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Article

Experiencing Political Advertising Through Social Media Logic: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

The allocation of political advertising in social media is rising in Western campaigns. Yet audiences, unlike those of television advertising, are no longer isolated and passive consumers of linear discourses from politicians; users can now interact, share, and merge political advertising with other messages. Literature has dealt with the effects of such affordances separately, yet not in an integrative, holistic way that makes it possible to observe how they interact with each other. Hence, this article explores qualitatively how users experience, engage with, and make sense of political advertising in social media, and how its affordances mediate the attitudes, responses, and meanings users bring to political advertising and its sponsors. Under the lenses of the theory of social media logic, which points out the properties of social media—popularity, programmability, datafication, and connectivity—that structure users’ experiences, we conducted six focus group sessions with Mexican users ($n = 34$) during the 2021 federal campaigns. Findings show the fuzziness of digital advertising for users, which blurs with other formats like infographics or memes, the crucial role of individual linkages for advertising attention and attitude formation, a mismatch between the platform’s political feed and citizens’ information needs, and the tactics users perform to tame or avoid political content, disengaging them from campaigns.

Keywords

digital advertising; digital campaigns; mediatization; political advertising; reception studies; social media logic

Issue

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1. Introduction

While political advertising (PA) remains the main channel of communication between politicians and citizens during campaigns, its pervasiveness on digital media heightens its relevance. Defined as “interactive content placed for a fee” (Fowler et al., 2020, p. 112), PA sustains its main goal, that is, to persuade voters for or against a candidate or party, yet new digital formats widen its original capabilities. Advertising through simple text, images, and videos abounds on websites, social media platforms, or video streaming content. Such a text could be the outcome of search-engine queries, images might display on websites or social media, and videos might pre-roll certain content or appear in a stream after a while (Fowler

et al., 2022). But more than simply quantitatively increasing the channels at the disposal of campaigns, the affordances of those digital channels introduce changes to how users experience political advertisement.

Social media platforms organize “interactions between users (and are) geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 4). Thus, social media allow the generation and exchange of user-generated content (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), but their programmed directives of interaction and data-based operations “steer users’ behavior” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 5). This is different from the mostly-passive role of audiences in linear television advertising, and supposedly its consequences are distinct.

Thus, while quantitative empirical research shows that social media campaigns are not that effective in winning elections (Coppock et al., 2022) or making candidates liked or followed (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013), they succeed in increasing the “amount and depth of engagement they get from citizens” (Baldwin, 2016, p. 533). Shares, likes, and comments are triggered by advertising content (Peeters et al., 2023). Off and online participation in so-called high and low threshold activities—canvassing, presence at rallies, signing petitions, etc.—are also increased by electoral social media usage (Heiss & Matthes, 2019; Vaccari et al., 2015).

What is lacking in these experiments or survey-based studies is an understanding of the meanings, “experiences, and rationales underlying people’s engagement” (Swart et al., 2018, p. 4330) with digital PA. This necessitates a phenomenological approach that investigates several dimensions of that experience holistically. Under this view, multiple perspectives and the identification of the many factors involved in the situation help create a complex picture of the problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2014).

The theory of social media logic (SML) comes in handy for such an endeavor. It proposes four characteristics of social media that structure the experience of its users and, in tandem, guide them through its virtually infinite stream of content (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Users do not lose agency because of that, yet they find limits on the information they encounter, what they can do with it, and with whom they can share it (van Dijck, 2013).

We contend that exposure to PA through the affordances of social media platforms has significant consequences on how users make sense of and engage with such pieces. More importantly, they give room to users to contest advertising by tinkering with platforms and publicly rejecting campaigns’ content and strategies. Though there are other theoretical proposals about the core media properties of social media (see boyd, 2010), we choose SML for it is bound to the mediatization theory, which allows us to ground the study in a phenomenological and interpretative approach, untangling how users experience PA through social media.

Thus, we present an exploratory qualitative inquiry that aims to understand how users engage with and make sense of the PA they encounter on social media and how the logic of social networks mediates the attitudes, responses, and meanings users give to advertising. This article explores the flip side of the studies that observe how campaigns maximize social media affordances. It also goes beyond important but partial quantitative accounts about specific components of social media to observe instead how they work in tandem to structure the experience of the user.

For that purpose, we used data from six online focus group sessions held during the 2021 Mexican federal election. In that way, this study contributes to countering the marginalization of qualitative studies by answering the what and how questions for certain phenom-

ena as “a precondition for developing (or, in this case, grounding) new theoretical understandings” (Karpf et al., 2015, p. 1890).

2. Social Media Logic in Digital Political Advertising and Campaigns

We chose SML as our working theoretical view because it stems from mediatization and media logic theories and shares its core epistemological assumptions. Mediatization is a broad process of social change where media become highly influential and deeply integrated into other institutions and practices (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Early conceptualizations in the 1970s and 1980s observed the blending of journalism’s values with entertainment and popular culture (Altheide, 2004). Yet campaigns were the first activities that demonstrated the mediatization of political parties: propaganda gave way to advertisement, political messages were produced with commercial techniques, and rhetorical discourses about issues were replaced with the personalization of leaders via slogans (Mazzoleni, 1987).

To understand exactly “to what in media platforms...the institutions of society are adapting” (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 3), scholars coined the term “media logic,” that is, the norms, rules, and processes of communication production that involve formats and storytelling techniques the media use in the struggle to capture people’s attention (Strömbäck, 2008). Thus, entertainment, advertising, cinema, and television became the main sources of the aesthetics—frames, narratives, and styles (Hjarvard, 2008)—that shape political campaigns and messages. This logic is appropriated by audiences, normalizing aesthetic mixtures and setting expectations as to how campaigns should look (Altheide, 2004).

SML conceptualizes the next step in the mediatization process. It brings some of the characteristics of media logic as well as new factors that drive people’s attention and interactions. This “refers to the processes, principles, and practices through which these platforms process information, news, and communication, and more generally, how they channel social traffic” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 5). This logic is crucial in people’s experiences, including electoral ones, insofar as (social media) platforms affect “the conditions and rules of social interaction” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 3) and are “infiltrating and converging with, the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organized” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2).

Media logic and SML work in tandem. Conceptually, they are an integrative effort to synthesize into a single concept several separate media features and practices. And historically, media logic precedes SML and blends with it. Campaigns are staged by politicians and experienced by citizens mainly as media spectacles. This frame is embedded in social media campaigns’ activity, along with four different elements: popularity, datafication, connectivity, and programmability.

Popularity pertains to the way platforms, through ranking devices, signal and boost items—content, other people, and ideas—that get people’s attention. It is two-way traffic: “Algorithms automatically assign differentiated value, but users themselves may also engage in concerted efforts to lift certain people’s visibility” (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 8). Perhaps based on such features, campaigns use more positive instead of negative content and images instead of issue ads (Fowler et al., 2021). Given the popularity of memes, campaigns also implement humorous content to boost sharing and motivate content creation (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021). However, what may be deemed “popular” by social media metrics might not always be the most effective for the persuasion goals of campaigns (Baldwin, 2016).

Datafication refers “to the ability of networked platforms to render into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before” (like friending, following, liking, posting, commenting, and retweeting) and “endows social media platforms with the potential to develop techniques for predictive and real-time analytics” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 8). This leads to the personalization of the stream of content, advertising, and contact suggestions that each user gets (van Dijck et al., 2018). This is conceptualized as an “analytic turn,” where campaigns use datafied behavior in digital media environments to organize and mobilize certain segments of the electorate (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). This micro-targeting feature allows campaigns to define and reach specific audiences with tailor-made ads, promote posts, and send messages about the issues those audiences care about (Fernandez, 2020). Nevertheless, though targeting usually works in terms of persuasion, users do not like to be targeted, out of concern about being manipulated (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013).

Connectivity “refers to the socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers,” mediating users’ activities, and defining “how connections are taking shape” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 10). It also affords networks of like-minded others, which “decide what information is relevant and passed on” (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 9). Connectivity yields two phenomena that are relevant to PA. First, it enhances a recommendation culture where personal recommendations and choices from friends might be more persuasive than advertising (although there is a hierarchy between “Facebook friends” and “real friends”; Klinger & Svensson, 2015; van Dijck, 2013). Second, connectivity stimulates campaigns to locate and sometimes hire digital opinion leaders or influencers that are paid to post content favorable to the candidate (Fernandez, 2020).

Finally, programmability is “the ability of a social media platform to trigger and steer users’ creative or communicative contributions” (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5) through algorithms. As simple as they seem, “these sets of instructions shape all kinds of relational activities, such as liking, favoriting, recommending, and sharing, so they steer user experiences, content, and user

relations via platforms” (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5). However, users are not passive actors of these algorithms, for they can influence the flow of communication and information activated by such platforms through their interaction, resistance to coded instructions, and defiance of established protocols—changing a default setting, filling out false information, or quitting the site, for example (van Dijck, 2013). Consequently, performing in a social media environment may result in unforeseen consequences, such as losing control of discourse or facing opposition backlash (Baldwin, 2016).

Despite using SML as our primary theoretical perspective, we use other frameworks to complement those aspects that it does not cover and that are crucial to understanding users’ engagement with advertising.

3. Specific Facebook Affordances and Social Media Cultures of Use

In spite of SML’s utility, this highly abstract theory is not adapted to specific platforms, where those four components work in particular ways, yielding specific audiences, communication modalities, and content. These distinct possibilities have been conceptualized by the literature as platforms’ affordances, that is, the “technical capacities and the types of communication and functionalities which campaigns believe a platform supports” (Kruschinski et al., 2022, p. 3). Users’ experiences of an online campaign are not only structured by the SML but, at a lower level, by the specific communication practices each platform affords. And since Facebook is the platform where our empirical endeavor is grounded—and where campaigns pour more resources and users get more political information (Fowler et al., 2022)—we link the aforesaid four components to the affordances of this platform. This gives an extra layer of insight into the responses of the users to PA.

Facebook architecture affords fine-grained datafication. Sophisticated capabilities of matching, targeting, and analytics allow highly customizable options for campaigns to tailor messages to a mass, partisan, group, or even individual target (Bossetta, 2018; Magin et al., 2017). Regarding programmability, Facebook contemplates organic and paid media. The former allows parties to communicate with their partisan audiences, though with a limited reach, while the latter gives campaigns control of the content, timing, and target of their output, expanding their reach beyond the party’s base (Kruschinski et al., 2022).

Popularization capabilities on Facebook benefit from non-restrictive rules regarding video lengths and editing options that make visual content more polished and complex, as well as “like” metrics (Bossetta, 2018). Concerning connectivity, this is boosted by the use of hyperlinks, which help drive traffic to parties’ websites; a search engine, which makes it easier for users to find and subscribe to politicians’ accounts (Bossetta, 2018), and a “friending” dynamic, which requires reciprocal

approval of the relationship. The latter creates a network of strong ties where more or less homogeneous users are bound by trust, empathy, and reinforcement of ideas (Valenzuela et al., 2018). This component of likemindedness is important for the influence and reach of content, which is more visible and prominent between strong ties (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2010).

On the other hand, these affordances do not imply that users respond to them as intended. Each platform is embedded in a certain *culture of use* (Rogers, 2017) where their affordances, like digital objects (likes, hashtags), are interpreted and used in particular ways, and where specific *genres* or social conventions and patterns of discourse are employed by users to coordinate their communication (Kreiss et al., 2018). Of particular importance are *folk theories*, that is, non-authoritative, “intuitive and informal theories that individuals develop to explain the outcomes, effects, or consequences of technological systems” (De Vito et al., 2017, p. 3162) in response to the “black box” algorithms platforms use and that are poorly understood by users (De Vito et al., 2018; Eslami et al., 2016). Cognitively, these systems of beliefs help people explain and predict platforms, yet in practical terms, they yield multipurpose practices that orient future behavior (Young et al., 2023). Its reliability comes from their unsystematic but tested utility and the fact that they are shared between groups and cultures at large (Rip, 2006).

In sum, social media platforms mediatize campaigns for voters and structure their experience, not only through content but also through the more immersive social experience they afford. Nonetheless, general cultures of use, folk theories, and the agency of the users moderate social media campaigns’ determinations. In order to ground these assumptions empirically, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do users experience, engage with, and make sense of the PA they get through Facebook?

RQ2: How does each of the elements of the SML in Facebook mediate the attitudes, responses, and meanings users bring to PA and its sponsors?

4. Method

Although qualitative research on PA has not been the main approach in the field, a wave of reception studies at the beginning of the century and a recent wave of studies of micro-communities in social media demonstrate its value and inform our research design. Thus, we use the focus group technique as our main tool to explore citizens’ views. Rather than generalization, this technique aims to generate “insights on the motives, experiences, and thought processes of individuals that are not obtainable through extensive methods like surveys” (Gustafsson, 2012, p. 52). By exploring “the fluid and dialogic aspects of public opinion formation” (Delli-Carpini & Williams,

1994, p. 788), participants are given the chance to articulate rich and subtle perspectives about communication.

We conducted six focus groups of five to seven members each ($n = 34$) a sufficient number of sessions to saturate themes (Gustafsson, 2012). The groups were held between May 19th and June 1st, during the Mexican midterm campaigns of 2021, when the Federal Congress was renewed, as well as local congresses and municipalities. We conducted the sessions via the online application Google Meet, since the pandemic was on the rise and strict restrictions for indoor meetings were imposed by the authorities. Sessions lasted from 60 to 70 minutes at the most.

A snowball sampling method was used to recruit respondents by contacting them through university students and acquaintances of the research team, who were asked to encourage their acquaintances to participate as well. We implemented a gender quota of 50% male and female respondents, as well as a split age cohort of people from 20 to 34 and 35 to 49, to capture millennials’ and centennials’ experiences in equal measure. Participants had a homogeneous composition with roughly the same level of education and income (middle class, college diploma), which facilitated discussion, though the middle class was admittedly overrepresented (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999). Thus, we used purposeful and quota sampling criteria for our sample (Örnebring & Hellekant-Rowe, 2022).

Our facilitator administered the same semi-structured questionnaire in all six sessions to allow comparability of the data. The former inquired about the kinds of PA they get through Facebook (our working platform), why they think it reaches them, what the participants think about digital advertising, how useful it is to get to know the candidates, and what makes them think about the candidates.

All sessions were recorded with the permission of the participants, transcribed, and uploaded to Nvivo 12. Coding was a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. In the former, techniques of axial coding were used. Constant comparison of simple themes allowed new categories and subcategories to emerge “in order to identify themes, concepts, and beliefs that revealed how advertising speaks to participants” (Parmelee et al., 2007, p. 188). Once those categories were established, we deductively classified them into the four categories that comprise the concept of SML (connectivity, datafication, popularity, and programmability). Thus, we applied a sequential emic (internal, native) and etic (external perspective) interpretation to the data (Jensen, 2012) in order to give room for the unexpected and then fit the findings into a theoretical rationale.

5. Findings

5.1. Broadening the Meaning of Political Advertising

What the majority of participants understand as PA has considerably expanded and blurred on social media.

There are of course short videos, as in conventional TV advertising, yet their format is more diverse: Aside from proposals or attacks, popular formats include videos that dub the lyrics of a popular song for the message of the campaign, homemade self-recordings of the candidates uttering their proposals, and supposedly spontaneous videos of the candidates canvassing and talking to voters on the streets (“they make videos from popular songs that candidates remaster, changing the lyrics”; Participant 5 [P5]).

But many users think of advertising in other genres, such as posts, invitations to follow a candidate, news biased against a candidate or government, Facebook “stories,” infographics with proposals, endorsements by local influencers, or memes (“candidates use trendy memes to get the attention of the people”; P21). The latter involved viral memes used to promote some candidates’ proposals and others targeted against certain candidates that users took as sponsored attacks: “I saw attacks through memes, which I think are geared towards the frontrunner. Just because they did something funny at an event, there follows an attack through memes” (P17).

Thus, there is some fuzziness for users in recognizing what is paid posting or organic content. It seems to the users that every message that comes from a candidate is sponsored somehow, and much of the content shared by acquaintances has a persuasive intent. Persuasive messages are equated to sponsored ones, raising the same skepticism towards both.

At the same time, users develop attitudes toward those formats they think are advertised. For example, a participant said that the use of infographics as advertising was very helpful since they were visually appealing and instructive for learning about proposals in detail: “I learned more about the proposals through the infographics than from the videos of the candidates. They were attractive in the colors, drawings, and relevant issues” (P9).

However, a few others rejected what they thought were paid-for targeted memes or news for being too repetitive.

5.2. Connectivity

Shared information by “friends” is a central venue through which most of the participants pay attention and give credence to political messages. It highlights that such content should be noted, even if it is mixed with opinions or the user does not agree with it. Most of the advertising or political content that users pay attention to are the messages their contacts share publicly, particularly those engaged in campaigns. In the former case, the intention may be to persuade or to provide a simple account of their involvement in the campaign. Shared information by acquaintances is useful and a low-cost resource to raise awareness of a certain candidacy or gauge the reliability of certain content: “I have some contacts that post such advertising from candidates, so they

keep me informed about everything that’s happening in the campaigns” (P19).

The latter grows with the closeness and esteem of the relationship. “Friends” who are deemed smart or trustworthy deserve users’ attention: “If I trust that person or deem her intelligent, maybe I can believe that what she is recommending or suggesting to me is interesting, then I will check it out” (P7).

This is somewhat lower with acquaintances and almost negligible with unknown contacts. As a general rule, the closer the relationship between the contact who shares the information and the user, the greater the level of attention, reflection, and sharing. They surpass parties or candidates by a wide margin, who, for most of the participants, do not deserve users’ attention: “When advertising comes directly from parties, I do not pay attention, but when it comes from an acquaintance, I share it or at least read what it is about” (P12).

On the other hand, the geographical placement of such connections plays a central role in PA awareness, consumption, and even credibility. When messages about a certain candidate are shared or endorsed by someone from the neighborhood or urban zone, some users pay attention and give them credence. This signals, they think, that the candidate is interested in the needs of the community. Conversely, videos posted by candidates canvassing or walking through local neighborhoods prove, for those participants, the effort candidates make to know firsthand the needs of the people and communicate their proposals on the streets: “When candidates post videos interacting with the community, you can tell what they are up to, for better or worse. I think that is useful” (P13). This is reinforced by the endorsements of local influencers, who make users pay attention to ads. The local origin of the influencer is important since that makes it more likely to “follow” her on Facebook.

Nevertheless, skeptic or even cynical attitudes mediate such practices, and strategies are deployed to validate the political content that a “friend” shares. Some voters screen some sources to avoid being manipulated by them. They ask themselves what is behind the person who shared the content, i.e., if it stems from authentic party support or perhaps she will profit from that—by getting a benefit or landing a job in the government after the election, for example (“some neighbors do it—post a candidate’s content—because they want to profit if that candidate wins”; P23). They also check if their contacts are endorsing local candidates from the districts where they live, which gives it authenticity. Bias from the source is detected if the shared content is unsubtle, that is, too negative in terms of frequency, intensity, and generalization of the attacks: “Acquaintances and acquaintances of acquaintances seem to have the intent to manipulate us; they share attacks and wrongdoings from candidates” (P11).

Similarly, some participants thought of influencers as “mercenaries” who sold themselves to the campaign

because of the number of followers they had and the reach of their messages but did not share the candidate's ideology.

5.3. Datafication

The advertising most users encounter on Facebook matches their profile, suggesting that data-driven micro-targeting is in motion. A majority of the voters get direct advertising pertaining to the districts or municipalities where they live instead of general advertising from the parties ("I got some advertising in Facebook about the municipality where I live"; P31). Also, during campaigns, advertising appears on the groups they belong to, mainly on those that deal with political or social subjects. Additionally, most of the participants have noticed that the issues included in the advertising they encounter are tailored to their interests and age and are different from what their parents receive:

I follow some news sites that report about abortion, and I have realized that if I follow those pages on Facebook, I suppose it finds out that I am interested in that subject and starts to post advertising about it. (P2)

This feature is deemed useful since it matches campaign issues to users' interests and gets their attention. Some participants think that ads are very precise in offering information about the issues and proposals they are interested in.

Nevertheless, a few users notice mistargeting issues that may come from a glitch in the platform datafication. For example, voters get ads from candidates who ran for other states instead of their own or do not get any sponsored political messages in their feedback or any political content at all, even if they like politics ("I don't get local advertising in social media, I get it from other states but not from where I live"; P25). A handful of voters said they only got negative memes about a popular candidate from another local race who became a national celebrity.

5.4. Popularity

Here, we delved into the kind of political content that the platform signals as popular, or else tries to elicit attention and engagement from the users, that is, to increase its popularity.

Meaning about the digital context matters in this subject. Facebook is characterized by some interviewees as the platform for the lay citizen: It is informal, personal, and depoliticized. They think that people tend not to post or share political content there. The tone of the comments is casual and playful and not as insightful as Twitter, for instance: "Facebook is for all kinds of people. You can see other kinds of content that is not too formal, like politics. My friends do not post about politics there" (P27).

However, even if the platform is perceived as thin on political content, it is the primary source of exposure to PA for most of the users, more than Twitter or Instagram, second only to posters on the streets, and far more relevant than television, a medium rarely used by the sample's participants.

That characterization sets the stage for the kind of advertising that grabs the attention of most of the users, that is, is popular with them. On the one hand, there is advertising produced by candidates that features peculiar proposals, such as bringing the rock band Metallica to its city, videos from events featuring rock bands or celebrities, adapted viral memes, or entertaining ads, such as candidates singing. On the other hand, there are third-party videos of other users mocking certain candidates for trivial things, such as being bad dancers. Moreover, since attention spans for political messages are low, even little details are crucial for messages to be noticed. Flashy colors, insightful slogans, the production values of the ads, or catchy jingles make users stop and check those messages ("I liked the candidate's catchy song; that hooked me, and from then on, I started to follow him"; P16).

Nonetheless, such tactics do not grant support to candidates. Those pieces are consumed for the sake of being amusing without yielding any political persuasion or insight: "Those ads are entertaining, for sure. They are well-crafted and engaging. But they do not make you think. They (the candidates) just want you to like them" (P6).

Additionally, some criticism arose for those content features. Firstly, a participant said that differences in the ads are negligible since the agenda and proposals are the same from party to party and between election cycles. Secondly, some participants think that the fact that candidates cling to current issues, popular memes, and popular songs to dub them with their messages shows that those politicians are interested in getting the attention of young voters, but in an unoriginal, opportunist, and cynical way: "I think politicians support some issues like feminism or the environment just because they want you to vote for them. That does not convey who they really are, and it raises doubts about their integrity" (P32).

Lastly, users saw content that featured candidates who are celebrities, like singers, actors, and *luchadores* (Mexican wrestlers), as well as candidates who show themselves singing, dancing, or making jokes. One participant showed disagreement and even disgust with the profiles of those candidates and the things they did in their videos. He said they are unfit and incapable of governing and just try to distract from the real problems that the nation is facing.

All of these ad features and content make a few of the participants think that the campaigns are sophisticated in form but devoid of substance and that they eschew information about the issues, proposals, and candidate profiles that would help voters to be more knowledgeable when they cast their votes.

5.5. Programmability

Programmability features allow most of the users to not only like, comment on, or share political ads, as mentioned above, but mostly to avoid PA or content in general. This is due to their feeling of being saturated by political messages during the campaign, both because of the frequency of the ads and the fact that the same pieces are displayed time and again. Therefore, a majority of the users deploy their agency and enact practices to reduce saturation or avoid campaign messages, which vary in their simplicity and affordability in terms of technical expertise.

The simplest action for certain users is to ignore PA or shut down Facebook for a while to rest or “detox” from it, though this expresses a high level of saturation. The next level of complexity is using the tools the platform gives for avoiding unwanted messages, like selecting the option “is not interesting to me” for the political sort of advertising. Furthermore, some users also tinker with the platform features, like changing privacy configurations to exclude people involved directly in campaigns or that are highly politicized, or “unfollowing” those contacts or groups that share an excess of PA and saturate users (“I even had two contacts that posted a lot about politics, time and again, and I unfollowed them because I felt overwhelmed”; P26). In the most complex and demanding manner, a participant who does not like politics does not interact with political content at all. She is careful not to follow, comment on, or like any piece in order not to draw the attention of the platform and trigger advertising deployment from it (“I try not to follow any party, react, or comment on anything that has to do with politics”; P3).

Nevertheless, some of those actions do not stop advertising from appearing on some users’ feeds, generating frustration among them. Hence, some participants feel that Facebook abuses its users, since a bit of interaction with political content, like notifications or news, triggers the massive deployment of more notifications, biased news, or advertising on their feeds. Participants said that liking a meme makes parties send out posts and invitations to users or bombard them with advertising, even if the party portrayed or attacked in the meme is different: “I gave a like to that candidate, and out of nowhere all of their posts appeared, even a recently published video. Facebook’s algorithms make it so that if you like anything, they bombard you with posts” (P17).

In another example, clicking news about certain subjects, such as Covid-19, triggered a political ad about how a party had donated its budget to the government to buy vaccines. This was understood by a participant as opportunistic and in bad taste by the sponsor (party).

Furthermore, the platforms allow so-called “intruder bots” to appear in the groups they are subscribed to, even if they have nothing to do with politics. There is an anecdote of a user who saw a post from a bot in a football group encouraging members to check the propos-

als of a candidate. Some of the members issued a complaint to Facebook about this kind of post because it had nothing to do with the subject of the group. These practices annoy participants and generate anger and rejection toward candidates and politicians in general.

On the contrary, some users recognize that the platforms do give them options to filter the advertising, so they feel they have some degree of control.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we sought to explore how users experience, engage with, and make sense of PA they get through on social media and how the components of the SML and specific Facebook affordances mediate such processes.

Overall, it is important to stress that the meaning of PA is distinct in social media. It has either expanded for users, since they recognize a myriad of formats and types of political content as such, or is rather fuzzy. We think this is due to the difficulty for users to differentiate between paid-for content and spontaneous feeds, but there is also a folk theory in place, under which sources—candidates—are regarded as sponsors and the platform as an unrestricted marketplace. Users may think that most political messages are nothing but funded persuasion attempts, equating persuasive messages with sponsored ones. Since the former raises a cautionary approach to the messages from users—that entails scrutiny in order not to be manipulated by them—that fuzzy quality makes many political formats and messages susceptible to skepticism, reducing opportunities for engagement.

Thus, the SML components are not the only factors that structure the meaning of PA, but so are their beliefs about how they work. In addition, the intermingling of paid and organic political content makes it difficult to determine whether participants are reacting to genuine advertising or any campaign content. However, we stick to the emic (native) meaning of PA, a core qualitative principle, and, from that on, we can explain how SML elements shape the experience and meaning of it.

Firstly, Facebook’s strong-ties connectivity heavily mediates how users approach advertising, for connections make users pay attention and further engage with it. The like-mindedness of the contacts plays a part but is not a clear-cut criterion. Yet the closer the contact is, in both affective and geographical terms, the higher the credibility of the messages, which are thought of as “good,” reliable advertising. In that way, local PA bridges users’ community politics to parties and elections. By analyzing how users screen contacts’ authenticity and sincerity, as well as the rejection of influencers, this category reveals that a recommendation culture is not only influenced by proximity but also by skepticism and distrust of political leaders and political persuasion.

Secondly, Facebook’s high capabilities of targeting make advertising geographically precise and drive the

content to groups and preferred issues. Nonetheless, the downside is that the target is so precise that they think candidates are cynically courting them and do not have a genuine interest in a given issue. Mistargeting is a problematic issue too, when users get advertising from other states or districts, blaming the candidates for promoting themselves outside their constituencies. In this way, a technical failure from the platform and a perceived malpractice from the sponsor render micro-targeting a potential source of negativity from users.

Thirdly, popularization shows a major failure of targeting since the algorithm seems to post flashy content to at least mildly politicized citizens who expect political substance instead of entertainment and political logic instead of media logic (Altheide, 2004). It also shows how the platforms' algorithms reveal a contradiction between consumers and citizens since content that would be popular by social media standards seems disliked by citizens. Thus, as previously stated, strategies from platforms could be counterproductive to the persuasion goals of the campaigns. Yet, citizens seem to attribute those grievances to candidates and not platforms.

Finally, in terms of programmability, all of SML features and Facebook's affordances do "steer" the users' experience, but the latter show a high degree of agency by enacting tactics to regulate the flow of content. Moreover, they blame the platform for their frustration, feel intrusion by it, and believe that their right to privacy is being violated, as the literature reports (Fowler et al., 2020). The downside or "unforeseen consequence" (Baldwin, 2016) is that some of that blame goes to the candidate sponsors, while the issues stem from the platforms and not the campaigns.

To conclude, our holistic approach to campaigns and PA reveals many interconnected factors that influence the meaning and engagement of political ads. As a result of SML, more formats are available for users' engagement with political advertisements, some of which have specific properties, such as entertaining content. Additionally, engagement is linked to close-knit connections that raise attention to advertising and shape mostly favorable attitudes towards it. When associated with like-minded acquaintances and local politics, advertising is meaningful and authentic. Moreover, users can get advertising tailored to their locations and issue preferences, which makes it convenient and on the spot. These elements are particularly relevant in low political involvement scenarios where citizens use primarily peripheral cues to make electoral decisions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Nevertheless, SML sometimes also disengages users from advertising and political content; yet, this is influenced by the local political culture, which is characterized in this case by distrust and cynicism. Under the role of citizens, participants complain about a mismatch between the platform's media logic display and their information needs. Some users exert their agency to avoid PA when they feel saturated. Precise target-

ing or mistargeting elicits attitudes towards manipulation attempts by politicians. A wide contact network brings about what they think are manipulative and insincere contacts, as well as sold-out influencers, who make ads unworthy.

All in all, users do not adequately separate the actions of the platform from those of the sponsors. Given the general lack of trust in politicians (Echeverría & Mani, 2020), some platforms' failures and features could end up damaging the candidate's reputation or that of politicians at large.

In terms of methods, further research will be able to expand our design and findings to other social media platforms, looking for differences and similarities. Also, scholars can complement the focus groups with in-depth interviews to avoid group thinking and bias. Of course, these propositions could be tested with experimental and survey-based techniques for nomothetic validity. Additionally, more work can be done to observe how political culture interacts with SML, particularly the way some negative beliefs beget certain platform practices. As for the characteristics of the ads, popular content seems to be close to entertainment techniques and stimuli, whose implications deserve further research. Of course, the blurring or mingling of traditional advertising with other online formats should be investigated in more depth.

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Conflict of Interests

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