
Miscellaneous

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Underlying Emotions in Political Messages: An Analysis of Their Influence on Interactions and Sharing/Commenting Actions on Facebook

Abstract

The 2022 presidential elections in Colombia resulted in the victory of the first left-wing government in the country's history, amidst a campaign marked by economic crisis, polarization, widespread circulation of misinformation, and hate speech fueling a populist narrative with a significant emotional component. In this context and considering the centrality of social media in public discourse, this study employed automated natural language processing techniques and statistical analysis to explore the configuration of affective audiences in the electoral contest, examining the specific emotions and implicit connotations within the breadth of campaign messages on the social network Facebook (N = 3,002) and their relationship with user reactions. One contribution of this study was the analysis of reactions as a mediator between implicit emotional valences and interactions (commenting and sharing). Although the implicit negative valence in campaign messages did not show a direct association with interactions, it did show an indirect and significant association through an increase in the number of negative reactions ("anger"), confirming the heuristic role of reactions and suggesting that the affective alignment between valences and reactions is a factor that enhances the impact of posts.

Keywords

Elections, Facebook, affective audiences, social networks, emotions.

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1. Introduction

The 2022 presidential elections in Colombia were atypical, not only because a left-wing candidate achieved victory for the first time in the country's democratic history but also because of the atmosphere of tension and polarization during the electoral campaign. The elections occurred within the context of an economic crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and social discontent expressed through numerous protests against some state institutions and the economic policies of the government under Iván Duque (Palomino, 2022), occurring at the greatest frequency since the 1970s (Long et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the elections were characterized by the extensive use of social media for the widespread circulation of false information aimed at tarnishing the image of different candidates (Maldita.es, 2022); hate messages with racist content, such as attacks directed at the vice-presidential candidate Francia Márquez; and the promotion of indignation by suggesting electoral fraud sponsored by institutional entities (García, 2022), casting doubt on the legitimacy of the process. Under these conditions, the discourse against the establishment and the status quo included a strong emotional component (Nguyen, 2019), and the presidential campaign of the two candidates who contested the presidency in the runoff elections, Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández, became hegemonic.

Social media, particularly Facebook, plays a prominent role in deliberation and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2012; Juleha et al., 2024), with Colombia having the third highest number of users among the countries of Latin America (Statista, 2022). This study introduced a new approach to determining the configuration of affective audiences (Papacharissi, 2016) through the use of emotion mining and statistical analysis, including the following assessments: a) the emotions and their implicit valences with the campaign messages of all candidates on Facebook; b) the associations among implicit emotions, valences, and user reactions; c) the direct relationship between implicit emotions and their valences with commenting and sharing actions; and d) the relationship between implicit emotions and commenting and sharing actions through the mediating role of user reactions to the campaign posts of the candidates on this social network, which is a novel investigation compared with the current literature.

2. Affective Publics

The supremacy of reason over affects and emotions has been questioned by various disciplines (Damasio, 1999). Currently, the emotional component of politics and the effects that feelings have on political communication are undeniable (Ingraham, 2023). As Szabó (2020) argues, we are witnessing an emotional turn in the study of political discourses, with a strong focus on the role of emotions in the production, processing, and response to political information (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012; Verbalyte, 2018; Zhang & Clark, 2018; Rivera Otero et al., 2023).

An increasing number of studies are being performed on the influence of affects, preconscious or spontaneous processes, on individuals' perception of and interaction with reality, which has been termed the affective turn (Arias, 2016; Arfuch, 2016; Garcés 2023). In politics, the affective turn is responsible not only for an epistemological shift but also for a new configuration of social structure characterized by the personalization of public debate, individualism, the blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres, polarization, and a more audiovisual than written culture (Arias, 2016; Arfuch, 2016), returning emotions to a prominent role in shaping public opinion. In this context, the emotional manipulation that can occur during political struggles can have a profound effect on the legitimacy of institutions and

on the dynamics of democracy. The mobilization of strong emotions, such as fear or anger, can foster a sense of urgency and action, but it can also polarize and fragment society (Westen, 2007).

Undoubtedly, one of the main features of the *affective turn* is the centrality of social networks, which have become not only favorite sites for news consumption and the expression of political opinions (Shah et al., 2017; Morris & Morris, 2023), but also immediate transmitters of emotionality (Han, 2014). According to Papacharissi (2016), social networks are affective because citizens mainly use them for expressive or heuristic purposes rather than for deliberative purposes and engage in politics by adhering to transitory political communities.

In this context, *affective publics* emerge, defined as *network public* formations that mobilize and connect or disconnect through expressions of sentiment. These publics are created and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity (Papacharissi, 2016). Sometimes, *affective publics* endure over time and may be the result or the beginning of social movements organized offline. In other cases, the *affective publics* are transient and revolve around a trending conversation, causing everyday issues to become public demands (Papacharissi, 2015).

Currently, there is substantial discussion about the concept of affect and its relationship to the concepts of feeling and emotion (Schemer, 2014). Without delving into deeper discussions that are characteristic of psychology and neuroscience in this work, and following Shouse (2005) by drawing on the contributions of Massumi (1987) and Tomkins (1995), we define affect as a nonconscious experience, a formless and unstructured moment that manifests physiologically, providing intensity to the experience and thus constituting the basis of emotions and feelings. Affective responses can be expressed on social media; in the case of Facebook, this expression is aided by the reactions provided by the platform (Taliar Giuntini et al., 2019; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021).

Network affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) can lead to not only connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) but also homophily, inducing users to interact with individuals who share their pre-existing beliefs (Sunstein, 2007; Weller et al., 2013) or to motivate the privileged consumption of like-minded information, generating the well-known concept of *echo chambers* (Sunstein, 2007; Bouvier, 2020; Castillo de Mesa et al., 2021), spaces where the same views are repeated by individuals with similar ideas who are exposed only to content that reinforces their prior conceptions. As Papacharissi (2015) explains, in these networks, the formation of nodes relies on an affective connection supported by simple and highly polarized narratives rather than a clear discursive or deliberative script.

The exchange of everyday emotional expressions results in affect contagion, which can also be termed *affective attunement* (Papacharissi, 2015), creating a new dimension of citizen participation that is different from deliberation or traditional collective actions and taking on various forms according to the medium's singularity. According to Papacharissi (2015), *affective attunement* can include actions such as liking a post on Facebook, endorsing an item in a news aggregator, uploading and sharing a YouTube video, sharing a meme, or reproducing photographs, among other expressions, as manifestations of civic engagement.

Affective publics mobilize and interconnect with each other. On platforms and social networks, users use tags or the conversations themselves as collaborative frames of reference and connective action, fostering affective attunement (Papacharissi, 2015). This attunement develops more easily in online social spaces due to user-specific searches and the web architecture itself based on prediction algorithms and tastes (Papacharissi, 2015; Arias, 2016; Brady et al., 2017; Boler & Davis, 2018).

3. Affective Publics, Electoral Campaigns, and Social Media

The dominance of affective expressiveness in public discourse reveals a new level of power struggle. A successful politician manages to embody emotional rules and expression norms to connect with users. Emotional competence is becoming an increasingly prominent strategy in the routines of professional politicians (Heaney, 2019; Szabó, 2020).

Emotions and affects constitute discursive tools for accessing and exercising political power. Parties, movements, and populist leadership tend to emerge and consolidate in crisis scenarios accompanied by emotional reactions. According to the literature, uncertainty and frustration stemming from socioeconomic issues can lead to the emergence of emotions such as fear, anger, hatred, or anxiety, which are easily channeled by populist discourses against immigrants, ethnic populations, the media, and cultural and political elites (Demertzis, 2006; Nguyen, 2019; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Martella & Vracchieale, 2021).

In the electoral realm, a considerable number of studies have focused on the role of emotions in the communicative content of campaigns and their impact on shaping citizens' political attitudes and behaviors (Corduneanu et al., 2019; Groenendyk, 2011; Marcus, 2000; Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2013; Arbeláez-Ochoa, 2023). These studies utilize contributions from the fields of political psychology and neuroscience (Harris, 2020) to interpret the mechanisms of cognitive and attitudinal responses to the emotional stimulus of campaign information. Westen (2007) argues that emotions are the driving force behind many political decisions because they activate the cognitive systems that allow for quick responses to complex situations, such as those commonly encountered during election campaigns.

Thus, emotions have been evaluated based on their valence (positive or negative), and specific emotions have been considered, with various studies highlighting emotions such as fear, anger, hope, sadness, and enthusiasm, among others (Groenendyk, 2011).

Political language can demonstrate an emotional charge that is received by users and prompts greater interaction and response. For example, the use of emoticons on social media, particularly on Facebook, has become an important tool for online emotional expression. In fact, it is currently being studied whether the emoticons chosen truly reflect the emotions that users intend to convey (Taliar Get al., 2019; Cherbonnier et al., 2024). It can also reveal the emotion behind a political language, an emotional charge taken by its users and, in that train of thought, asking for more interaction and reaction. Such emotional charge comes from rhetorical persuasions trying to influence the public mindsets to get important reactions that go from enthusiasm and hope to anger and indignation.

The same strategies are adopted by politicians and their communication teams: how to mobilize their bases, how to increase participation in their campaigns and debates, and how to further polarize the audience to solidify more support. What is said and the nature of language used on social media tends to go viral easily because these emotionally charged messages undergo a type of velocity that enhances reach and influence. Emotional political language thus becomes a powerful factor of compulsion in the formation of public opinion and electoral behavior, as well as in being able to stay afloat in media speech. Emotional reactions can, therefore, prompt a user to act not only explicitly but also deeply affect the perception and attitude toward politics—establishing or undermining an existing disposition.

The study by Márton Bene (2016) analyzed Hungarian political candidates and how they used Facebook during the 2014 general election campaign to interact with their followers. The work focuses on identifying which types of political content generated the most reactions from

followers on the platform. The analysis showed that posts including images and videos generated a higher number of reactions.

According to Brady et al. (2017), in the context of the 2016 US elections, tweets with emotional appeals were shared significantly more often than those with neutral ones. As for virality, it can be said that political messages, especially those charged with emotions, spread quickly through social media, amplifying their reach and impact (Berger, 2012; Pellicer, 2024). This phenomenon not only redefines the dynamics of political communication but also shapes discursive strategies based on their ability to generate mass emotional interactions.

Authors such as De León and Trilling (2021) suggest that there is a negativity bias in emotional engagement with political information, where negative news generates more intense emotional responses and, therefore, is more likely to be shared on social media. However, the relationship between engagement and type of emotion is not limited solely to the valence of the emotion. Other research suggests that content that evokes positive emotions like awe or negative ones like anger or anxiety is significantly more viral (Paletz et al., 2023).

Similarly, De Paula and Dincelli (2018), in a study analyzing messages from US government institutions on Facebook, concluded that posts with symbolic and affective representations received more interactions from users. In addition to the affective content of messages, social media reactions are affective responses to specific stimuli (Grusin, 2010; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Paasonen, 2016; Tettegah & Noble, 2016).

A significant number of studies have been conducted within the field of emotion mining in social media messages (Graziani, 2019; Mohammad & Turney, 2013), as well as studies investigating the emotional content of those messages and users' affective responses, particularly on Twitter and Facebook (Taliar Giuntini et al., 2019; Plaza Del Arco et al., 2018). Some of these studies are within the political-electoral domain (Mancosu, 2016; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021).

Among the studies exploring the relationship between the emotional content of Facebook posts and users' reactions, Taliar Giuntini et al. (2019) tested the methodological effectiveness of using algorithms for sentiment analysis by identifying emotional expressions in Facebook reactions to news content, investigating whether the emojis chosen by users reflected the emotions they wished to express. A cluster algorithm was used to explore the representation of emotions in Facebook reactions and their association with the emotions in the posts. Among the main findings, the associations between the types of connotations (positive, negative, and neutral) identified in the news content of Facebook posts and the reactions with the same connotation from users stand out.

Eberl et al. (2020), investigating the effect of feelings and the thematic relevance of Facebook posts by political actors in Austria during the 2017 legislative elections, found that the positive or negative connotation of messages increased the number of "love" and "angry" reactions, respectively. In the study by Sturm Wilkerson et al. (2021) on affective responses to hyperpartisan news content on Facebook, posts with emotionally charged content associated with joy generated a greater number of "like" and "love" reactions regardless of the ideology of the news outlet. However, emotional contexts such as fear and anger elicited different audience reactions between left- and right-wing media on this social network. In the same study, a positive association was observed between the presence of emotional content and a higher number of comments and shares, in line with previous findings (Lee et al., 2014).

According to Nave et al. (2018), when analyzing political posts on Facebook from various actors in Israel, posts with implicit emotions were more likely to be successful, measuring success based on the number of "likes". This same study found that a higher number of likes was

associated with a higher number of shares. Considering the evidence, one aspect to investigate is the interaction that may exist between the implicit emotions in the posts, the reactions, and the interactions such as commenting and sharing. In other thematic fields, for example, Masullo (2022), based on the analysis of news posts about COVID-19 in the United States, found that reactions such as ‘likes’ and ‘angry’ increased the likelihood of commenting on these posts, as they function as heuristic signals that help assess the attention given to such content.

The present study aimed to expand upon the findings of the abovementioned studies but additionally sought to determine if users’ reactions to campaign messages, in addition to being related to the implicit emotions conveyed by the candidates, can serve as mediating variables, acting as a “resonance box” that leads to sharing or commenting, amplifying the reach of posts and emotional contagion in the configuration of affective publics on Facebook.

4. Methodology

This study was conducted using a quantitative methodological approach supported by statistics and the use of automated techniques for language processing. The research questions were as follows:

P1a. What type of association exists between the implicit emotions of posts made by the candidates in the 2022 Colombian presidential elections and user reactions on Facebook?

P1b. What type of association exists between the implicit connotations of posts made by the candidates in the 2022 Colombian presidential elections and user reactions on Facebook?

P1c. What type of association exist between the emotions and implicit valences of campaign posts and interactions (commenting and sharing) by audiences on Facebook?

P2. Do reactions play a mediating role between the implicit emotional valences in campaign posts and interactions (commenting and sharing) by users on Facebook?

CrowdTangle, a public tool designed by Meta, was used to obtain the data for this study. The posts ($N = 3,067$) from the official Facebook accounts of the seven presidential candidates were downloaded from March 13, the date candidacies were officially announced, to June 19, 2022, the day of the elections. Of the total collected posts, 43 (1.4%) were images or videos without text, so they were removed from the database, reducing the study population to 3,002 posts.

According to Kempt (2022), Facebook is the second most used social network in Colombia (24.3% participation). Since 2015, Facebook has expanded the range of reactions available to include “love”, “haha”, “wow”, “sad”, “angry” and “care”, which are useful for studying the emotions with which the audience reacts to each post.

The first step was the characterization of the implicit emotions in the Facebook posts made by the presidential candidates on their official accounts and their connotations (Amor et al., 2020). To identify the emotional intention of the texts, sentiment analysis was used, which allows for an automatic interpretation of opinions and feelings expressed with words (Rosenbrock et al., 2021; Pang & Lee, 2008; Koschut et al., 2017). The dictionary proposed by Mohammad and Turney (2013), called the NRC Emotion Lexicon (NRC), was used to associate words with the eight basic emotions proposed by Ekman (1992) and Plutchik (1994) “joy”, “sadness”, “anger”, “fear”, “disgust”, “surprise”, “trust”, and “anticipation” and with the three sentiments of connotation positive, neutral, and negative (Amor et al., 2020).

To ensure the correct functioning of the dictionary, the posts were processed with parameters specific to text mining. First, the text was cleaned of elements that did not contribute information about the theme, structure, or content of the message; next, the posts were tokenized and lemmatized. Once the database was ready, the dictionary was run through

the R programming language due to its advantages in statistical analysis (Santana & Mateos, 2014; Czarnek, 2022).

Once the emotional intent of the messages was identified using the NRC, the analysis of the emotional response of users to these messages was conducted, including the frequencies of user reactions, the number of comments ($N = 5,890,574$, $M = 1,962$, $SD = 5,843$, range = 0–187,958), and the number of times the posts were shared ($N = 8,125,616$, $M = 2,706$, $SD = 6,066$, range = 0–1–08,731) based on the information provided by CrowdTangle. The number of “like” reactions ranged between 0 and 153,020 per post ($M = 9,494$, $SD = 14,777$), representing 72.24% of the total reactions, followed by “love” ($M = 2,749$, $SD = 7,976$, range = 0–192,793) with 20.92%, “haha” ($M = 710$, $SD = 2,340$, range = 0–54,171) with 5.40%, “care” ($M = 130.61$, $SD = 381.94$, range = 0–12,247) with 0.99%, “angry” ($M = 25.57$, $SD = 132.29$, range = 0–6,068) with 0.19%, “sad” ($M = 23.21$, $SD = 357.04$, range = 0–16,382) with 0.18%, and “wow” ($M = 9.68$, $SD = 36.81$, range = 0–1,251) with 0.07%, totaling 39,453,980 reactions.

Third, the associations between the implicit emotions and connotations of the candidates’ Facebook posts and user reactions, as well as commenting and sharing actions, were identified. Since the numbers of emotions, connotations, reactions, comments, and shares exhibited a wide range of various orders of magnitude, following the procedure adopted by Sturm Wilkerson et al. (2021), the set of variables underwent a logarithmic transformation to avoid bias in the sample distribution (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables

Variable	Log ₁₀ Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Standard Error
Trust	1.59	0.63	0.29	-0.44	0.01
Joy	1.54	0.51	0.27	-0.23	0.00
Surprise	1.38	0.34	0.25	0.10	0.00
Anticipation	1.51	0.51	0.27	-0.25	0.00
Sadness	1.41	0.38	0.27	0.08	0.00
Fear	1.51	0.45	0.27	-0.14	0.01
Anger	1.52	0.38	0.27	0.08	0.00
Disgust	1.34	0.29	0.25	0.32	0.00
Like	5.18	3.45	0.78	-0.30	0.01
Love	5.29	2.63	0.93	-0.09	0.02
Wow	3.10	0.56	0.56	0.82	0.01
Haha	4.73	1.83	1.05	0.06	0.02
Sad	4.21	0.48	0.58	1.50	0.01
Angry	3.78	0.75	0.69	0.70	0.01
Care	4.09	1.49	0.78	0.07	0.01
Positive Connotation	1.84	0.83	0.28	-0.63	0.01
Neutral Connotation	1.36	0.41	0.26	-0.05	0.00
Negative Connotation	1.83	0.62	0.29	-0.36	0.01
Shares	5.04	2.78	0.85	-0.30	0.02
Comments	5.27	2.45	0.98	-0.20	0.02
Overperformance*	1.72	0.00	0.38	0.58	0.00
Followers at Posting	6.35	5.61	0.72	-2.01	0.01

Note. The mean corresponds to the Log₁₀ transformation of the variables. * The variable was transformed using a symmetric logarithm due to the presence of negative values in the original data.

Source: Author’s own work.

Multiple linear regression models were estimated to determine the association of emotions and connotations (independent variables) with the seven types of reactions, the number of comments, and the number of shares (dependent variables), addressing P1a, P1b, and P1c. Given the strong correlation between the emotions of joy and trust (Spearman, $r = 0.715$, $p < 0.001$) and between joy and anticipation (Spearman, $r = 0.721$, $p < 0.001$), we decided to include only joy and therefore evaluate six basic emotions proposed by Ekman, which is a method that has been used in other studies (Taliari Giuntini et al., 2019). At the same time, the number of comments and shares showed a high correlation (Spearman, $r = .898$, $p < .001$), so a new variable called 'interactions' was calculated based on their average ($N = 3002$, $M = 2.69$, $SD = .86$, range = 0-7).

Additionally, to address P2 and determine the mediating relationship of Facebook reactions between implicit valences and commenting/sharing actions, Hayes' (2022) single-variable mediation model was utilized using the PROCESS macro. This technique, which combines regression analysis with bootstrapping, allows for the identification of direct and indirect effects of an independent variable (implicit valences) on the dependent variable (commenting or sharing) based on the presence of the mediating variable (user reaction type). For the analysis, the statistical packages Stata 17 and SPSS 29 were used.

To analyze the variation in the association between emotions and valences with reactions, comments, and shared posts on Facebook during the electoral campaign, following other studies (Bene, 2016), the campaign week in which the messages were posted, overperformance, the number of page followers at the time of posting, and the presence of audiovisual content were included as control variables.

Regarding the campaign week in which the posts were made, it ranged from the start of the first round (March 13) to the day of the second round (June 19), being an ordinal variable (range: 1-14). Overperformance, in turn, measures the extent to which a post exceeds interaction expectations compared to other posts from the same page ($N = 3,002$, $M = .19$, $SD = 4.05$, range = -22.61 to 53.04). On the other hand, the variable 'number of followers' indicates the total number of followers of the candidate's page at the time each post is made ($N = 3,002$, $M = 815,813$, $SD = 694,123$, range = 106 to 2,252,388). Finally, audiovisual content was estimated based on the presence or absence of video content in each post (56.2% of the total posts). These variables allow for controlling the performance and characteristics of social media posts.

5. Results

Addressing research question P1a, the regression analysis (Table 2) showed that for the posts made by the candidates, the "like" showed a positive association with a higher presence of joy ($\beta = .117$, $p < .001$) and sadness ($\beta = .231$, $p < .001$). A similar situation was observed with the reaction 'Love it', which recorded a positive association with joy ($\beta = .235$, $p < .01$) and sadness ($\beta = .191$, $p < .01$). In the case of "Wow", this reaction showed a positive association with sadness ($\beta = .153$, $p < .001$) and disgust ($\beta = .119$, $p < .01$), while it showed a negative relationship with joy ($\beta = -.176$, $p < .001$). "Funny" showed a positive association with sadness ($\beta = .419$, $p < .001$) and a negative relationship with fear ($\beta = -.163$, $p < .05$). "Sad" showed a positive and significant relationship with sadness ($\beta = .175$, $p < .001$) and disgust ($\beta = .091$, $p < .01$), while it showed a negative relationship with joy ($\beta = -.121$, $p < .01$). The reaction "Angry" had a positive relationship with disgust ($\beta = .155$, $p < .01$) and sadness ($\beta = .187$, $p < .001$), while it showed a negative relationship with joy ($\beta = -.098$, $p < .05$). "I care" had a positive relationship with joy ($\beta = .152$, $p < .001$) and sadness ($\beta = .172$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Linear regression of reactions, comments, and number of shared posts on Facebook according to implicit emotions

	Like	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry	Care	Interactions
Joy	.117*** (.039)	.235*** (.050)	-.176*** (.034)	-.077 (.061)	-.121** (.0039)	-.098** (.043)	.152*** (.041)	.129* (.060)
Surprise	-.070 (.043)	-.079 (.055)	-.006 (.038)	-.010 (.067)	.020 (.043)	-.023* (.047)	-.055 (.045)	.019 (.066)
Sadness	.231*** (.047)	.191** (.060)	.153*** (.041)	.419*** (.074)	.175*** (.047)	.187*** (.052)	.172*** (.049)	.139 (.0073)
Fear	-.046 (.048)	-.050 (.061)	-.014 (.042)	-.163* (.075)	.019 (.048)	-.001 (.053)	-.013 (.050)	-.093 (.074)
Anger	-.022 (.050)	-.002 (.064)	.021 (.044)	-.139 (.079)	-.032 (.050)	-.034 (.055)	.010 (.053)	-.088 (.078)
Disgust	.032 (.047)	-.073 (.060)	.119** (.041)	.147* (.073)	.091* (.047)	.155** (.052)	-.086 (.049)	.111 (.072)
Week	.023*** (.002)	.040*** (.003)	.017*** (.002)	.026*** (.004)	.024*** (.002)	.016*** (.003)	.034*** (.002)	.029*** (.004)
Overperforming	.754*** (.022)	.839*** (.028)	.723*** (.010)	1.298** (.034)	.743*** (.022)	.838*** (.024)	.728*** (.012)	- -
Followers at posting	.720*** (.012)	.812*** (.015)	.340*** (.010)	.739*** (.018)	.251*** (.012)	.425*** (.013)	.688*** (.012)	.649*** (.018)
Audiovisual content	.112*** (.017)	.186*** (.021)	.150*** (.0155)	.243*** (.026)	.136*** (.017)	.260*** (.019)	.170*** (.018)	.124*** (.026)
Observations	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002
R2	.660	.614	.505	.543	.404	.484	.631	.341

Note. Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05. The overperformance variable was not included in the interaction model to avoid collinearity.

Source: Author's own work.

Addressing research question P1b (Table 3), the positive valence of the messages was associated with a lower number of “Wow” ($\beta = -.235, p < .001$), “Sad” ($\beta = -.151, p < .001$), and “Angry” ($\beta = -.104, p < .05$) reactions, while it showed a positive and significant association with ‘Like’ ($\beta = .106, p < .01$), ‘Love it’ ($\beta = .212, p < .001$), and ‘I care’ ($\beta = .141, p < .001$). The neutral valence in the messages only showed a significant and negative association with the ‘Funny’ reaction ($\beta = -.107, p < .05$). The negative valence showed a higher probability of response through the reactions ‘Like’ ($\beta = .116, p < .05$), ‘Wow’ ($\beta = .228, p < .001$), ‘Funny’ ($\beta = .259, p < .05$), ‘Sad’ ($\beta = .191, p < .001$), and ‘Angry’ ($\beta = .210, p < .001$).

Table 3. Linear regression of reactions, comments, and number of shared posts on Facebook according to emotional valence

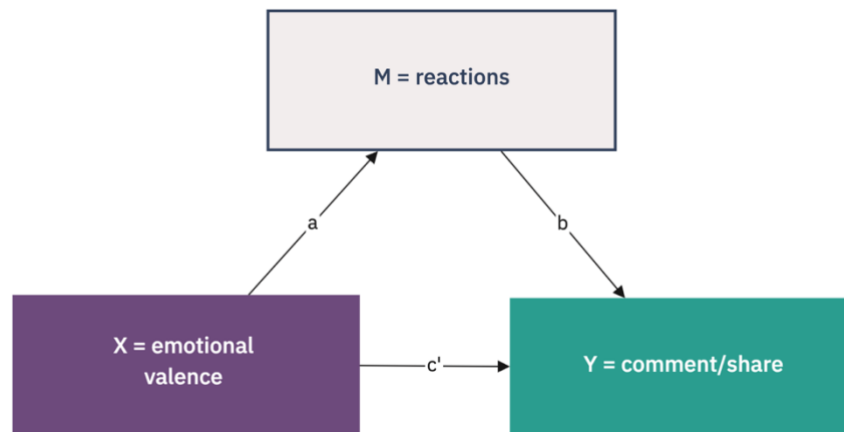
	Like	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry	Care	Interactions
Positive Valence	.106** (.039)	.212*** (.050)	-.235*** (.034)	-.071 (.061)	-.151*** (.039)	-.104* (.043)	.141*** (.041)	.136* (.060)
Neutral Valence	-.119 (.035)	.0162 (.044)	.049 (.030)	-.107* (.054)	.028 (.035)	.048 (.038)	.018 (.036)	-.071 (.053)
Negative Valence	.116** (.035)	.006 (.048)	.228*** (.033)	.259*** (.059)	.191*** (.038)	.210*** (.042)	.024 (.040)	.005 (.058)
Week	.024*** (.002)	.003*** (.003)	.017*** (.002)	.027*** (.004)	.024*** (.022)	.016*** (.003)	.034*** (.002)	.030*** (.004)
Overperformance	.758*** (.002)	.845** (.028)	.723*** (.019)	1.296*** (.034)	.743*** (.022)	.840*** (.024)	.732*** (.023)	- -
Followers at posting	.720*** (.012)	.815 (.015)	.331*** (.010)	.736*** (.018)	.245*** (.012)	.419 (.013)	.689*** (.012)	.650*** (.018)
Audiovisual content	.113*** (.017)	.186*** (.021)	.151*** (.015)	.242*** (.026)	.136*** (.017)	.0263*** (.019)	.170*** (.018)	.122*** (.026)
Observations	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002	3,002
R2	.658	.614	.503	.539	.401	.481	.630	.340

Note. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.
 Source: Author's own work.

Addressing research question P1c, the direct relationships of specific emotions and implicit valences with the frequency of interactions (commenting/sharing). As shown in Table 2 A greater presence of joy in the emotional content of the messages was associated with a higher number of comments/shares ($\beta = .129$, $p < .05$). Looking at the association between these types of actions on Facebook and the implicit valence of the messages (Table 3), a higher positive valence increased the likelihood of interactions ($\beta = .136$, $p < .05$).

Finally, to answer P2, the results of the linear regressions presented in Table 3 were considered, and the mediation path positive valence—'Love it'—interactions (commenting/sharing) was evaluated. Additionally, it was assessed whether, in the absence of a direct effect of negative valence on interactions, the affective alignment of this implicit valence with any reaction it had shown an association with (Table 2) could establish an indirect effect. Therefore, the mediation model negative valence—'Angry'—interactions (commenting/sharing) was proposed. The mediating role of reactions is suggested based on the assumption that, while there is evidence suggesting a direct relationship between the emotions in political posts and commenting or sharing actions (Lee et al., 2014; Nave et al., 2018; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021), as well as between users' reactions and those interactions (Nave et al., 2018), it is also possible that these reactions serve a heuristic role by drawing attention to the content of the posts and thus increasing other additional interactions like comments or shares (Masullo, 2022). Furthermore, there is a lack of research testing this heuristic role by observing the affective alignment between implicit valences and reactions.

Figure 1. Pathway of the mediating effects of Facebook reactions between the implicit emotions of posts and interactions (commenting/sharing)



Source. Author's own work.

The mediation analysis reveals that the relationship between implicit positive valence and interactions (commenting/sharing) was mediated by the 'Love it' reaction. No direct and significant effect of positive valence on interactions was observed ($B = .0054$, $p = .89$, $CI [-.0746, .0853]$). However, positive valence showed a significant association with the 'Love it' reaction ($B = .2295$, $p < .001$, $CI [.1451, .3139]$). The 'Love it' reaction showed a direct and significant association with interactions ($B = .4802$, $p < .001$, $CI [.4464, .5141]$). Additionally, a significant and indirect effect of positive valence on interactions through the 'Love it' reaction was identified ($B = .1102$, $BootSE = .0216$, $95\% CI [.0676, .1516]$). These findings suggest that the 'Love it' reaction acted as a full mediator in the relationship between the implicit positive valence of the posts and the interactions.

When observing the model negative valence—'Angry'—interactions, negative valence had a direct and significant association with 'Angry' ($B = .1915$, $p < .001$, $CI [.1180, .2649]$), but not with interactions ($B = -.0025$, $p = .9536$, $CI [.1180, .2649]$). Negative valence showed a significant indirect association with interactions through the 'Angry' reaction ($B = .0695$, $BootSE = .0138$, $95\% CI [.0434, .0977]$). These results suggest that 'Angry' acted as a full mediator in the relationship between negative valence and increased interactions.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study contributes to the ongoing research on the associations among emotions, valences, Facebook reactions and the interactions of commenting and sharing, particularly in the context of electoral politics in the global South. Unlike previous studies, this study focused on the posts made by candidates on Facebook during the presidential campaign, providing evidence and new findings regarding the relationship between political elites and audiences in the digital sphere based on emotional dimensions. In particular, it advances the recognition of the uniqueness and contingent nature of the affective alignment between the implicit emotions in the messages and users' reactions (Papacharissi, 2015; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021), avoiding automatic equivalencies and thus addressing the unique nature of the political context and the capacity of actors (users and candidates) to generate reactions in others.

While other approaches have aimed to identify the effectiveness of reactions in expressing emotions generated by audiences online by isolating individual behavior from social influence from a methodological perspective (Taliar Giuntini et al., 2019), this study was based on the opposite

premise: the need to study the configuration of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015, 2016) based on the interactions among implicit emotions in candidates' messages, user reactions, and actions such as commenting or sharing those posts.

The results obtained are consistent with other studies (Eberl et al., 2020; Taliar Giuntini et al., 2019; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021) in finding that the implicit emotion of joy increased the likelihood of reactions such as 'Like', 'Love it', and 'I care', while it reduced the likelihood of 'Sad' and 'Angry'. In contrast to previous studies (Taliar Giuntini et al., 2019; Nave et al., 2018), the 'Like' reaction was positively associated with a higher presence of joy and a lower presence of anger. However, a greater implicit presence of sadness was associated with a higher number of 'Like', and a greater presence of disgust was positively associated with this type of reaction, although not significantly, suggesting a displacement of anger by these negative emotions. This idea is reinforced when considering that anger did not show significant associations with any reaction, while sadness and disgust exhibited a significant association with most reactions, including negative ones like 'Sad' and 'Angry'. These findings suggest a contextual relationship between specific emotions implicit in political posts and reactions, leaving the discussion open for future research. At the same time, they reinforce approaches that have found that both positive and negative emotions can increase the affective response of audiences (Paletz et al., 2023), this time expressed through reactions.

According to the previous results, reactions such as "angry," "sad," "haha," and "wow" were correlated with a greater presence of negative valence in campaign messages, as well as with a lower presence of positive valence. A greater number of "love" reactions was correlated with a lower presence of negative valence. Notably, neutral valence did not show association with most of the reactions, reinforcing the importance of studying emotions and their capacity to generate a greater response from audiences, as well as the possibility of configuring affective publics that align with the emotional expressions of political elites.

The results also suggest the possibility of configuring audiences who consume information in line with their ideology and interact with political leaders and users with similar beliefs, giving rise to phenomena such as homophily, selective exposure, and echo chambers (Bouvier, 2020; Castillo de Mesa et al., 2021; Sunstein, 2007; Weller et al. 2013). To test this hypothesis, future studies that combine opinion mining with other information collection tools such as surveys, experimental designs, or qualitative content analyses that allow the emotional expressions of audiences to be linked with other communicative behaviors and their sociodemographic characteristics are needed.

In terms of actions taken on Facebook, such as sharing or commenting on posts made by presidential candidates, while there was no overall association with positive valence, there was an association of these actions with a greater presence of joy as a specific emotion. In addition, these actions were correlated with a lower presence of negative valence and with anger. There was no association between these actions and neutral valence, thus reinforcing the importance of studying emotions as a determining factor in digital sphere behavior and communication practices. In contrast to the literature on the mobilizing capacity of anger (Corduneanu et al., 2019; Groenendyk, 2011; Marcus, 2000; Westen 2007; Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2013), in this study, anger did not lead to increased interaction; rather, it led to less audience participation by being associated with fewer comments or shares. The implicit emotions of sadness and disgust, although they did not show a statistically significant association, were positively associated with a higher number of interactions, reinforcing the idea of a shift toward these negative emotions.

Finally, one of the main findings of this study is the mediating role of reactions between implicit valences and other behaviors, such as commenting or sharing posts made during the campaign by presidential candidates. When there was emotional resonance between implicit valences and both negative and positive reactions (joy-“love” and disgust-“angry”), the probabilities of sharing or commenting on posts increased. These results are relevant because although a greater presence of negative valences in the implicit content of messages was directly associated with less commenting/sharing behavior, the presence of an affiliated reaction (“Angry”) as a mediating variable changes the direction of the association, increasing commenting or sharing actions. This new methodological approach reflects the importance of considering the role of mediating variables between implicit emotions and audience behaviors on social networks. Additionally, it supports the idea of the heuristic role of reactions as a reference point for the attention and reflection of audiences on the content they are consuming (Masullo, 2022).

Thus, the ability of political elites to elicit affiliated emotions can amplify the reach and impact of their messages within digital public opinion, including messages with negative emotions. This phenomenon can be problematic considering the dissemination of hate speech or fake news that alters and distorts democratic debate in the current communicative ecosystem, particularly during moments of crisis, which can be capitalized on by populist expressions questioning institutional legitimacy (Demertzis, 2006; Nguyen, 2019; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017).

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