that define what is considered appropriate or deviant behavior. In the context of social interactions, individuals regarded as outsiders are those who deviate from established norms, perceived from a dual perspective: both by the "normals" and by the "deviants" themselves (Xiberras, 1996). From this analysis, political humor and memes can be understood as forms of resistance and social critique, enabling the contestation of norms imposed by dominant political systems. In this sense, political humor and memes not only reflect the "deviants'" view of the "normals" and political elites but also reveal the reaction of the "normals" toward the "deviants," often through mechanisms such as censorship or cancel culture.

In summary, the interaction between the microsociology of memes, humor, and politics reveals a continuous process of tension among social norms, deviance, and power. This process reflects the dynamics of meaning-making and the struggle for control over social norms within a specific political context. From Goffman's (2004) interactionist perspective, human interactions can be likened to theatrical performances, in which individuals assume roles and manage their self-presentations. Social environments establish categories of people likely to encounter one another in specific contexts, allowing social interactions to occur predictably without requiring particular attention or reflection.

In political contexts, humor has been employed as a rhetorical strategy by both candidates and officeholders, as well as by the general population (Freire, 2016). With the rise of the Internet, the dissemination of humorous information has become faster, transforming humor into an effective vehicle for electoral propaganda, debates on controversial topics, and engagement with citizens. In this scenario, political humor, particularly in the form of memes, emerges as a powerful tool for constructing and contesting political discourse.

Historically, the use of humor in politics has deep roots. Aristotle, in his treatise *Rhetoric*[5], discussed persuasion as an art that employs emotional, rational, and symbolic resources to motivate action. In Brazil, political humor has served as a critical tool since 1808, with the emergence of periodicals such as *O Marimbondo* and other caricature-based newspapers that satirized public figures and political regimes (Freire, 2016).

In the Angolan context, the microsociology of political humor, though recent in its digital form, has historical roots in earlier cultural expressions. During the colonial period, politically engaged youth creatively used humor in theatrical performances organized by the Angolan League of Friendship and Solidarity with Peoples to foster political awareness. These practices were associated with resistance to colonial domination and the struggle for cultural and political autonomy.

Within this historical trajectory of resistance, the Elinga Theater stands out as a living memory of cultural and political expression since the nineteenth century. According to António (2021, p. 241), "*el Teatro Elinga es un espacio de expresión de la libertad, en una sociedad hipócritamente conservadora. Es un lugar de resistencia a la supresión de libertades en una sociedad política y socialmente autoritaria y represiva.*" In this sense, theater constitutes a locus of symbolic resistance.

In contemporary Angola, beyond digital platforms that have fostered new forms of political expression, humor remains a relevant instrument of critique and civic participation. A notable example is the caricature *Mankiko*, created by Piçarra, which employs humor to satirize both ruling authorities and opposition politicians, disseminating messages through images marked by irony and sarcasm. Another significant case occurred in the period preceding the 2022 elections, with the performance *Cinema de Combate à Fraude Eleitoral*, or simply *Electoral Fraud in Theater*, organized by the *Observatório de Imprensa*[6], presented both in-person and online. This initiative aimed to promote civic and political education through humor, critically addressing the rhetoric of electoral fraud—a theme recurrent in opposition party discourse since the institutionalization of the multiparty system.

Shifman (2013) argues that both humor and political memes share a common characteristic: they participate in a normative debate about how the world could be and what actions should be taken to achieve that vision. In this sense, memes—whether through the

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[5] See: https://sumateologica.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/aristoteles_-_retorica2.pdf.
[6] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9WldNQUVZY.

visibility they gain via humor and public discussion or through the aggressiveness they may provoke when used as social commentary in online debates—become crucial devices for familiarizing individuals with political processes. They facilitate the dissemination of persuasive messages within a context of viral politics, characterized by segmentation into different follower groups, thereby strengthening the propagation of political discourse, often in an effective manner (Chagas, 2017; 2018).

Memes represent a form of expression and participation for online communities, manifesting and circulating through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X (Rolán; Otero, 2017). These platforms not only enable rapid consumption of memes but also allow their viral transmission and dissemination within a short period. According to these authors, memes encompass various cultural expressions, including music, fashion trends, popular sayings, and images, which become symbols of identification and resistance within specific social contexts.

Shifman, cited in Chagas (2017), classifies political memes into three main categories: persuasive, popular action, and public discussion. These categories are essential for understanding how memes can influence public opinion, mobilize voters, or promote critical discussions about contemporary politics.

Table 1 – Characteristics of political memes

Type of Meme	Characteristics	Example
Persuasive Meme	Strategically created for wide dissemination to garner support for a candidacy.	Comparative infographics between candidates or political parties.
Popular Action Meme	Mobilizes citizens toward collective practices and meaning-making, encouraging participation in political causes or movements.	Sharing selfies at political events, campaign-related hashtags.
Public Discussion Meme	Functions as an informal, humorous commentary on political situations, fostering debate and reactions among citizens and voters.	Jokes and reactions by voters to political events, memes about politicians' statements.

Source: author's elaboration, adapted from Chagas (2017).

The use of comparative infographics as a category of persuasive memes constitutes one of the most effective tools in contemporary political communication, particularly on digital platforms. Infographics can translate complex information into accessible visual formats,

employing synthesis and humor to convey political, social, or cultural messages rapidly and impactfully. By strategically combining text and images, these infographics aim to quickly capture public attention, highlight contrasts, and communicate critiques or messages in a clear and easily understandable manner (Feliciani; Borelli, 2024).

In political contexts, comparative infographics are particularly useful for illustrating discrepancies between promises and outcomes, providing a visual means for critical analysis of policies proposed by candidates or governments. A notable example occurred during the 2017 electoral campaign of President JLO, who promised the creation of "500,000 jobs for youth" and the development of Benguela Province, nicknamed the "California of Angola[7]." In this context, an infographic could be used to compare the promises with the actual results or perceived expectations, visually displaying disparities between rhetoric and governmental reality.

Another illustrative case is the promise made by the UNITA[8] party and its leader, Adalberto Costa Júnior (ACJ), during the 2022 electoral campaign, which aimed to establish a "minimum wage of 150,000 Kz in public service." Similarly, an infographic could be designed to compare this promise with existing public policies and the country's economic challenges, graphically demonstrating the feasibility or difficulty of achieving such a proposal within the national economic context.

In this framework, comparative infographics demonstrate significant persuasive potential, influencing the electorate by exposing contradictions or shortcomings in political promises and governmental actions. By incorporating humor or critique, these infographics inform, engage, and stimulate public discussion, contributing to political and social debate. When humor is embedded within infographics, it functions as a strategic device to captivate audiences and enhance communication impact (Feliciani; Borelli, 2024).

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[7] Full speech: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9b3g-FXrTN4.

[8] Meaning of: National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.

Figure 1 – Electoral Infographics in Angola

Source: Facebook Archive.

Figure 2 – Post-Election Critiques

Source: MankikoOficial.

García (2015) notes that the concept of the meme has expanded considerably in the digital era, adapting to new forms of expression and communication. To differentiate the

original memes, as proposed by Dawkins, from those that incorporate images with text, short videos, and GIFs, García introduces the term *imemes*. This adaptation is significant in reflecting the evolution of digital communication and the role of memes in social interaction.

According to García, memes are not static phenomena; rather, they have the capacity to be replicated, modified, and shared by different users across multiple contexts. Replicability is a central aspect of meme dissemination, yet their survival and propagation depend on more than mere reproduction. A meme's effectiveness is directly related to the recipients' ability to interpret it correctly, highlighting the importance of cultural contexts and shared referents among individuals.

> The popularity of memes lies precisely in users' capacity to generate new content, a capability that expanded in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the advent of graphic editing software, such as Adobe Photoshop […]. The phenomenon of *imemes* is analogous; what has changed today is the medium and the ease with which individuals can create and disseminate messages from the comfort and safety of their homes, without time restrictions and with reach limited only by expressive capacity and thematic relevance. *Imemes* are the product of an individual projecting the opinions of a collective that lacks a defined structure and reconfigures itself as shared interests emerge (García, 2015, p. 150, my emphasis, our translation)[9].

Makhortykh *et al*. (2015) propose identifying memes through a historical narrative, treating them as a distinct category of web content. They argue that both political and historical memes consist of groups of digital content units sharing common features, such as content or form, and are used to communicate group identities. However, unlike political memes, historical memes are linked to a specific historical event or figure and reference existing memory practices—either by satirizing, reinforcing, or propagating them online.

In their study, the authors examined a collection of historical memes on the Internet, specifically Russian-language memes related to World War II. To investigate the role of these

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[9] Original: *La popularidad de los memes radica justamente en la capacidad que los usuarios tienen de crear nuevos con tenidos, capacidad se que incrementó a finales de los no venta y en los primeros años del siglo XXI gracias a una nueva herramienta tecnológica, un software para edición de elementos gráficos: Photoshop de Adobe […]. Sin embargo, el fenómeno del imeme es muy similar, lo que ha cambiado hoy en día es el soporte y la facilidad con la cual las personas pueden crear y difundir sus mensajes desde la tranquilidad y seguridad de su hogar, sin restricciones de horario y con un alcance sólo limitado por su capacidad expresiva y la temática abordada. Los imemes son producto de un individuo que pro yecta la opinión de un colectivo que no tiene una estructu ra definida y se reconfigura a medida que surgen intereses comunes.*

memes in post-Soviet online spaces, they utilized data from the Russian online encyclopedia of folklore and digital culture.

Figure 3 – Models of Meme Diffusion
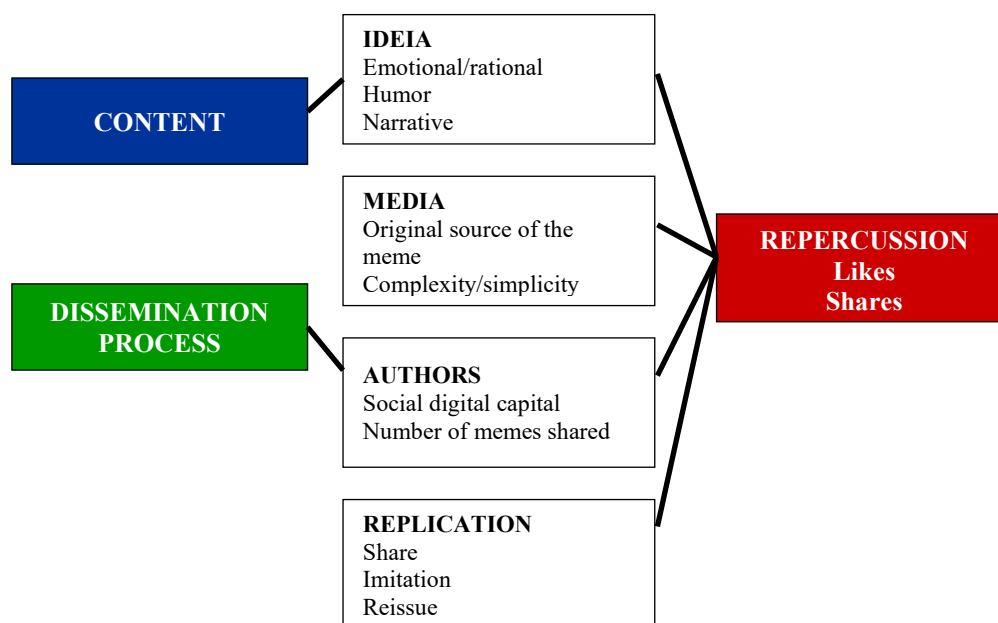
Source: Gonzalez, Figueroa and Meyer (2019).

The visual structure of memes, by departing from traditional forms of expression such as speech and writing, offers an innovative and dynamic mode of communication. Although textual inscriptions—common in political memes—are often present, the images themselves embody the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" (Matos; Gomes, 2019), a principle particularly relevant for memes, which frequently convey complex meanings without requiring a linear or conventional discourse.

In memes, there is an intersection between the signifier and the signified, a feature also present in speech and writing. This functions as a form of collage, where image and text complement each other to transmit a message that, if isolated, might not have the same impact. This underscores the unique capacity of memes to condense complex ideas into a visually appealing, accessible, and easily comprehensible format.

In today's context, marked by an oversaturation of images on digital platforms, political imaginaries are closely linked to iconic images that sustain, reinforce, and legitimize specific political perspectives. Memes, therefore, function simultaneously as tools of entertainment and

political communication. As Hristova (2014) notes, humor, rich intertextuality, and anomalous juxtaposition are essential components of meme efficacy.

Analyzing memes reveals an intriguing sociopolitical ambiguity, encompassing both democratic and autocratic elements. On one hand, memes possess a democratic nature, characterized by widespread usage and the capacity for mutation, which allows them to survive and proliferate through collective participation. In this sense, memes can be understood as cultural information intrinsic to a democratic culture, transmitted from person to person and, eventually, evolving into shared social phenomena (Hristova, 2014). This transformative process occurs as the ideas contained in memes spread and are adapted to different contexts, reflecting and reinforcing aspects of culture and social communication (Chagas, 2017).

Conversely, memes exhibit an autocratic dimension. This manifests in the preservation of a central idea, which may limit interpretive freedom and pluralistic voices. Furthermore, it can be argued that, in some cases, memes function as vehicles for misinformation, simplified or manipulated narratives, contributing to the construction of polarizing and distorted discourses.

> Although memes propagate on a micro level, their impact is macro: they shape mindsets, behaviors, and social group actions. This attribute aligns closely with cultural formation in the so-called Web 2.0 era, characterized by platforms that facilitate user-generated content. YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia, and similar applications rely on content propagation as a core principle (Hristova, 2014, p. 266, our translation).

Similarly, the term "Internet meme" is commonly used to describe the spread of diverse content—such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites—from one person to another via the Internet. According to Shifman (2013, p. 362, our translation), "an Internet meme can spread in its original form but often also generates user-created derivatives." These derivatives, while preserving the essence of the original meme, are adapted to different contexts, moods, or perspectives, enhancing their dissemination and reinforcing their impact on digital culture.

The memetic circulation of "*Vão Gostar*" and political marketing in Angola's 2022 electoral campaign

According to the 2024 annual report of the National Institute of Statistics of Angola, the country's population is estimated at 35 million. Official data released by the Ministry of

Telecommunications, Information Technologies, and Social Communication (MINTTICS) indicate that the number of Internet users in Angola doubled between 2020 and 2024, reaching 12 million, representing a penetration rate of 34% of the population[10]. In contrast, the DataReportal report estimates 14.63 million users[11].

For analytical purposes, this research relies primarily on MINTTICS official data, given its basis in national administrative records and closer alignment with the parameters of the Angolan state. However, complementary data from the international Digital 2024—DataReportal report are utilized contextually, particularly for estimates of platform usage and gender-based behavioral patterns, enriching the comparative and behavioral analysis.

Table 2 – Gender representation on digital platforms in Angola

Platform	Total Users	% Women	Women (n)	% Men	Men (n)
Internet	14.63 million	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D
Facebook	5.00 million	41.0%	2.05 million	59.0%	2.95 million
Instagram	763.5 thousand	46.4%	354 thousand	53.6%	409 thousand
TikTok (18+)	3.01 million	50.9%	1.53 million	49.1%	1.48 million
Messenger	1.10 million	40.1%	441 thousand	59.9%	659 thousand
LinkedIn	890 thousand	29.0%	258 thousand	71.0%	632 thousand
X (Twitter)	92.5 thousand	19.9%	18 thousand	80.1%	74.5 thousand

Source: author elaboration, adapted from DataReportal (2024)[12].

These data illustrate the growing digital presence in the country and help contextualize the impact of political memes on elections. The most recent election, held in 2022, was particularly marked by political polarization and digital mobilization, with memes emerging as a prominent form of political and collective action.

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[10] See: https://minttics.gov.ao/ao/noticias/numero-de-utilizadores-de-internet-em-angola-duplicou-para-12-milhoes-entre-2020-e-2024/.

[11] DataReportal is an international platform that publishes annual reports on internet and social media usage around the world. In Angola, its reports use estimates from sources such as Kepios, GSMA, Meta, Ookla, and GWI. The data refers to active users, often calculated using statistical models and advertising tools, which may differ from official data as they do not necessarily represent unique individuals. See: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-angola.

[12] See: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-angola.

During this process, political memes played a significant role in mobilizing youth who had previously been disengaged from politics. Across multiple platforms and communication forms, memes became instruments of transformation in the understanding of political processes, which were increasingly perceived as entertainment while simultaneously altering the traditional modes of information dissemination. In this context, memes function as vehicles of collective action that reflect shared political grievances, recontextualizing candidates and parties. In Angola, this dynamic necessitated that political parties reinvent their modes of interaction with the electorate.

The dissemination of the meme "*Vão Gostar,*" a political discursive genre that gained considerable visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and was popularized by Joyce Zau, played a central role in the 2022 electoral campaign. Far from being a mere element of entertainment, this humorous slogan incorporated social critiques of the political system, socioeconomic conditions, and violence in the country. Through this approach, the meme became a point of socialization and sharing, allowing citizens to express their frustrations humorously. Thus, the culture of online politics, via memes, not only socializes political content but also presents a more accessible political language, contributing to the creation of common spaces for public opinion and civic demand, as emphasized by Baquero, Baquero, and Morais (2016).

Table 3 – Results of General Elections in Angola (1992–2022)

PARTY	1992 (%)*	2008 (%)	2012 (%)	2017 (%)	2022 (%)
MPLA	58.6%	81.64%	71.84%	61.1%	51.17%
UNITA	31.8%	10.39%	18.66%	26.67%	43.95%
PRS[13]	2.7%	3.17%	1.7%	1.33%	1.14%
FNLA[14]	2.3%	1.11%	1.1%	0.91%	1.06%
CASA-CE[15]	n.p*	n.p*	6.00%	9.49%	//
PHA[16]	n.p	n.p	n.p	n.p	1.02%

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[13] Social Renewal Party.

[14] National Liberation Front of Angola.

[15] Broad Convergence for the Salvation of Angola – Electoral Coalition (CASA-CE).

[16] Humanist Party of Angola.

* Data refer to legislative elections. In the presidential elections, the MPLA candidate received 49.56% of the valid votes, while the UNITA candidate obtained 40.07% [17].
n.p. – indicates non-participation in the general elections.
Source: Author elaboration, adapted from CNE data [18].

In terms of political marketing and electoral strategies, parties historically relied on traditional means of campaigning and voter mobilization. Television, radio, and mass rallies served as the primary strategic tools for collective action within conventional spaces until 2017. According to Rego (1985, p. 24, our translation), the use of these mechanisms "constitutes an excellent opportunity to exploit opponents' weaknesses." However, despite the rise of digital platforms, traditional media continue to predominate as campaign strategies, particularly in rural areas of Angola and other parts of the African continent.

Angola's historical context—colonization, single-party rule, civil war, and recent peace—has been cited as a factor limiting development and urbanization in many rural regions. Consequently, campaigns and electoral mobilization in the interior of the country (commonly referred to as the "*mato*") still heavily rely on in-person rallies and TV and radio broadcasts.

Thus, political marketing aims to secure greater adherence to a political program, typically represented by a candidate, with its distinct feature being the electoral period (Lima, 2002). However, the execution of an electoral marketing plan necessarily requires several key elements: the politicians, political parties, the electoral marketing professional, the competition, voter behavior, and the media (Alves, 2018).

Figure 4 – Elements of electoral marketing

Source: author's elaboration, adapted from Alves (2018).

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[17] However, due to complaints from UNITA, led by Jonas Savimbi, regarding the initial results of the legislative elections—alleging fraud and a lack of impartiality on the part of the National Electoral Commission (CNE)—the country returned to civil war.

[18] Data provided by the National Electoral Commission. Available at: https://www.cne.ao/.

In electoral marketing, the candidate is the "central product," around which the planning revolves, while political parties seek to gain and maintain power by presenting their ideologies to build support bases. The electoral marketing professional plays a crucial role in constructing a successful campaign, conducting research to understand voters' needs, and designing appropriate programs. Understanding the competition and voter behavior is essential to achieving a competitive advantage. Moreover, maintaining a positive relationship with the media constitutes an excellent component in terms of marketing and campaign strategy.

The political marketer occupies, without a doubt, a prominent position in any political campaign, performing a strategic role analogous to that of a marketing manager in a business organization. Just as in the corporate environment, where it is essential to understand the consumer to promote a product effectively, in politics, it is indispensable to comprehend the voter as the target audience of communication actions. In this context, the political marketer's role is oriented toward bringing the candidate closer to the electorate, developing strategies that align political proposals with public demands and expectations, from the analysis and construction of the candidate's image to the development of speeches—especially persuasive ones capable of emotionally engaging the masses. In this way, the marketer functions as the candidate's *right hand* with the electorate (Freitas; Neto, n. d).

Within this framework, the strategic positioning of each actor is conditioned by the candidate, their opponents, and the economic and social context of the state. Therefore, electoral strategies must remain flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. Manhanelli emphasizes this when stating that "it is a game of intelligence, cunning, and audacity, where one must anticipate competitive moves and, on a personal level, resemble a general with courage, loyalty, and perseverance in the struggle for votes" (Manhanelli, 1992, p. 35, our translation).

Analytically, according to Castro (1996), political marketing can be understood as a permanent and long-term activity, whereas electoral marketing has short-term objectives, namely, winning the immediate elections. In electoral marketing, there exists what Lima (2002) calls the "electoral marketing system," which interconnects the following elements: communications and information, the candidate, expectations, the voter, and the votes.

In Angola, the elections held on August 24, 2022, were, in general, tumultuous, taking place in a climate of (in)tolerance among members of the two major parties, MPLA and UNITA, civil society actors, activists, and citizens. Even before the start of the campaign, a strategy had already emerged based on the denunciation of "alleged" preemptive electoral

fraud. UNITA accused the MPLA of hiring, without public tender, the companies SINFIC[19] and HINDRA[20], both linked to Angolan businessmen affiliated with the MPLA. This prompted the UNITA candidate to convene a press conference broadcast via Facebook platforms.

Consequently, digital platforms became privileged spaces for the dissemination of political discourse: on one hand, defending the MPLA's continuity in power, and on the other, fostering the "dream" of political alternation. The latter led to the creation of the Broad Front for the Salvation of Angola (FPU), also known as the United Patriotic Front. This political alliance brought together three main forces: UNITA, the Democratic Bloc (BD), and the political project Angolan Renewal Party—Together for Angola—Serve Angola (PRA-JÁ Serve Angola)[21].

The creation of online campaigns during the electoral period involved the participation of volunteer groups from civil society. In political marketing terms, these groups are considered strategic assets, generating significant results for two main reasons: first, because they engage directly with the electorate, promoting a type of campaign with a high potential for success; and second, because they contribute to activities such as conducting opinion polls, structuring electoral programs, and refining the candidate's messaging to make it more effective and aligned with the target audience (Rego, 1985).

In the 2022 elections in Angola, there was significant mobilization not only by individuals but also by civic groups, such as the MUDEI[22], movement, which actively engaged in election monitoring and parallel vote counting *through exit polls*. Digital platforms, in this context, provided a space for sharing diverse content and mobilizing youth, particularly through the use of hashtags, such as the one that became popular under the slogan #VotoueSentou.

According to Freitas and Neto (n. d.), the use of digital platforms as a strategic tool for political and electoral marketing is not a novelty in democratic contexts, with former US President Barack Obama being one of the first to employ them in his 2008 and 2012 electoral campaigns. In Angola, this practice intensified in recent elections, particularly through the use of memes and hashtags as instruments of political participation. The adoption of memes and digital activism also reflected a growing desire for political engagement.

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[19] Industrial information and consulting system.

[20] Information and technology companies.

[21] The following are part of this project or political platform: the UNITA party—ACJ, BD—Filomeno Viera Lopes, and PRAJA-Servir Angola—Abel Chiukuvuku.

[22] It is a civil society organization engaged in defending fair voting in Angola.

However, the electoral process in Angola presents significant contrasts with other countries, such as Brazil, where elections are conducted using electronic voting machines. In Angola, the traditional voting method is still used, based on marking paper ballots that display candidates' faces and party flags. This system raises concerns regarding the transparency and security of the electoral process, particularly given the technological and institutional limitations involved.

The use of the hashtag #VotoueSentou, associated with the FPU, generated intense political debate, accompanied by criticism from the MPLA's incumbent candidate, JLO, and his allies. Moreover, the President of the CNE, Manuel Pereira da Silva, attempted to discredit the popular mobilization, labeling it illegal and an act of disobedience. This discourse resulted in an unprecedented increase in military presence on the streets, especially in Luanda, the nation's capital, with armored vehicles deployed before and after the electoral process. The Armed Forces were responsible for transporting the ballot boxes to the CNE Palace, where the final counting took place[23].

According to Andreas Schedler (2002), electoral authoritarian regimes, such as Angola's, adopt practices aimed at creating a façade of democratic legitimacy, while not practicing democracy in its full sense. These regimes organize periodic elections to satisfy both domestic and international actors, attempting to project a commitment to democratic processes while simultaneously employing direct repression to control the process and ensure the maintenance of power. In this scenario, repression extends beyond the control of political discourse to include manipulation of the electoral process itself.

As highlighted by Calingaert (2006), such regimes frequently adopt aggressive strategies to delegitimize the opposition, including deploying police forces to arrest opposing candidates or, in more extreme cases, hiring criminals to assault or even assassinate them. One of the most direct and violent forms of electoral fraud involves preventing opposition candidates from participating in the electoral process, excluding them before they even reach the polls. This preemptive tactic seeks to eliminate rivals before they can effectively compete in the elections.

In sum, in hegemonic political systems (Maerz, 2018), electoral competition is distorted in favor of those in power. A range of methods is employed, varying in intensity and brutality. The ruling regime may co-opt and obstruct the opposition and its supporters through threats,

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[23] See the report by Roque and Boio. Available at: https://radioangola.org/revelando-uma-ditadura-a-nova-lei-de-seguranca-de-angola/. Accessed on: July 15, 2025.

intimidation, and violence, while pressuring the population to align with the government. Control over state resources, manipulation of electoral commissions, creation of satellite parties, and domination of the media are commonly used instruments.

Furthermore, the enactment of laws regulating and monitoring digital platforms has become a frequent strategy to limit freedom of expression, control information circulation, and restrict mobilization, as evidenced by the Angolan government's handling of social media during the 2022 electoral process.

When memes become politics: an analysis of "*Vão Gostar*" in the pre- and post-electoral period

The slogan "*Vão Gostar*" became an emblematic cliché during the elections, gaining popularity and shaping both political perception and behavior. This meme functioned as a form of humor, a persuasive technique, and a tool of political psychology, using creativity to engage the electorate within a tense political landscape marked by fear and widespread violence. The use of this meme can be understood as a reappropriation, and even a subversion, of official political propaganda materials.

Embedded within a broader strategy, the meme was linked to other hashtags: #afatitavaigostar, #Votou&Sentou, and #VamosFazerOestadoCorruptoGostar, which stood out as tactical imperatives aimed at fostering a critical and oppositional view of the political system. In this context, these hashtags acted as mirrors of institutional distrust.

It is worth emphasizing that "*Vão Gostar*" belongs to a new media genre: the digital meme. This form of content merges the simplicity of humor with the depth of social critique, operating as a form of political literacy. The popularity of caricatures, such as the #Mankiko, also contributed to expanding this language of contestation. The digital meme, therefore, offered an unprecedented experience of political interaction, tailored to the Angolan socio-cultural reality, as opposed to traditional political strategies such as rallies and marches, which tend to be more formal and are often constrained by censorship.

Figure 5 – Political Memes #VãoGostar and #VaisGostar

Source: Facebook archive.

Beyond these, other political memes with similar characteristics and appeals exist but were not included in this study. Concerning the rhetoric of the #VãoGostar memes, they also attracted the attention of ruling party militants, particularly the Youth Wing of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (JMPLA), who used them as a form of praise for the continuity of the regime. One example is the expression: "*JLO, vai gostar do voto de confiança dos angolanos*" ("JLO will appreciate the vote of confidence from the Angolan people"). Furthermore, the MPLA candidate himself used the slogan ironically during the campaign, stating: "Regarding the slogan #VaisGostar in 2022, we shall see."

Figure 6 – Rhetoric of the Meme #Vão/Vai Gostar

Source: Facebook profile of Platinaline & JMPLA.

The use of humorous variations—sometimes mocking a situation through irony, satire, or critical reflection on political events—has become a significant novelty in political consumption (César; Hoff, 2017). In this context, Piçarra employed his caricatures as a tool of political critique, and the 2022 elections were no exception.

Figure 7 – Mankiko Caricatures

Source: Instagram profile Mankikoofficial.

Despite its widespread impact and mobilization, the slogan #VãoGostar ironically became a joke following the announcement of the electoral results, which confirmed the victory of the MPLA party and JLO as President of the Republic. The meme was subsequently used to ridicule the "dream" of political alternation and to criticize the opposition party, UNITA, the FPU platform, and its leader, ACJ.

Figure 8 – Mocking the Political Meme #Vão/Vai Gostar
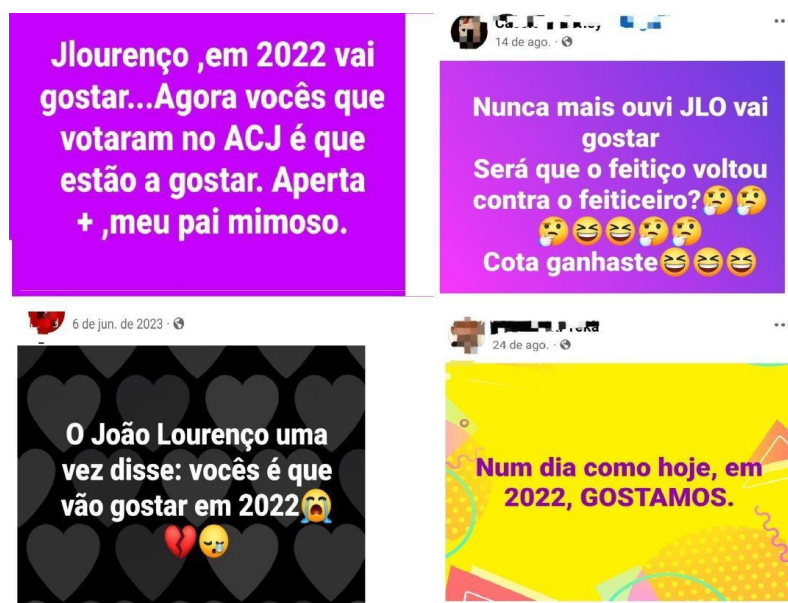
Source: Facebook archive.

Thus, the internet has gradually facilitated the actions of many countries, particularly those with a colonial past (Nye, 2002) and an authoritarian legacy. In the network society, as described by Castells (2000), social networks have created more opportunities for integration among nations and individuals, reducing the costs of face-to-face interaction. However, alongside its advantages, the internet also embodies what Giddens (1991) calls a "consequence of modernity," characterized by the tension between security and danger, trust and risk. This paradox arises partly from the privatization of personal life and the individualism driven by technological consumerism, which has rendered social relations increasingly flexible and fragile, as noted by Bauman (2001).

In this regard, the comedic play of memes and humor as a form of social critique is often linked to attempts to subvert political power, fostering a culture of distrust toward democratic institutions and their agents. Although this is a separate discussion, it is important to highlight that, in the post-electoral context—particularly with the enforcement of the controversial Article 333 of the Angolan Penal Code, approved in 2020, which criminalizes offenses against the President of the Republic and sovereign bodies—several Angolans have been arrested and prosecuted for allegedly insulting JLO since the law's enactment[24].

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[24]   Read: https://observador.pt/2020/11/17/angola-artigo-do-codigo-penal-que-condena-ultraje-ao-presidente-visto-como-ameaca-a-liberdade-de-expressao/.

Moreover, on August 14, 2024, the Angolan Parliament approved a series of laws, including Law No. 18/24 of August 29, 2024, concerning national security. This new legislation, in addition to criminalizing the vandalism of public property and services, stipulates in Article 36.4 that:

> The forces and services of the system may also propose the temporary interruption of land, air, maritime, and river communication routes, telecommunication systems, access and movement of people, as well as the evacuation or temporary abandonment of locations or means of transport[25].

This provision implies that the National State Security Intelligence Services may shut down internet access whenever deemed a threat to national security. As highlighted by Marques (2010), this reflects one of the central objectives of repressive governments. In general, internet users most affected by censorship often fail to realize they are being targeted by restrictions. Governments attempting to enforce such control over the network face significant challenges due to the global and decentralized nature of the internet.

Final considerations

The use of digital platforms during the 2022 elections in Angola marked a significant milestone in the evolution of political propaganda, particularly through the dissemination of political memes such as #VãoGostar, which became a symbol of popular mobilization. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X, proved effective in facilitating political participation by enabling the rapid dissemination of messages. Moreover, these digital spaces became essential tools for electoral marketing campaigns, employing strategies centered on agility and direct interaction with the electorate.

However, this phenomenon also brought considerable challenges. The spread of fake news, hate speech (Feliciani; Borelli, 2024) and the subversion of political discourse through memes can hinder the development of a healthy democratic debate, posing a threat to the integrity of the electoral process. Although memes such as #VãoGostar proved effective for mobilization, it is important to note that their reach was more pronounced in urban centers such as Luanda, where internet access and familiarity with digital platforms are more widespread. In

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[25] We have italicized it to differentiate it from other citations, mainly because it is a legal article.

more remote regions, where traditional communication still predominates, the impact of such memes was limited. This suggests that, despite the power of digital platforms, electoral campaigns must continue to integrate conventional mobilization methods to reach voters in these areas, where physical and direct contact remains essential.

The rise of digital influencers, particularly among adolescents aged 15 to 17, also points to a transformation in the profile of participants in future electoral campaigns. Although young, these influencers have the capacity to shape public opinion, whether by promoting candidacies or by engaging their followers in political debates.

Nonetheless, electoral campaigns should not rely exclusively on digital platforms. While these tools have proven effective and complementary, their integration with traditional methods—such as in-person meetings, visits to municipalities, and direct interactions with the population (Rego, 1985)—remains crucial. Political communication must be multifaceted, encompassing both digital channels and conventional means, to ensure inclusive and effective mobilization.

From a methodological perspective, this study sought to document a contemporary phenomenon by analyzing the dissemination of memes and visual content across digital platforms. Despite the limitations imposed by the restricted sample and the focus on a single profile, the results reveal significant trends and patterns in digital political behavior in Angola. The #VãoGostar meme not only adapted political discourse to the digital environment but also became an agent of change, challenging existing political structures and influencing public perception.

Therefore, political memes, as an integral part of digital political culture, play a crucial role in shaping new forms of political socialization. However, caution is warranted regarding their potential to polarize and fragment political debate, which calls for ongoing reflection on their implications for democracy and civic participation.

This research has demonstrated that humor, conveyed through memes, is also connected to the construction of hate speech and the dissemination of misinformation. In this regard, we consider the creation of legal mechanisms to combat this culture to be essential, as exemplified by Brazil. However, such legislation must not assume a repressive or controlling nature similar to existing measures that privilege certain actors through impunity while repressing others, thereby fostering a society divided between "us" and "them."

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