

**Multistable Political Becomings:  
A Postphenomenological Study of How Social  
Media Shape the Political Experiences of Young  
Brazilians**

by Patricia Ferreira-Alves

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of  
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## CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

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This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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## **Dedictory**

To Maria and Maria, and all the women who walked with me.

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*Com a fúria da beleza do sol!*

*Te vejo no pódio.*

*Emicida*

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## Abstract

In 2018, Brazil experienced a turn to the far-Right, after a few years of political crises. One recurring discussion about this phenomenon was the role of social media in shaping political discussions and individuals' political identifications. This setting motivated this research to ask: *How do social media shape young Brazilians' political becomings?* Political becomings are conceptualised as processes involving the identification with political discourses and the practices which both inform and are informed by these identifications in iterative experiences. The study is primarily informed by postphenomenology, more precisely the mediation theory, which supports the analysis of how social media transform the perception and action part of political becomings. The empirical material is constructed with in-depth interviews with 16 young Brazilians who demonstrate varying levels of political engagement. By focusing on individual experiences, this research attends to a central characteristic of contemporary political processes: the heavy personalisation of political participation, which owes a great deal to the influence of social media. The purpose is two-fold: to contribute to media and political participation studies, demonstrating that postphenomenology can be an addition to the array of theories and methodologies employed in the investigations of human relations with contemporary (and future) media technologies, such as social media; and to further recent discussions on the significance of postphenomenology to the investigation of political processes happening in an increasingly technologically textured world.

This study finds that the highly multistable character of social media contributes to turning political becomings into multistable experiences, allowing individuals to get involved with the political in multiple non-exclusive ways, some more expressive, others more silent, some more public, others more private. Moreover, social media tend to amplify the significance of the individual, who enjoys increased autonomy in the engagement with the political: the individual searching for meanings,

the individual who chooses to engage in political clashes or comfort bubbles, the individual expressing collective identifications and projects, the individual who constructs collective identifications from their private sphere. At the same time, political becomings are experienced as a search for belonging and perceiving oneself as part of a group with a shared understanding of the world, even if this feeling of belonging emerges from private screens. Although, as the result of a phenomenological investigation, these findings cannot be generalised to the Brazilian population, it illuminates some of the complexities involved in political becomings assisting in the understanding of how these experiences might be lived.

Technologies transform our experience of the world and our perceptions  
and interpretations of our world, and we in turn become  
transformed in this process. Transformations are non-neutral.

—Don Ihde, 2009



## 1

**Introduction:****Looking Underneath Stormy Waters**

I deleted [on social media] everyone aligned with the Right. I simply deleted everyone from my family. (Helena, 34 years old, Left)

I did a lot of campaigning [online]. I was afraid of speaking up for the first time because I knew that I was going to face cursing and such; people's spirits were very high. But I knew it was important to position myself [politically]. (Luciana, 30 years old, Right)

These are excerpts from the stories heard during this study.<sup>1</sup> They are voices that transport us to the political turmoil experienced by Brazilians before and after the 2018 general elections, which was the period when this research was proposed. The year 2018 was an intense period for Brazil. The participants in this study refer to social media during this time as true political battlefields. In a biography of 2018, Mário Magalhães (2019), quite dramatically, depicts 2018 as the year which flirted with the apocalypse, with consequences not to be overlooked.<sup>2</sup> During this period, the dichotomy of Left and Right was intensified, and the feeling of political polarisation<sup>3</sup> increased in Brazil, pushing individuals to choose and, not rarely, campaign for or against one of these two poles in dispute (Duque & Smith, 2019; Miguel, 2019a; Soares et al., 2019). Furthermore, as highlighted in the above quotes, much of this polarisation

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<sup>1</sup> These extracts were taken from the interviews conducted during the fieldwork of this research. All names are fictional, as detailed in chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> In *Sobre Lutas e Lágrimas, uma Biografia de 2018* (About Struggles and Tears, a Biography of 2018), Magalhães traces the main events and personalities of the Brazil 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The term *political polarisation* is employed here to refer to *mass affective polarisation*, which is polarisation sensed amongst the public, not parties or elites, in its *affective dimension*, when two opposing camps strongly dislike each other, affecting other social relationships, such as friendships and family (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019).

could be perceived on social media platforms (Chagas et al., 2019; Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018b), spaces where an estimated 66% of the Brazilian population spend on average around 3 hours and 31 minutes per day (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020b).<sup>4</sup> These numbers give an idea of the centrality of social media in Brazilians' lives, as also identified by Juliano Spyer (2017) in an ethnographic investigation of how social media are used by the inhabitants of a small and underdeveloped town in the Northeast of Brazil.

Against this background, this research explores the role of social media in individuals' experiences with political struggles from the perspectives of citizens like Helena and Luciana, quoted in the opening of this chapter. This introduction is divided into five parts. The first engages with discussions about how social media have been impacting political processes in Brazil and elsewhere. Section 1.2 positions this study within the field of postphenomenology (Ihde, 1993a, 1993b, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a), a branch of philosophy of technology, which functions as the main thread connecting discussions on media studies and political participation studies. The third part explains the aims of the study and the research questions it proposes to answer. The fourth section demarcates the philosophical assumptions that support the research questions and this investigation as a whole, offering a preliminary view on postphenomenological tenets and addressing the phenomenological approach to the study of media employed in this dissertation. The chapter ends with the outline of this dissertation.

### **1.1 Social Media and Political Struggles: A Primer**

Social media are intricately engaged with the various dimensions of our lives, including how we become involved with political struggles, as illustrated by the participants'

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<sup>4</sup> Brazil is the third country in time spent on social media, Colombia and Philippines come in second and first respectively. Data from January 2020 (whenever possible, data referring to the time when participants were interviewed, 2019, are preferred in this investigation (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020b).

quotes in the opening of this chapter. This introductory section considers some of the ways in which social media have been discussed as impacting political processes, concentrating on those debates closer to the broad contexts that inspire this investigation.

Studies indicate that the increase of a sense of political polarisation amongst the Brazilian population is due to the rise of (radical) Right-wing discourses, which are pushing the Right to its extreme (Duque & Smith, 2019; Miguel, 2019a; Mussi & Bianchi, 2018; Nicolau, 2020; Rocha, 2019; Soares et al., 2019). For instance, through social network analysis, communication scholars Felipe Benow Soares, Raquel Recuero and Gabriela Zago (2019) conclude that political conversations on Twitter in Brazil during 2018 reveal the existence of an asymmetric political polarisation. The term asymmetric political polarisation derives from the scholars Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts (2018), who employed it to describe “a consistent pattern” showing “a division between the right and the rest of the media ecosystem” during their analysis of the media ecosystem in the US between 2016 and 2017 (p. 73). According to Soares et al. (2019), a similar pattern could be detected in the Brazilian scenario in 2018.

There is also a growing body of research investigating links between social media and the advance of political polarisation globally (Neudert & Marchal, 2019; Woolley & Howard, 2019). A report on this connection in Europe suggests that there are two potential ways in which these platforms could foster political polarisation: (1) their design, which by default offers less diverse information to their users and incentivise “emotionally-charged content”; and (2) manipulation, when the platforms are employed (by individuals, corporations, political actors, nations and other actors) to influence political discourse for economic and political reasons (Neudert & Marchal, 2019, p. 3). The latter has been coined “computational propaganda,” which refers to the “use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute

misleading information over social media networks,” and now constitutes a new field of study in itself (Woolley & Howard, 2019, p. 4).

The Oxford Internet Institute, which has been monitoring computational propaganda across the world since 2012, claims that this political approach has reached (to some degree) virtually all 70 countries observed in 2019’s report (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). In Brazil, the earliest evidence of computational propaganda goes back to 2010 with the use of fake accounts supporting Dilma Rousseff<sup>5</sup> on Orkut, the country’s most-loved social media platform at that time (Gragnani, 2018). The employment of such strategies grew year after year, being present again in the 2014 presidential elections, continuing to 2016 during the calls for Rousseff’s impeachment (Woolley & Howard, 2017), culminating with widespread computational propaganda in the 2018 presidential elections (Campos Mello, 2020; Nicolau, 2020).

In the 2018 Brazilian elections, social media took the place of television as the dominant vehicle utilised by candidates for political campaigning (Duque & Smith, 2019; Evangelista & Fernanda, 2019; Nicolau, 2020; Reis et al., 2020; Vitorino, 2019). In Brazil, political candidates are allocated Free Electoral Broadcast Airtime (FEBA) on television and radio in the months leading to the elections (Duque & Smith, 2019; Nicolau, 2020). The length of time a candidate is allocated depends mostly on their party’s number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies (Nicolau, 2020). Traditionally, candidates with more broadcasting time had the best results in the polls (Duque & Smith, 2019). However, this changed drastically in 2018. The elections were won by Bolsonaro, who had only eight seconds of airtime per day. The candidate with the most time, Alckmin, with five minutes and 32 seconds (42 times more than Bolsonaro), did not even make it to the second round (Duque & Smith, 2019; Nicolau, 2020). By winning the 2018 elections with very limited airtime, Bolsonaro demonstrated the power of social media over traditional means of communication, such as television and

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<sup>5</sup> In the general election of 2010, Dilma Rousseff was elected president of Brazil for the first time.

radio. Prior to 2018, Bolsonaro had established himself as the politician with the greatest influence on social media in Brazil, and by the time the campaign started, the candidate had already 20% of the voting intentions (Nicolau, 2020). In a detailed analysis of the 2018 elections, the political scientist Jairo Nicolau (2020) contends that the extensive use of diverse social media platforms by the candidate and his supporters was one of the pivotal factors that led to Bolsonaro's victory.

Alternatively, social media are also spaces of resistance, occupied by activists who challenge mainstream media and demand various rights, building collective action around a range of social movements and issues (Magallanes-Blanco & Treré, 2019). After the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, local and global movements shook many nations by taking collective action into the digital realm (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Margetts et al., 2016; Melgaço & Monaghan, 2018). A few examples include the Arab Spring (2011, starting in Tunisia and spreading to other five Arab countries), Indignados (Spain, 2011), Occupy Wall Street (the United States, 2011), Black Lives Matter (the United States, 2013 onwards) and Gezi Park (Turkey, 2013) (Melgaço & Monaghan, 2018; Treré, 2019). In Latin America, in 2012, #YoSoy132 (Mexico) “marked the beginning of self-organised revolts, with a new imaginary, a new narrative,” with the use of novel forms of communications in combination with social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, traditionally rejected by former social movements due to being on the “evil side” (Treré & Gutierrez, 2015, pp. 3,807). In Brazil, these revolts began in 2013, with an uprising against the increase in public transport fares in São Paulo, called by the *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Fare Movement) (Antunes, 2013; Mendonça et al., 2019; Singer, 2013). The movement, which became known as June Journeys, gained energy and popular support across the country, sparking several demonstrations throughout June 2013 in hundreds of cities, some of them amongst the largest protests in recent Brazilian history (de Freixo & Pinheiro-Machado, 2019; Singer, 2013, 2014). The protests travelled throughout social media, were multiplied in hundreds of pages, profiles, events and groups (Mendonça et

al., 2019); this fomented more demonstrations on the streets in a “network-streets dynamic” (Treré & Gutierrez, 2015, pp. 3,810).

The broad issues identified above signal some of the ways in which social media are present in political processes. These technologies are sites of power struggles involving economic, cultural and political forces, and are being used for democratic and undemocratic ends, a sound illustration of what Nico Carpentier (2018) calls “the era of the both,” a time of paradoxical movements occurring together, even feeding on each other (p. v). In this epoch, media technologies contribute to the stretching of the good and the bad in human behaviour, as can be observed in the coexistence of (continuously amplified)

media legitimations of war and violence with pacifist messages, celebrations of bigotry with respect for diversity, sealed-off media empires with maximalist participatory media platforms, spirals of silence with practices of voice, symbolic annihilations with the politics of presence, media-induced amnesia with deep-rooted historical awareness, the defense of the status-quo with the loud propagation that another world is possible. (Carpentier, 2018, p. ix)

To look at contemporary digital media technologies is to acknowledge the coexistence of these contradictory movements in the same spaces at the same time.

This section aimed to demonstrate some of the diverse ways in which social media are impacting political processes in Brazil and elsewhere, sometimes facilitating actions that endanger democratic processes and other times providing alternative spaces where citizens can fight inequalities. These perspectives illustrate that social media are not simply one thing but complex technologies that embrace the contradictions inherent to human nature. One way or another, what we can observe is that social media are present in significant ways in current political processes. The next section situates this study and explicates the perspective adopted to investigate the impact of social media in political processes.

## 1.2 Positioning the Research

This dissertation looks underneath the stormy waters described earlier by listening to young Brazilians who demonstrate diverse levels of political engagement to explore how their experiences of becoming involved in political struggles take shape in a context of high social media usage. The main investigation is pursued with the employment of postphenomenology, a phenomenological approach developed from the work of the North American philosopher Don Ihde (1993a, 1993b, 2009) as a philosophy to question human-technology relations, which positions postphenomenology as a branch of philosophy of technology (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a).

Within this field, this investigation engages more specifically with the mediation theory elaborated by the Dutch philosopher of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek (2000/2005, 2011) as an element of postphenomenology. Mediation theory offers a detailed conceptual framework that supports the analysis of how social media transform the perception and action involved in the participants' experiences with political struggles (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). By looking at how individuals interact with political struggles through a postphenomenological lens, this study responds to quests to politicise postphenomenology and demonstrates that this is a valuable framework for examining the impact of social media in current political processes and the ethical dilemmas they elicit (Verbeek, 2020a, 2020b; Warfield, 2021).

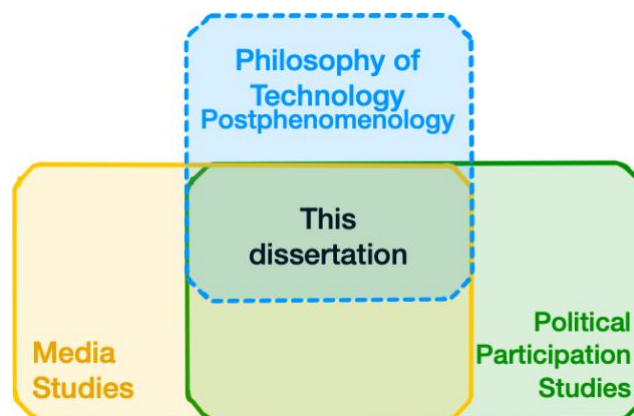
Postphenomenological investigations tend to rely on case studies to explore the roles that technology plays in the relations individuals establish with the world, looking at their influence on certain dimensions of human experience (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b). This dissertation investigates the role of social media on current political processes by looking at the experiences of young Brazilians as a case study. The choice of young Brazilians as a case study for this investigation at this time is especially pertinent, since Brazil has been experiencing periods of an increased sense of mass political affective polarisation in recent years, combined with crescent levels of social

media usage, spaces bombarded with all sorts of information and misinformation (Machado et al., 2019; Margetts et al., 2016; Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018b; Santos et al., 2019).

As observed by postphenomenologists (e.g., Van Den Eede et al., 2017) and media scholars (e.g., Warfield, 2021), postphenomenology has not been commonly used in the study of media, and even less in the investigation of social media. However, as the media scholar Katie Warfield (2021) remarks, postphenomenology can assist the study of social media by offering “embodied and intimate narratives of becoming alongside technologies—the manner in which technological interfaces both shape, and are shaped by, individual needs and broader social discourses” (p. 192). Through a postphenomenological analysis, we can observe how social media are impacting the processes through which the participants in this study are becoming politically engaged, as described in their narratives of experiences with political struggles and social media.

### Figure 1.1

*Position of this Dissertation in an Intersection of Fields*



*Note.* Source: The author.

The aforementioned choices position this investigation in an intersection of philosophy of technology, media studies and political participation studies (*Figure 1.1*). The postphenomenological vocabulary is elaborated upon throughout this chapter and



further expanded in Chapter 2. Readers unfamiliar with this philosophical approach are invited to engage with new ways of seeing old conceptions. Those coming from a postphenomenological background are encouraged to contemplate ways of expanding postphenomenology into media and political studies, to which this study aims to contribute. The next section considers the aims of the study, and the research questions it proposes to answer, followed by the demarcation of the philosophical assumptions that support the research questions and this investigation as a whole.

### **1.3 Aims and Research Questions**

This study is interested in the processes through which individuals constitute themselves as political subjects, organising their interpretations of society and positioning themselves in political struggles (Holland et al., 2018; Marques & Mendonça, 2018). In this dissertation, these experiences are termed *political becomings*.

The notion of political becomings subscribes to the understanding that individuals constitute themselves as political subjects through their participation in political activities, when they become aware of being part of a society, acting to transform it in diverse ways with others who share similar values (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). In the words of the anthropologists Dorothy Holland, Charles Price and William H. Westermeyer (2018), “the work of political becoming is to engage in political practice, to make personally meaningful the cultural genres of the politics of the time, to self-author” (p. 288). Through these experiences, individuals integrate political views into their lives, developing a sense of their position in current political struggles (Holland et al., 2018). Hence, political becomings involve the processes through which individuals are constituted into specific political subjects through their engagement with the political discourses available to them (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). This conception is elaborated in Chapter 3 through two

intertwined dimensions: (1) political identifications, derived primarily from the work of the political theorists Ernesto Laclau (1994) and Chantal Mouffe (2005, 1992/2013b); and (2) political participation, seen as a continuum comprehending diverse levels and forms of engagement with political struggles (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010). The examination of political participation pays particular attention to how social media are transforming these experiences, engaging with issues such as the personalisation of political processes (e. g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Lewis, 2018; Milan, 2015) and Zizi Papacharissi's (2010) conception of the private sphere. Political becomings, thus, are seen as experiences involving processes of political identification and political participation in an iterative process (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018).

The employment of postphenomenology to study human-technology relations directs the investigation to “how, through these relations, humans and technologies become what they are” (Gertz, 2018, p. 45). Hence, the focus lies on the relations between individuals, social media and political becomings and the meanings these three elements acquire in this encounter (Gertz, 2018; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a; Verbeek, 2000/2005). More specifically, by employing mediation theory, this research explores how social media transform the perception and action dimensions involved in experiences of political becomings (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). *Mediation of perception* refers to how the world is made present for humans, while *mediation of action* is about how individuals become present in the world (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Therefore, this dissertation investigates how social media transform the perception of political struggles and how individuals act to support or challenge political projects, becoming transformed in this process (Verbeek, 2020b). From a postphenomenological standpoint, technologies, in this case, social media, are also transformed through these same relations, acquiring diverse meanings in the participants' experiences with the political.

### **1.3.1 Research Aims**

The primary aim of this study is to explore how the experiences of political becomings take shape under contemporary media settings, utilising the experiences of young Brazilians as a case study. By focusing on how social media transform perception and action, this investigation draws philosophical analyses about the impact of these technologies in current political processes (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011, 2020a, 2020b).

As discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter (and expanded in Chapter 4), there are several components that make the Brazil of 2019 a special moment and place to conduct this investigation. In 2019, Brazilians had just emerged from a year of intense political activity, with reports indicating that social media had been part of much of the political processes in the country (Chagas et al., 2019; Duque & Smith, 2019; Miguel, 2019a; Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018b; Soares et al., 2019). In recent years, Brazil has been experiencing increased affective political polarisation, “the extent to which people on one side of a political divide dislike people on the other” (Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019, para. 2), which pushes citizens to choose sides, much of which happens on social media (Chagas et al., 2019; Duque & Smith, 2019; Miguel, 2019a; Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018b; Soares et al., 2019). Additionally, these platforms have been extensively used for computational propaganda (particularly in 2018, during the elections) and political activism in the country (Campos Mello, 2020; Mendonça et al., 2019; Nicolau, 2020).

This investigation is pursued through the analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Della Porta, 2014) conducted with 16 Brazilian citizens aged 18 to 34 years old<sup>6</sup> performed between April and October 2019 across multiple cities in Brazil. The interviews are conducted following a non-media centric attitude, with emphasis on the larger experience of political becomings, examining the interconnection of online and offline moments

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<sup>6</sup> The choice for this extended notion of youth is detailed in chapter 5.

(Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013). Considering the context of affective political polarisation, the recruitment of participants aimed for a balance of citizens who identify with both the Left and Right political camps in dispute during the 2018 elections (Duque & Smith, 2019; Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019; Miguel, 2019a; Soares et al., 2019). Moreover, the citizens selected for the research come from different backgrounds, small and big cities in different regions in Brazil, comprising a diverse pool of participants where the phenomenon of political becomings and their interconnection with social media usage can be understood from multiple perspectives (Ihde, 2012; Vagle, 2014/2018).

Deriving from a postphenomenological standpoint, the main aims of this research are:

1. **To provide** valuable descriptions of the relations the participants in this study establish with social media, concerning their political becomings (Rosenberger, 2021). These descriptions concentrate on the multiple ways in which social media transform processes of political becomings and political subjects by shaping the perception and action involved in these experiences (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). This aim is pursued by employing Verbeek's (2000/2005, 2011) mediation theory, which is an element of postphenomenology (Ihde, 1990, 1993b, 2009).
2. **To theorise** how micropolitical processes (from individuals' perspectives) are being transformed through the mediation of social media, bringing a postphenomenological vocabulary into the encounter of media and political participation studies. Through this philosophical analysis, this study aims to engage in debates regarding the impact of social media in political processes and the ethical dilemmas they elicit, contributing to current discussions about citizenship in the digital society (Verbeek, 2020a, 2020b).

3. **To explore** how postphenomenology can be employed to examine the significance of media technologies in political processes, adding to the scholarly production on postphenomenology and media studies (Gertz, 2018, 2019; Nelson, 2018, 2020; Van Den Eede et al., 2017; Verbeek, 2020a, 2020b; Warfield, 2021).
4. **To contribute** to media studies, demonstrating that postphenomenology can be an addition to the array of theories and methodologies employed in the investigations of human relations with contemporary (and future) media technologies, such as social media (Van Den Eede et al., 2017; Warfield, 2021).

Next, the specific research questions employed to achieve these aims are discussed.

### ***1.3.2 Research Questions***

This study questions our existence in a digitally textured world (Ihde, 1990), concentrating on how social media help to organise experiences with the political for young individuals in Brazil (Verbeek, 2020b). Accordingly, this research's main research question (RQ) is:

*How do social media shape young Brazilians' political becomings?*

The following sub research questions (SRQs) provide more focused perspectives to the answering of the central question:

**SRQ 1.** *How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?*

The answer to this question is pursued through the analysis of the lived experiences (van Manen, 2016) of political becomings as narrated by the participants in this study (Holland et al., 2018; Marques & Mendonça, 2018). These experiences encompass

overall involvements with political struggles, from when participants first recall becoming acquainted with political discourses and how they became invested in political participation practices. The interviews are centred around individuals' trajectories with political struggles, aiming to explore how they become involved with these processes and engage in political practices (Holland et al., 2018), paying attention to where and when social media appear in these experiences (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013).

**SRQ 2.** *How do social media transform the perception and action involved in the political becomings of young Brazilians and are transformed in these processes?*

With this research question the analysis concentrates on how social media transform perception and action in the participants' experiences with political struggles (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). This question directs the investigation to the analysis of how individuals interact with political projects through participation (Holland et al., 2018; Marques & Mendonça, 2018). Political participation is conceived as a continuum, encompassing four stages (access, connection, expression and action) (Dennis, 2019) that are analysed through the dimensions of the mediation of perception and action (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Simultaneously, social media acquire specific meanings that are transformed through the experience of these technologies.

The next section addresses postphenomenology as the philosophical foundation for this study, and from which the research questions are derived.

#### **1.4 Philosophical Threads: Lived Experiences in a Technological Textured World**

Postphenomenology can be seen as a continuation of phenomenology (Wellner, 2020c). In phenomenology, the philosophical analysis originates from questions about how humans experience the world (van Manen, 2016). In postphenomenology

however, the primary focus is on how these experiences are mediated by technologies, which organise our relations with the world (Ihde, 1993b; Verbeek, 2020b). As a philosophy of human-technology relations, postphenomenology offers valuable tools for analysing experiences lived in and through social media, shedding light on the transparent (digital) threads which permeate a significant part of our days (Gertz, 2019; Irwin, 2016; Nelson, 2018, 2020; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a; Van Den Eede et al., 2017; Verbeek, 2020a).

Acknowledging the irrevocable presence of social media in current socio-political (and subjective) processes (Caballero & Gravante, 2018; Dennis, 2019; Magallanes-Blanco & Treré, 2019; Markham, 2020; Melgaço & Monaghan, 2018; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2019; Verbeek, 2020a, 2020b), this investigation delves into individuals' experiences of political becomings to explore how these technologies are entangled in such involvements. The choice to focus on individual experiences follows a belief that social change "is the result of transformation only visible in the everyday actions of millions of people" (Caballero & Gravante, 2018, p. 22). Thus, by digging into micropolitical processes, meaning the everyday experiences that contribute to the formation of individuals' political preferences and identifications (Dennis, 2019), this dissertation aims to contribute to the discussions of how social media are transforming political participation. As argued in the next sections and throughout this whole dissertation, postphenomenology is well suited for this objective as it can offer intimate descriptions of the relations between humans and technologies (Warfield, 2021).

In the next Section 1.4.1, a brief introduction to phenomenology contemplates core assumptions that not only inform this study but also constitute the grounds on which Ihde (1993b) subsequently advances postphenomenology as a philosophy of technology. This more evolved positioning is then discussed in Section 1.4.2.

### **1.4.1 Phenomenology: Questioning Human-World Relations**

This section attends to a few phenomenological conceptions pertinent to this study and to the comprehension of discussions advanced in postphenomenology later in this chapter and Chapter 2. The aim is to introduce some of the phenomenological notions employed throughout this dissertation without the ambition of a comprehensive examination of classical phenomenology, as the primary philosophy employed in this study is postphenomenology and its particular interpretation of phenomenology and technologies.

Phenomenology refers not to *one* philosophy but to various philosophies explored in varied and divergent directions by thinkers worldwide wishing to understand the relations between humans and the world (Glendinning, 2007; Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2016). In turn, these philosophies inform a multiplicity of methodologies, conceiving phenomena and how to study them in diverse ways (Soule & Freeman, 2019; van Manen, 2016). Phenomenological research, as Mark Vagle (2014/2018) observes, “is in a constant state of becoming” (p. 11). As an illustration of this diversity, Max van Manen (2016) identifies and explores more than thirty “phenomenologies and phenomenologists that are originary in their thinking” with varied methods of inquiry and interests (p. 24).

Classical phenomenology was proposed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1901/2001) as a critique of the dehumanised positivist approach to sciences, directly opposing the “mind-body/world dualism that dominated the Western thought” (Vagle, 2014/2018, p. 7) with the purpose to re-establish human experience as the grounds of science (Glendinning, 2007). The central argument is that the world should be investigated in terms of our relations with it, as “humans cannot be conceived apart from their relations to the world, and the world cannot be conceived apart from people’s relations to it” (Verbeek, 2001, p. 120). Phenomenology aims to move away from abstractions directing knowledge to the concreteness of everyday life. To accomplish this new way of producing knowledge, one needs to turn “to the things



themselves,” which within phenomenology are phenomena, or the lived experience of the world (Husserl, 1901/2001, p. 178).

A central contribution of phenomenology is the concept of *intentionality*, which reflects the understanding that it is impossible to have a detached view of the world; phenomena are always lived from some perspective, a position taken towards the object (Husserl, 1901/2001; van Manen, 2016). The world is known through our *consciousness* of it, as “in perception something is perceived, in imagination, something imagined, in a statement something stated, in love something loved, in hate hated, in desire desired etc.” (Husserl, 1901/2001, p. 95). The notion of intentionality reveals that everything we do, think or feel is always directed towards the world, through human-world relations (Husserl, 1901/2001; van Manen, 2016). The term intentionality should not be confused with intentions, as in purpose or what one plans to do (Valentine et al., 2018); it signifies “this active relationship, in which we experience the things and events of our world as endowed with meaning” (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p. 49). Intentionality is about the connection between humans, ideas, places, technology, phenomena, and how meanings appear in such connections (Dahlberg et al., 2011). It is in these connections that phenomenologists are interested.

In phenomenology, attention is given not to the *what* but to “the ‘experience’ of the what” (van Manen, 2016, p. 91, emphasis in original). These experiences can be with other humans, things, such as technology, information or feelings. Thus, in researching social media, this investigation focuses not so much on *what* these technologies are but on *how* individuals experience them. Likewise, what matters most in phenomenological studies are not individuals, but the phenomena and how they manifest, which are investigated through lived experiences (Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2003, 2016).

The lived experience, also referred to as *lifeworld*, “is the starting point and the end point of phenomenological research” (van Manen, 2016, p. 36). In phenomenology, lived experience is characterised by the *natural attitude*, in reference to the way we

experience the world immersed in it, without thinking about it or analysing it: “in the natural attitude we do not critically reflect on our immediate action and response to the world, we just do it, we just *are*” (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p. 33, emphasis in original). For example, when talking to friends or family, one is often not analysing their own tone of voice or what their body is doing; one simply engages in a conversation, not paying close attention to the mechanics of their body (van Manen, 2003). However, if the situation changes to one of high exposure, such as a panel discussion at a conference or being interviewed live on television, the individual becomes aware of a public, of being watched, and begins to notice what would otherwise be “taken for granted,” like the tone of voice or body gestures (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974, p. 4). After a while, the audience is forgotten, and the person returns to their natural attitude to the world (van Manen, 2003). Thereby, the lived experience can only be apprehended retrospectively, moving from a natural to a phenomenological attitude, which opens space to question the obvious, in a reflection about its meanings (Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2016).

The human relationship with the world and concepts such as intentionality are also present in postphenomenology, but these are interpreted in a very specific way, as addressed in the section that follows.

#### **1.4.2 Postphenomenology: Human-Technology Relations**

This section introduces postphenomenology as a philosophy of technology developed from the work of Don Ihde (1990, 1993a, 1993b, 2009, 2012). Postphenomenology stems from classical phenomenology, employing terms such as intentionality and lived experiences, addressed in the last section, but always explicitly considering the role of technologies in human-world relations. In postphenomenology intentionality is reconceptualised from human-world relations to human-technology-world relations, wherein human access to the world is often indirect, mediated by technologies (Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Technologies are defined very broadly as concrete components that are part of a set of practices through “which humans may

make [use] of these components” (Ihde, 1993a, p. 46). From this perspective, the notion of technologies includes things like clothing, furniture and electronic devices present in our everyday lives, transforming our encounters with the world.

Postphenomenology builds on interpretations of the works of classical phenomenology philosophers, particularly Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, who have both advanced the understanding of human relations with technologies. The contribution of these philosophers is the foundation of postphenomenology and central to some of the main concepts developed by Ihde’s (1990), such as transparency and embodiment relations, discussed in Chapter 2. Hence, The *post* in postphenomenology<sup>7</sup> does not signal a break with phenomenology but a next step, “more likely a continuation and further development” (Wellner, 2020c, p. 80). Conceptions advanced in postphenomenology permeate this dissertation as a whole and are further extended in Chapter 2, dedicated entirely to the explanation of mediation theory, which is the central postphenomenological element employed to answer the questions posed.

Scholars engaged with postphenomenology have been taking varied routes in the pursuit of making visible the many ways in which technologies are intertwined in our lives, shaping experiences, oftentimes being so blended in our routines that they go unnoticed (Ihde, 1990, 1993b; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a; Van Den Eede et al., 2017). However, two main characteristics are shared: (1) the investigation of how technologies “help to shape relations between human beings and the world” and (2) a combination of “philosophical analysis with empirical investigation” (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a, p. 9). The starting point of postphenomenological analysis is *technologies* as experienced in everyday life (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Thus, as a philosophy of technology, postphenomenology “is in a sense a philosophy ‘from’ technology” (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a, p. 10, emphasis in

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<sup>7</sup> Previously, Ihde had labelled this way of doing phenomenology as “nonfoundational phenomenology”, but in 1993 the author renamed it to postphenomenology, a term which is now well established in academia (Ihde, 2012, p. xv).

original). These characteristics make postphenomenology particularly appropriate for studies aiming to unveil the impacts of social media in everyday experiences.

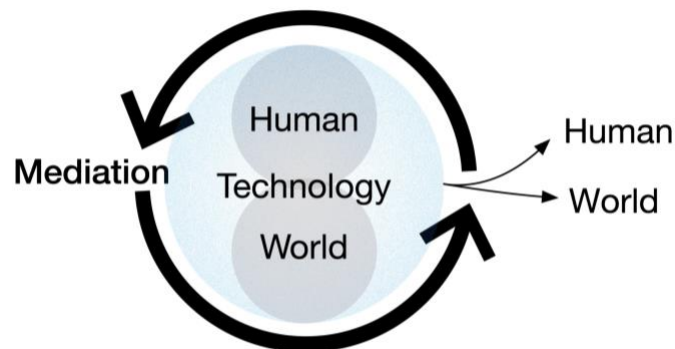
Postphenomenology originates from Ihde's (1993a, 2009, 2010) critical engagement with classical phenomenology and the integration of North American pragmatism, which adds to the philosophical analysis an emphasis on practices as opposed to representation. One characteristic of classical phenomenological views on technology is an emphasis on "the historical and transcendental conditions that made modern technology possible" with a disregard for "the real changes accompanying the development culture" (Achterhuis, 2001, p. 3), leading to more abstract discussions (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Such views have been challenged and expanded by philosophers of technology in the empirical turn taken place notably in the United States around the 1980s (Achterhuis, 2001). This generation of thinkers, in which Ihde is included, proposes new directions to the ideas of the classical philosophers channelling the attention to concrete experiences of technology (Achterhuis, 2001). Instead of looking to the past, and questioning what kind of world made technologies possible, postphenomenology turns to human experiences and asks: what form of the world is made possible by technologies (Verbeek, 2001)? Postphenomenology "finds a way to probe and analyze the role of technologies in social, personal, and cultural life that it undertakes by concrete—empirical—studies of technologies in the plural" (Ihde, 2009, p. 23). This kind of questioning allows us to look at concrete experiences and explore how social media are assisting in the creation of particular forms of engaging with political processes.

In postphenomenology, the relationship between humans and technology is one of a mutual constitution (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). This interrelational ontology is inherited from both pragmatism and phenomenology (Ihde, 2009, 2016). Ontology is concerned with the study of being, asking questions such as: "what it is to be" (Vagle, 2014/2018, p. 8). Thereby, from a postphenomenological standpoint, the being of things and humans is always understood in their relations (Ihde, 2009, 2016; Ihde &

Malafouris, 2019). There is not a “pre-given subject in a pre-given world of objects, with a mediating entity between them” (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a, p. 12). Subjects and objects are constituted through the relations they find themselves in. Thus, technological mediation is not something that comes between humans and the world, but “the mutual constitution of subject and object” in their relations (*Figure 1.2*) (Verbeek, 2000/2005, p. 130). In the words of the postphenomenologist Robert Rosenberger (2021), “technologies enable new ways to perceive the world, and new ways to perform action upon it. And, according to postphenomenology, through this mediation, technologies give new shape to who users are and what the world itself can be” (p. 4).

**Figure 1.2**

*Technological Mediation: Co-constitution of Humans and World*



*Note.* Adapted from Verbeek (2000/2005) and Ihde (2009).

The co-constitution involved in technological mediation can be observed in Verbeek’s (2011) analysis of the *FoodPhone*,<sup>8</sup> a phone application that offers information on calorie consumption based on pictures of meals sent by users. The relation with this technology makes possible the existence of both *user* and *FoodPhone*, and changes how these users interpret their food, transforming their eating practices

<sup>8</sup> Current information about FoodPhone can be found at: <https://www.foodphone.biz/>. Please note that the technology might have undergone changes since Verbeek’s (2011) analysis.

and also impacting their social relations around meals, as they are required to send pictures of every meal consumed (Van Den Eede, 2017; Verbeek, 2011). User, *FoodPhone*, and the world as experienced by these users are mutually constituted in the relations among them, through the technological mediation (Van Den Eede, 2017; Verbeek, 2011). To the same extent, postphenomenology assists this investigation in looking for the ways in which social media transform how participants in this study engage with political struggles and are constituted into specific political subjects through the mediation process.

#### **1.4.2.1 Multistability: Against Technological Determinisms**

A central aspect of postphenomenology is that it does not view the impact technologies have on human actions in a deterministic light, as deciding our actions for us. Instead, technologies are seen as having some “inclinations,” which make “certain actions easier than not” (Ihde, 2017, p. xii). Ihde (1990) invites us to reflect on how three different technologies, a dip ink pen, a typewriter and a word processor, affect one’s mode of writing, including editing, speed of composition and influence on style. With the dip ink pen, writing can be slower than one’s thoughts and more ludic; the typewriter adds more speed to the experience, but editing is still difficult; finally, the computer allows for a plethora of options not feasible with the two analogic means (Ihde, 1990). Each experience has different characteristics. However, “in none of these variants does the technology ‘determine’ the style or the type of composition but it does ‘incline’ toward some possibilities simply by virtue of which part of the writing experience is enhanced and which made difficult” (Ihde, 1990, p. 142, emphasis in original). Technologies therefore organise our relationship with the world, simultaneously amplifying and constraining aspects of our experiences, inviting or inhibiting certain actions. They do not determine human behaviour however; humans and technologies are both agents in the experiences in which they are involved (Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger & Verbeek,

2015a). This idea supports this research in questioning how social media amplify and constrain, invite and inhibit aspects involved in political becomings.

One of the key concepts in postphenomenology is multistability, which is the understanding that technologies are open to multiple meanings found in the specific experiences individuals develop with them (Ihde, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). This is to say that “technology never means only one thing, never has only one usage, never is limited to developing along only one trajectory, and never reduces to the plans intended by its designer” (Rosenberger, 2021, p. 43). When technologies are used by humans, varied and unintended meanings can emerge. Ihde (1999) reminds us that the typewriter and the telephone were both designed to assist persons with visual and hearing deficiencies, respectively, but were soon transformed into office tools and widely used communications devices. Each of these meaningful ways of interacting with technologies constitutes a stability or variation (Ihde, 2009).

At the same time, the notion of multistability implies that the many uses of the technology are restricted by the materiality of the artifact:<sup>9</sup> you could not use a typewriter to hear someone from a distance, for example (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Thus, multistability does not mean infinite stabilities, only certain ways of interacting with a given technology “prove experientially stable” (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a, p. 26). Moving to a more contemporary example, in a postphenomenological inquiry on cell phones, Galit Wellner (2016) demonstrates how these devices can be customised to serve different purposes, according to users’ “specific tastes and needs” (p. 80), from a music player, camera, map, to a paying device, resulting in a “drastic multistability” (p. 56). By the same token, although social media have not been designed as an instrument for political participation, the technology has been widely appropriated for such aims (Barassi, 2018; Bennett &

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<sup>9</sup> Although the word *artifact* is often written in Australian English as *artefact*, in this dissertation the spelling *artifact* is preferred, due to being the version adopted in the postphenomenological texts that this dissertation engages with, such as in Verbeek (2000/2005, 2011).

Segerberg, 2013; Dennis, 2019; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015; Theocharis & Deth, 2018; Treré, 2019). The use of social media for political participation is also multistable, as observed in the experiences of the participants in this study. These individuals explore different aspects of social media in their political involvements.

A similar view to the postphenomenological concept of technological multistability is articulated by Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) in their ethnographic investigation of the internet in Trinidad. The authors argue that in order to understand the relations people build with “new media,” it is necessary to “disaggregate’ the Internet”, abandoning the idea of a “monolithic medium” to look at the diversity of practices and technologies individuals assemble to make “*their* Internet” (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 14, emphasis in original). For the authors, media should be “understood in terms of their particular manifestations as material culture” (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 15).

Another commonality that Miller and Slater’s study shares with postphenomenology is the idea of co-constitution of subject and object:

we do not start from two premises, that is, the internet on the one hand and Trinidad on the other. . . . both the Internet and an understanding of what it means to feel Trinidadian [...] are seen as the conclusion of the processes we study. (p. 8)

These processes are the relations between Trinidadians and the internet. Similarly, the idea of media as acquiring contextualised meanings is found in the interpretations of media as practice, which refers to investigations of what people do “in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts” (Couldry, 2012, Ch. 2, “The background”, para. 5). Within this framework, media are seen as “a heterogenous bundle of practices for acting in the world,” and it is only through the examination of the actual uses of media that it is possible to distinguish the many possible meanings they acquire in everyday life (Couldry, 2012, Ch. 1, “A toolkit”, para. 2). Likewise, informed by Couldry (2012), among others, the media scholar Emiliano Treré (2019) contends that social movements and “communication technologies are co-constitutive”



(p. 204). In the analysis of current political activism, the author concludes that media technologies “are not mere tools to fulfil predetermined goals, but are deeply involved in the determination, development, and diffusion of these goals” (Treré, 2019, p. 204). These selected views demonstrate that the idea of co-constitution, central to postphenomenology, is articulated in varied understandings of media and their impact on human experiences.

From these perspectives, social media are not *one thing*, but can have diverse meanings to different people in varied contexts, and also have diverse meanings to the same user depending on the context or goal (Ihde, 1999; Rosenberger, 2014; Wellner, 2020b). According to Ihde (1990), “communications technologies are as powerful as they are because of the multiple set of dimensions they incarnate” (p. 155). This power of holding multiple dimensions allows for digital media technologies, such as social media, to be present and significant in various aspects of one’s routine, as part of the texture of everyday life, shaping how humans perceive and act in the world (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011).

The metaphor of technological texture is commonly employed in postphenomenological studies to denote how technologies are intertwined in human existence (Ihde, 1990). Derived from the Latin *textura*, which means weave (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), the notion of texture conveys the idea of “a pattern and feeling that envelops everyday life and experience” (Irwin, 2016, p. 7). The metaphor of technological texture is present throughout this dissertation, signifying our entanglement with technologies, which transform “the rhythms and spaces of daily life” in significant ways, as a texture accompanying our experiences (Ihde, 1990, p. 1).

This section has introduced postphenomenology and some of its core assumptions and views on technologies. A central notion in postphenomenology, and in this dissertation, is interrelational ontology, the understanding that humans, technologies and the world are co-constituted in their relations (Ihde, 2009, 2016; Ihde & Malafouris, 2019; Verbeek, 2000/2005). From this perspective, political struggles

acquire specific meanings through the relations participants in this study establish with them, which are often mediated by social media. These individuals are also transformed into specific political subjects through the mediation process. Additionally, the conception of multistability allows for the understanding of social media as acquiring diverse meanings in the relations participants establish with them. By employing these understandings to the study of how political participation is transformed by social media technologies, this thesis demonstrates that postphenomenology can be of great value to the investigation of political issues, contributing to debates over the lack of political and contextual awareness of this philosophical strand (e.g. Kaplan, 2009; Scharff, 2020; Verbeek, 2020b). The next section considers the study of media through a phenomenological lens, addressing the de-centred approach exercised in this research.

### ***1.4.3 Phenomenology and Media Studies***

This section contemplates some ways in which media studies have engaged with phenomenological inspirations, illuminating how social media are considered in this investigation. This section also deals with the de-centred approach employed in the study of how social media impacts micropolitical processes.

Among media scholars, varied phenomenological perspectives have been mobilised to investigate how media mediate human experience with the world and with other individuals (Markham & Rodgers, 2017). Common to these views is the acknowledgement that, as embedded in everyday life, media should be examined as part of the broader context where they are inserted, as a way to grasp their significance in the social world (Couldry, 2012; Couldry et al., 2007; Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013).

The movement of placing media amongst other experiences is what Shaun Moores (2018) identifies as “non-media-centric media studies”, where “*everyday actions and interactions are centred* so that media, with their special characteristics

and affordances, can be investigated in this quotidian context” (p. x, emphasis in original). Non-media-centric approaches shift the focus from the media as objects, texts, and perception tools to the mediated experience itself and ask questions such as: “*what are people doing that is related to media?*” (Couldry, 2012, chapter 2, para. 6, emphasis in original). This de-centred analytical framework pays “sufficient attention to the particularities of media” while preventing researchers from isolating media from the wide circumstances where individuals are situated (Morley, 2007, p. 1). Moreover, it allows for the appreciation of “the intricate ways in which media use is stitched into the fabric of people’s daily routines and thoroughly entangled there” (Moore, 2018, pp. 6-7). This view of media as entangled in the fabric of peoples’ routines brings us back to Ihde’s (1990) account of technology as textures permeating human lives. Social media are a fine example of media technologies highly embedded in daily lives, like digital threads connecting us to the world (Irwin, 2016; van Dijck, 2013). By employing this non-media-centric approach, this investigation looks firstly at the experiences of political becomings, to then contemplate the significance of social media in these processes.

In this research, social media are broadly defined as internet-based applications that facilitate or enhance “*human networks—webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value*” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 11, emphasis in original). These platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and many others, are automated technologies that shape human connections with other humans, information, businesses and political issues (van Dijck, 2013). Such technologies exist within an ecosystem (van Dijck, 2013), where one platform connects, informs and is informed by the others (Miller et al., 2016). Thus, whereas specific platforms are important, “since these are the primary units through which we think about and use social media” (Miller et al., 2016, p. 6), how individuals use these technologies is much more fluid. For this reason, this research subscribes to the idea that investigations of experiences around social media call for an approach that moves away from the focus on specific platforms,

taking into consideration the actual behaviours of individuals in their routines with these technologies (Madianou, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Miller et al., 2016; Miller & Slater, 2000; Treré, 2019). As reported by the anthropologist Daniel Miller and colleagues (2016) after a study on the uses of social media in nine countries (Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Trinidad and Turkey), as these applications become ever more integrated and connected, people tend to care less about specific platforms:

At the moment we typically discuss social media in terms of QQ or Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Yet until recently instant messaging would also have been understood in terms of platforms such as AIM, MSN or BBM. Today, however, a text message may equally come through WhatsApp, WeChat, the smartphone's own messaging facility, a private Facebook message or an app such as Viber. People are becoming increasingly unconcerned as to which this is. . . . One clear conclusion of this project is that platforms matter much less than we once thought. (pp. 207-208)

The researchers concluded that there is a trend, which may persist, where content transcends "the platform by which it is communicated" (Miller et al., 2016, pp. 207-208). This finding adds to the argument in support of research on social media with a focus on experiences rather than on platforms. To restrict research to a given platform might induce a very limited view of reality, preventing the investigation from accessing the actual significance of these technologies for social (and political) processes.

Moreover, by taking this approach the research's discussions can potentially be more sustainable, once new social media platforms continue to emerge while others go extinct very rapidly (Miller et al., 2016).

This section has contemplated how social media are considered in this investigation. By engaging with a non-media-centric perspective, the experiences of political becomings are brought to the forefront in order to evaluate the significance of social media in these experiences. Moreover, the focus of the study is on the experience of social media, not limiting the investigation to specific platforms, generating an analysis that is closer to participants' experiences in the real world once these social

media platforms are highly interconnected in their uses. The next section provides an overview of the dissertation outline.

### **1.5 Outline of the Dissertation**

After the introduction of postphenomenology presented in this chapter, *chapter 2* continues to build the postphenomenological foundation mobilised in the analysis of how social media transform political becomings (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011, 2020b). The main theoretical instrument employed in this dissertation is the mediation theory as synthesised by Verbeek (2000/2005, 2011), which offers a framework to explore how technologies transform human experiences through the mediation of perception and action. The mediation of perception is about how the world becomes present to us, constituted in specific ways through the amplification and reduction of aspects of reality (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). The mediation of action is related to the ways in which technologies shape how we become present in the world by inviting and inhibiting certain actions (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). This chapter also contemplates personalization, a chief characteristic of interactions on social media; this is attained through the work of human and technologies and can be observed in the action and perception dimensions of the technological mediation (van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2008, 2011). In the next chapter these concepts and philosophical discussions are brought into the encounter of current discussions of political participation processes and social media.

*Chapter 3* elaborates on the notion of political becomings, which are the experiences on which this dissertation focuses. This conception is developed as processes involving two interconnected dimensions: political identifications and political participation (Dennis, 2019; Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mendonça, 2017; Mouffe, 1992, 1992/2013b). Political participation is viewed as a continuum involving four stages: access, connection, expression and action, which are revised by employing the mediation

theory, discussed in Chapter 2, to enrich the discussions about how social media impact current political processes from the perspectives of the mediation of perception and action. The heavy personalisation of communication practices, a culture of visibility and the dislocation of the political from public to private spheres are central elements in this discussion (Bakardjieva, 2004; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Lewis, 2018, 2020; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010).

Postphenomenological investigations often employ case studies to examine how technologies impact human experiences. This research studies the role of social media on political becomings through the lived experiences of young Brazilians. *Chapter 4* delves into the particularities of the case study upon which this study is constructed, by elaborating on some of the broad characteristics of Brazil and recent political struggles that have informed the political becomings of the participants listened to as part of this investigation. Refraining from an ambitious extensive socio-political analysis (which is outside of the scope of this investigation), this chapter focuses on elements associated with the recent political crises in Brazil (between 2013 and 2018) and the significance of social media in this particular time and space (Kingstone & Power, 2017b; Mendonça et al., 2019; Rocha, 2021; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). The aim is to elaborate on the larger contexts in which the participants in this study live their political becomings and provide the reader with sufficient information to support the comprehension of the analysis of the empirical material performed in Chapters 6 and 7. The background addressed in this chapter informs the methodological discussions advanced in Chapter 5.

*Chapter 5* describes the methodological steps taken as part of this investigation. The first part discusses postphenomenology from a methodological standpoint, elaborating the main characteristics of postphenomenological studies and how they are translated into this research. This study is framed as an exercise of postphenomenology of practice, as suggested by Adams and Turville (2018). In addition, other phenomenological approaches support the investigation, in particular, van Manen's

(2016) lived experience descriptions. Political becomings are examined through the experiences of 16 participants who comprise a diverse group coming from diverse different cities, socioeconomic backgrounds and political identifications. The empirical data is constructed (Aagaard, 2015, 2018; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Brinkmann, 2012, 2014; Della Porta, 2014; Richards, 2015) by employing semi-structured interviews to elicit lived experiences descriptions (van Manen, 2016) about the role of social media on political becomings. The analysis of the empirical material observes hermeneutic rules (Ihde, 2012) and thematic analysis (van Manen, 2016). The empirical material is also explored through the design of Maps of Political Becomings, which provide a visual representation of the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The maps facilitate the analyses of how and when social media appear in the participants' political becomings and also assist the visualisation of the many interconnections present in the experiences. The last section of this chapter contemplates ethical issues and the risks posed to participants, research and the researcher.

*Chapter 6* addresses the sub research question 1: *How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?* By looking at these experiences from a non-media centric perspective (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013), focusing on the broad experiences of political becomings this chapter demonstrates the significance of personal relations forged outside social media in how participants begin their involvement with political struggles (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005). This finding is particularly interesting, once it places social media as pieces of a mosaic of experiences that bring participants to become invested in certain political views. Political becomings, thus, involve hybrid experiences where online and offline, public and private are intertwined in the participants' lives. Moreover, the second part of this chapter (section 6.2) discusses the variations in participants' modes of participation. Due to social media's highly multistable character (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017), citizens can easily experience diverse

modes of participation by changing how they use these technologies. The findings and discussions in this chapter build the foundation for Chapter 7.

*Chapter 7* focuses on the SQR 2: *How do social media transform the perception and action involved in the political becomings of young Brazilians?* Section 7.1 addresses how social media mediate the perception of political struggles by, in conjunction with individuals, constituting specific worlds for them (Verbeek, 2000/2005). The discussions are centred around issues of personalisation and privatisation of the access to the political (Papacharissi, 2010; Pybus, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018), which are amplified by human and technologies, while the technological mediation grows in transparency (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011). Section 7.2 concentrates on the mediation of action, that is, how individuals become present to the world (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011), and political struggles. In the mediation of action, the focus is on what actions social media invite and inhibit (Verbeek, 2011). The multistable character of social media fosters various, and sometimes opposing, experiences with the political. At times participants experience a hyper-personalisation of political engagement, choosing to encounter only similar political views. Others, engage in agonistic and antagonist arenas (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013), where political debates motivate participants to build strong arguments and refine their political identifications. This chapter demonstrates that not only social media are highly multistable, but so are political becomings lived in and through these technologies (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017).

In *Chapter 8*, the findings discussed in chapters 6 and 7 are re-examined in order to draw conceptual insights from the participants' experiences of political becomings as a whole, highlighting the contributions of the investigation to debates in postphenomenology, political participation studies and media studies. These conclusions also address the limitations of the study and suggest directions for future research.



**2****Technological Mediation:  
How Technologies Transform Perception, Action  
and Us (and We Transform them Back)**

This chapter establishes the theoretical grounds of this research by introducing the mediation theory and the postphenomenological vocabulary employed to explore how social media transform the *perception* and *action* involved in political becomings (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011). As introduced in Chapter 1, this is a postphenomenological study on how social media shape political becomings, exploring the experiences of young Brazilians as a case study. The notion of political becomings is enlarged upon in Chapter 3, which also presents current discussions on how social media are impacting political processes to the encounter of the postphenomenological concepts presented in this chapter. Subsequently, Chapter 4 addresses the particularities of Brazil and its political struggles, aspects of the context which inform the political becomings of the participants in this investigation.

Postphenomenology can be seen as “a branch in philosophy of technology” (Van Den Eede et al., 2017, p. xviii), in which classical phenomenology is adapted to reflect “historical changes in the twenty-first century” (Ihde, 2009, p. 5). Postphenomenology has devoted few studies to media and even less attention to social media in particular (Van Den Eede et al., 2017; Warfield, 2021). Some recent postphenomenological works discussing social media include Yoni Van Den Eede and colleagues’ (2017) edited book *Postphenomenology and Media*, with some sections on aspects of social media’s mediation; Lisa Nelson’s (2018) *Social Media and Morality*, which explores how social media might affect our sense of morality; Nolen Gertz’s (2019) *Nihilism and Technology*, an investigation on how various platforms, from Netflix to Tinder and

Twitter, affect our being in the world; and Katie Warfield's (2021) analysis of becoming bisexual through a hook-up application. Engaging with diverse dimensions of human experience and social media, these studies demonstrate that postphenomenology offers valuable resources which can "contribute to existing approaches to media by invoking new questions that push forward our understanding of the effects of contemporary media on humans and our surrounding world" (Van Den Eede et al., 2017, p. xix). Furthermore, the employment of this framework in this research responds to Verbeek's position that postphenomenology can assist in a better understanding of "the character and dynamics of politics in a technological society" (Verbeek, 2020b, p. 153).

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first section attends to the notion of mediation, which is the most important assumption behind this research, and central to the analysis of how social media are transforming political processes as proposed in this investigation (Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). From a postphenomenological perspective, mediation is a transformative process through which technologies shape "the relationship between human beings and reality" (Verbeek, 2011, p. 7). This investigation employs primarily the mediation theory proposed by the Dutch philosopher of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek (2000/2005, 2011) as an element of postphenomenology. Building on postphenomenological notions, with the incorporation of actor-network theory tenets, the mediation theory<sup>10</sup> expands on how technologies transform human experiences, considering the dimensions of perception and action (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). In both dimensions, technologies shape human experiences in specific ways, as discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.3, respectively. Section 2.4 speaks to a central characteristic of interactions on social media, personalisation, which is attained through the work of human and technology and can be observed in the mediation of

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<sup>10</sup> The postphenomenological framework is sometimes referred to as "mediation theory" (Van Den Eede et al., 2017, p. xix), but in this study mediation theory is used to refer to the framework proposed by Verbeek (2011).

action and perception. This theoretical framework aims to shed light on aspects of technological mediation that can become invisible as technologies as social media grow increasingly intertwined in our lives (Van Den Eede et al., 2017; Verbeek, 2011, 2020b).

### **2.1 Introduction to the Mediation Theory**

This research investigates the political significance of social media by looking at how these technologies shape individuals' experiences with political struggles (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). This aim is pursued by employing the mediation theory, a framework that offers tools to analyse the connections between humans and technologies through the dimensions of perception and action (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). This section contemplates the notion of mediation, which is central to postphenomenology and the analysis performed in this study (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a).

Media technologies texture human life, providing a “feeling or surface that is knit into how we live and what we do” (Irwin, 2016, p. 4). As these technologies continue to evolve, so do the ways in which they transform our experiences and ourselves. To have a better view of how social media are changing our experiences with the world, we can go back in time and observe in brief how we have been transformed by the press (Reshaping Work, 2020). The invention of the press facilitated the multiplication of texts, contributing to the democratisation of knowledge (Naughton, 2014; Verbeek, 2020a). Before the press, books were handwritten and, thus, incredibly expensive (Naughton, 2014). For this reason, only a very selected elite had access to the knowledge in books, and the vast majority of human communication happened in social contexts, in public spaces, through orality (Naughton, 2014). But with the popularisation of books, this setting changed throughout the years, giving rise to “the isolated reader and his private eye” (Postman, 1982/1994, Ch. 2, “The Printing...,” para. 15). The press changed how we relate to knowledge and “helped to create a social environment within which the idea of individuality made sense” (Naughton, 2014, ch. 1,

“Writers,” para. 5). Technology transformed our experience of the world and changed us in the process: we could then conceive the notion of learning by ourselves, engaging with knowledge from the privacy of our homes. A transformation that resembles the notion of the private sphere is expanded in Chapter 3 (Papacharissi, 2010).

The invention of the press illustrates how human life has been altered by media technologies and helps us contemplate that we are in the midst of important transformations provoked by the widespread development of digital technologies (Romele & Terrone, 2018; van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018). As Verbeek (2020a) remarks,

digital technology is intertwined with all aspects of society and it is becoming increasingly obvious that a new society is emerging. From politics to health care and from personal relationships to public space, digital technology is changing the infrastructure of our daily life. (p. 35)

With prior technologies, the media were “over there” as well-defined objects (books, newspapers, television) that we could use and put away once we were done with them, and they would remain static (Van Den Eede et al., 2017, pp. xxv-xxvi). But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these technologies have been moving continuously closer to us,

media are becoming increasingly invisible, transparent, “seamless,” interactive, and predictive (they “guesstimate” our next move). Thanks to contemporary technologies such as the cellphone, media have become not only what we read, hear, and see but also what we constantly have around us. (Van Den Eede et al., 2017, pp. xxv-xxvi, emphasis in original)

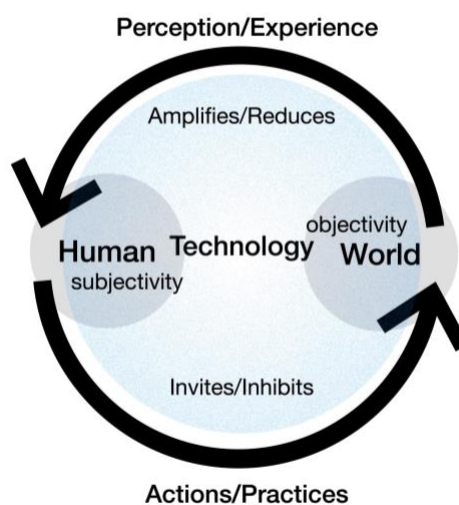
Not only are they closer, but they are also not static objects. Digital technologies have artificial intelligence, which gives them the ability to study us and show us what we want to see, to buy, whom we want to engage with, and what political content we might like or not (Verbeek, 2020a). And even when we are not using them, they continue using us, “we may log out of our apps and our devices, but our apps and our devices do not log out of us” (Gertz, 2018, p. 207). We still choose, to a certain extent, to engage with these technologies or not, but the settings in which we make these decisions are

changing considerably (Reshaping Work, 2020; Verbeek, 2020a). As argued in this chapter, mediation theory offers tools to make visible the structures of the relations we establish with technologies, contributing to the understanding of the transformations prompted by social media, including those associated with micropolitical processes (Verbeek, 2020b).

Mediation theory proposes an understanding of technological mediation from two angles: *mediation of experience*, which refers to how technologies impact the *human perception of the world*; and *mediation of action*, which refers to how technologies impact *human actions* (Figure 2.1). In this study, these two dimensions assist in the examination of how social media transform individuals' perception of political struggles and the actions they engage in to support or challenge political projects. When social media are employed, these technologies become mediators of their users with "their environment [and other people], helping to shape the character of the relations between both" and transform users in these processes (Verbeek, 2015, p. 218). To appreciate this process, we must have a clear understanding of what mediation means in postphenomenology.

**Figure 2.1**

*Theory of Mediation*



*Note.* Adapted from Hauser et al. (2018).

As noted in Chapter 1, mediation, as conceptualised in postphenomenology, is not a process happening between two fixed entities, a human being and the world (subject and object) “wherein only the manner in which the object is experienced by the subject is affected” (Verbeek, 2000/2005, p. 129). Mediation is a transformative process through which both humans and the world are constituted (Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Or, in Verbeek’s (2000/2005) words, “humans and the world they experience are the *products* of technological mediation, and not just the poles between which the mediation plays itself out” (p. 130, emphasis in original). This co-constitution of objectivity (world) and subjectivity (humans) is particularly noticeable in the experiences of wheelchair users:

Many of their everyday, worldly activities, from greeting another person to carrying on a conversation to partaking in meals, are shaped to a large extent by their wheelchairs. The same can be said for the way in which their world is present to them; many objects are present as obstacles, and wheelchair users experience the world from a sitting perspective, which determines, for instance, a specific kind of relation to conversational partners. (Verbeek, 2000/2005, p. 130)

Hence, saying that social media mediate a given experience means not only that what is experienced (objectivity/world) is transformed in a particular situation, but also that the individual using social media (subject) and social media themselves are shaped in this specific use (Hauser et al., 2018; Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011; Warfield, 2021). Thereby, when citizens use social media to engage in political processes, they experience the *political world* in a specific way and are transformed into specific political subjects in this process.

This section addressed the conception of mediation: the transformative process through which humans, the world and technologies are constituted through their relations (Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). When technologies are used, they transform human experience by shaping the perception of the world and the actions we engage with (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). To analyse mediation from a postphenomenological standpoint is to examine the

structures of our relations with technologies. Concerning the mediation of perception, these structures involve embodiment and hermeneutic relations, in which aspects of reality are amplified and reduced. In the mediation of action, for its turn, the analysis concentrates on how technologies invite and inhibit certain actions. The structures of the mediation of perception and action are explored next. The aim is to lay the philosophical and theoretical grounds that support the considerations of how social media are transforming political processes. This is addressed in Chapter 3.

## **2.2 Mediation of Perception: Seeing Through and by Means of Technologies**

This study employs the mediation theory to investigate how social media transform individuals' experiences with political struggles. The mediation theory looks at how technologies impact human-world relations through the dimensions of perception and action (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). The mediation of perception refers to how technologies impact the experience and interpretation of reality (Verbeek, 2011). It is through perception that the world, and political discourses, become present to us (Verbeek, 2011, 2020b). Thus, the analysis of how social media mediate perception directs us to explore how, through the mediation, a particular political world is constituted and made available for individuals, impacting the actions informed by this perception (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011, 2020b). As social media “help us ‘read’ the world,” these technologies mediate what (political) issues deserve our attention (Verbeek, 2020b, p. 153, emphasis in original). The mediation of perception involves two central human-technology relations: embodiment and hermeneutic, both of which are explored in this section.

From a postphenomenological standpoint, perception is not passive; it is an *activity* of the body towards the environment (Ihde, 2009). The notion of perception employed in postphenomenology stems from the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), for whom perception is deeply embodied: “we must live things in

order to perceive them” (p. 340). As Taylor Carman (1945/2012) observes, for Merleau-Ponty, perception is connected to the human body and how we move through the world, “to perceive is not to have inner mental states, but to be familiar with, deal with, and find our way around in an environment. Perceiving means having a body, which in turn means *inhabiting* a world” (Carman, 1945/2012, p. x, emphasis in original). While rooted in the body, as referring to our sensory capabilities (to see, to hear, to touch, to experience the world with our bodies), the word perception, in postphenomenology, has a second interconnected meaning. Ihde (1990) differentiates two dimensions of perception: microperception, which refers to the bodily sensory perception (what we see, touch, hear); and macroperception, which refers to the contexts that give meaning to our sensory perception. Although these two dimensions of perception can be differentiated, “they cannot be separated” (Verbeek, 2000/2005, p. 123). All bodily-perceptual activity occur within a field of experience, a “set of practices and discourses” (Ihde, 2020a, p. 227) which “informs or orients” the meaning of what is perceived (Ihde, 1990, p. 40); and all macroperception is rooted in a body that sees, hear, touches, from their unique perspective. In this way, perception also means an interpretation of the world, as Verbeek (2000/2005) explains:

The twofold meaning of the word “perception” to which Ihde points is illustratively present in the verb “to see,” which we can use to describe a bodily-sensory perception (“I see a tree”) and to characterize an interpretation of the world (“Since that talk I see things completely differently”). (p. 123)

Hence, perception in this study is used to refer to both macro and microperception dimensions: referring to how we interpret the world and to how our bodies experience this same world.

Perception is also intimately related to language, constituting our being-in-the-world (Ihde, 2020b). This can be observed, for instance, in the language we use to refer to the activities related to social media when we say we *visit* a profile, we *go* online, *jump* from one platform to another and so on. These verbs, borrowed from mundane



actions can be seen as material metaphors (van den Boomen, 2014) that help us make sense of social media platforms as spaces we inhabit and move through (Moore, 2009; Warfield, 2021; Wiltse, 2017). The employment of these material metaphors shape our experience of social media, or our perception of these technologies, assigning specific “forms of sociability” (van den Boomen, 2014, p. 169) correlated to our face-to-face interactions, contributing to the blurring of online and offline and an experience of social media as “profoundly material and powerful” (van den Boomen, 2014, p. 155). As these material metaphors denote, we are not observing social media as objects out there, we engage with these technologies as if we are living in and through them.

Postphenomenology offers a framework to examine in detail how technologies affect human perception by looking at the structure of the relations individuals establish with these artifacts (Ihde, 1990). The mediation of perception involves two relations, embodiment and hermeneutic, understood as a continuum (Ihde, 2009; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Embodiment relations occur when technological artifacts are incorporated into humans’ lives in such a way that they expand their bodily abilities (Ihde, 1990, 2012; Irwin, 2010), and perception of the world is “reshaped *through* the device,” like when wearing eyeglasses or listening through earphones (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a, p. 14, emphasis in original). Hermeneutic relations refer to those times when technology acts as a translator of the world, engaging users in more “meaning-oriented capacities,” as when one interprets if it is cold or hot outside through a thermometer (Ihde, 2009, p. 43). These two relations are expanded next, taking into consideration how they affect our encounters with social media.

The mediation of perception involves an amplification/reduction structure (Ihde, 1990). At the same time that technologies amplify or reveal certain aspects of reality, they also conceal or reduce others:

we not only receive the desired change in our abilities, but always also receive other changes, some of them taking on the quality of “tradeoffs,” a decrease of a sense, or area of focus, or layer of context. A hammer enables one to strike a nail with force, but occupies one’s hand in the process. A pair of binoculars enables one to see over

a distance, but at the sacrifice of visual awareness of one's immediate surroundings. (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a, p. 16, emphasis in original)

These tensions and trade-offs are observed in both embodiment and hermeneutics relations, contemplated in the following sections.

### ***2.2.1 Embodiment Relations: Becoming One with Technology***

One way in which social media can be understood as transforming our perception is when they function as extensions of our bodies, extending our reach towards the world (Ihde, 1990, 2009; Romele & Terrone, 2018; Rosenberger, 2017). This extended reach can be observed when, for example, we follow a political demonstration online through Facebook or YouTube (seeing beyond what our eyes would be capable of seeing without the technology), or when we feel part of online communities, even though we have never been in the same physical spaces with these other people (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004; Gutmann, 2003). In such occurrences, we experience what social media make possible for us rather than the technologies that they are; we have embodied social media and forgotten that they are transforming our encounters with the world (Ihde, 1990). The analysis of embodiment relations aims to make visible these transparent threads with the world.

Embodiment relations refer to how we experience the world with the incorporation of technologies (Ihde, 2009). This type of human-technology relations involves experiencing the world through technologies in such a way that “the user and the technology together encounter the world with transformed capacities to perceive and/or act” (Rosenberger, 2017, p. 149). When experiencing embodiment relations, individuals expand “the area of sensitivity of their bodies” with technologies (Verbeek, 2000/2005, p. 125). That is, humans' bodily senses are augmented. A classic example of embodiment relations is the mediation performed by eyeglasses. When one sees through eyeglasses, the vision is corrected (reshaped) to become clearer (providing they work well), and the experience of seeing is changed (Ihde, 1990). The user might even

see things that they would not be able to see if it were not for the “transformative mediation of the technology” (Gertz et al., 2019, p. 74). In this case, the user’s visual senses were expanded by the technology. Another illustration, this time related to another bodily sense, the touch, is when a blind person uses a cane to perceive the environment around them:

The blind man’s cane has ceased to be an object for him, it is no longer perceived for itself; rather, the cane’s furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone, it increases the scope and the radius of the act of touching and has become analogous to a gaze. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 144)

The cane augments the blind person’s reach to their environment and becomes their way of perceiving their surroundings, of inhabiting their environment, acting as an extension of their body. In both examples, the technologies act to broaden the sensory capabilities of the human body: the glasses mediate our vision, expanding it, the cane mediate the blind person’s reach to their environment, allowing them to “feel at a distance” (Ihde, 2009, p. 42). The embodiment of technologies expand our being-in-the-world (Ihde, 2009).

In embodiment relations, the focus lies not on the devices but on “(aspects of) the world given through” them (Verbeek, 2000/2005, p. 126). Technologies are the *means* used to experience our environment: eyeglasses to shape vision, phones to allow listening from a distance, a cane to perceive the surroundings as a blind person, and social media to amplify our communicative capabilities (Ihde, 2009). Ihde (2009) represents this relationship as:

(human-technology) → environment.

The arrow symbolises human intentionality, meaning that individuals embody a technology, *becoming one with it*, in order to experience the world (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2008).

A central characteristic of technologies involved in embodiment relations is transparency<sup>11</sup> (Gertz, 2018; Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a; Verbeek, 2000/2005). Through embodiment, the technology *amplifies* what is to be perceived while the experience of the technology itself is *reduced* (Ihde, 1990; Nelson, 2018; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). As the technology grows intertwined in one's life, becoming part of everyday dwellings, the device begins to fade away from the user's awareness, acquiring a certain degree of transparency (Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). This conception is borrowed from Heidegger's (1953/2010) analysis of tools (Ihde, 2009). Heidegger (1953/2010) observes how the technology becomes *ready-to-hand*, and we become busy not with the "tools themselves, but the work" they do (p. 69). In the case of the eyeglasses, the technology becomes incorporated into the wearer as an "invisible extension of the eyes" (Gertz, 2019, p. 66). In embodiment relations, "the better the machine the more 'transparency' there is," as the aim is not so much to experience the technology, but the enhancement of the experience a technology grants its users (Ihde, 1975, p. 272, emphasis in original). The technology and the human body enter into a symbiotic relation to experience the environment (Ihde, 2009).

Applying these notions to social media, we grow accustomed to these technologies, they acquire increasing levels of transparency. As platforms like Facebook expand our "ability to access new information" (Gertz, 2019, p. 67), expanding both our micro and macroperceptions (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2000/2005) of the world, we tend to focus on the new possibilities the technology opens to us, losing sight of "the role it plays in our gaining that access" (Gertz, 2019, p. 67). Social media are complex platforms *made of* and *interconnected with* numerous other technologies: access to social media is made possible through (to begin with) a smartphone or computer,

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<sup>11</sup> Not to be confused with the notion of transparency, or lack of, often used in social media studies to refer to the need for these companies to reveal how they operate, making public "the guidelines on the kinds of content allowed on platforms, the rules for fact-checking trending news items, as well as the overall development of platforms algorithms" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 70).

internet connection, screens, interfaces, applications, algorithms, codes that are translated into messages, and so on (Gertz et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the more we use social media, the more transparent they become, and we tend to forget that our experiences are being transformed by these technologies. Our awareness is not directed to codes on screens or complex algorithmic configurations: we *follow* people, we *like* ideas, *share*, *comment*, *connect*, *post*, and our being-in-the-world is transformed (Gertz et al., 2019):

(I-social media) → world.

For the participants in this study, social media have acquired varying degrees of transparency, contributing to the blurring of notions of online and offline in their perception and actions in relation to their political becomings.

When we embody social media, these technologies enhance “our ability to communicate with others” (Gertz, 2019, pp. 66-67). The amplification of humans’ capacity to communicate is one of the ways in which social media transform our being-in-the-world. Through our relationships with these technologies, we become networked humans (Papacharissi, 2011) who can reach far beyond what our eyes and arms allow us: our bodily senses are expanded (microperception) and we co-constitute specific worlds with these technologies (macroperception) (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2000/2005). The embodiment of social media can be observed in Zizi Papacharissi’s (2011, 2019b) conception of the *networked self* as the human who emerges from their relations with these platforms. The media and political sciences scholar observes that social media

allow the individual to connect to local and remote spheres of family members, friends and acquaintances, and strong and weaker social ties. They further *expand the communicative* channels individuals may dedicate toward the cultivation of social networks. The flexibility of online digital technologies permits interaction and relations among individuals within the same networks or across networks, a variety of exchanges and ties, variable frequency of contact and intimacy, affiliation with smaller or larger, and global or local, networks formed around variable common matter. (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 307, emphasis added)

Through these networks, human capabilities to connect to other humans are expanded, as they allow individuals to reach others beyond their social ties (Gertz, 2019; Romele & Terrone, 2018). The mediation transforms us into networked selves (microperception), who experience a networked world (macroperception) (Papacharissi, 2011, 2019b) (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2000/2005).

Although it might seem that social media simply magnify human's communication capabilities these technologies do transform the way we communicate in significant ways,

status updates, comments, likes, shares, memes, emojis, and GIFs — these are very particular types of online communication that are not simply amplified versions of what we'd say to a friend in person. But it's easy to forget this, and instead to think of Facebook as just an effective way of communicating with more people. (Gertz, 2019, pp. 66-67)

The fact that we overlook these transformations is an indication of the high degree of transparency that these technologies have attained in our lives, which signals their successful embodiment (Gertz, 2018; Verbeek, 2000/2005). The effective embodiment of social media impacts not only individuals' perception, when they forget that what is experienced on social media is transformed by the mediation, but also their actions, as the activities in these environments are comprehended as equivalent to offline acts. This understanding impacts how and what we consider political participation, as expanded in the analysis of the empirical material of this investigation. Additionally, the successful embodiment of social media in everyday life owes a great deal to another ubiquitous contemporary technology: the smartphone.

To talk about social media is, more often than not, to talk about social media used on a smartphone. As a technology designed for an individual and private usage (not for sharing, as in the television, for instance), the smartphone<sup>12</sup> enhances the

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<sup>12</sup> The term smartphone is used interchangeably with terms as mobile phone and cell phone, meaning a phone device with access to the internet and applications such as social media platforms.

embodiment potential of social media, bringing these technologies closer to one's body, allowing them to be within reach at all times (Wellner, 2016). Additionally, as social media, accessible through the smartphone, are carried around inside pockets (Richardson, 2007), they become part of users' "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1953/2010, pp. 53-62) or, more appropriately, "being-in-multiple-worlds" (Verbeek, 2015, p. 221), amplifying the perception of reality in varied ways (Wiltse, 2017). The private space materialised in the mobile phone travels to public spaces, to the bus, to political protests. At the same time, what happens in public spaces can be perceived in the privacy of the small screen on the smartphone (Papacharissi, 2010). In this way, social media and smartphones contribute to blurring notions of public and private, online and offline, being best understood from a hybrid perspective (Chadwick, 2017; Papacharissi, 2010, 2019a; Treré, 2019).

Moreover, the smartphone becomes a portal to diverse media environments (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) (Aagaard, 2018). Jesper Aagaard (2018) employs the metaphor of a portal to indicate that there is a "movement from one place to another" when we use these artifacts, conveying the idea that "users are not sitting-inside-and looking out at mediated content, but actively entering and exiting specific realms," inhabiting these spaces (p. 52). This idea is in line with the understanding of social media as environments (Moores, 2009; Wiltse, 2017), and it becomes possible through the successful embodiment of these technologies. Expanding on Aagaard (2018), social media themselves can be seen as portals giving access to diverse realities, multiple political struggles and discourses we might not encounter in our relations with the world and which are not mediated by these technologies. The portal is thus an important notion to appreciate the participants' experiences with diverse political realities through social media.

This section addressed the notion of embodiment relations, which deals with how we become one with technologies to access the world (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2008). The structure of this relation is important for an understanding of how participants in

this study relate to social media and experience their political becomings in and through these technologies. When we engage in embodiment relations with technologies, they amplify our reach towards the world while reducing our awareness of their transformative role (Gertz, 2018; Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a; Verbeek, 2000/2005). In a successful embodiment relation, technologies acquire a certain degree of transparency in that while immersing ourselves in the experiences these devices make possible, we overlook their transformative role (Gertz, 2018; Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a; Verbeek, 2000/2005). Drawing again on Aagaard, the embodiment of social media is enhanced through mobile and private technologies (smartphones), which can be seen as portals transporting us to diverse realities (Aagaard, 2018). To the same extent, social media can also be considered portals that permit participants in this study to experience varied political projects from the private spaces in their homes (Papacharissi, 2010). This human-technology relation can facilitate an appreciation of the role of social media in the personalisation characteristic of contemporary political processes; this will be discussed in Chapter 3. The mediation of perception also involves another significant human-technology relation, hermeneutic relations, which is discussed below (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011).

### **2.2.2 Hermeneutic Relations: Technological Translation of the World**

A different way in which technologies mediate perception is through hermeneutic relations (Ihde, 1990). If in embodiment relations users experience the world *through* the technology, in hermeneutic relations, technologies “provide a representation of reality, which requires interpretation,” functioning as a translator of the world (Verbeek, 2011, p. 8). For instance, a thermometer informs about the weather by numbers that must be interpreted. In this case, the heat or cold is not felt by the human body but read through the numbers on display (Verbeek, 2011).



The processes involved in hermeneutic relations are “more analogous to our *reading or interpreting* actions than to our bodily action” (Ihde, 2009, p. 43, emphasis in original). Reality is experienced not *through* technologies but *by means of* them (Verbeek, 2000/2005). This relation is formalised as:

human → (technology-world).

Here technology couples with the world to make reality accessible to humans. Through hermeneutic relations, technologies show us part(s) of the world that would not be available to us otherwise, and “that which lies beyond perception is made perceivable” (Ihde, 2012, p. 140). Image technologies, like the ultrasound, allow us to see parts of the body that would not be visible otherwise, such as “a living fetus in the womb, which cannot be seen without them” (Verbeek, 2011, p. 9). It is only through technologies that these images are accessible to us, as a technological *reading* of what they represent (we do not actually see the fetus, but an image created by the technology, which represents the fetus) (Verbeek, 2011).

In hermeneutic relations, the tension amplification/reduction can be observed when technologies reveal certain parts of reality, while concealing others:

when one is looking at a tree through an infrared camera, for instance, most aspects of the tree that are visible to the naked eye get lost, but at the same time a new aspect of the tree becomes visible: one can now see whether it is healthy or not. (Verbeek, 2011, p. 9)

The infrared camera reveals certain parts of reality at the expense of hiding others. The camera’s behaviour, that is, the propensity to show the world in a given way, is what Ihde (1990) labels “technological intentionality” (p. 102). However, these intentionalities can always be challenged due to technologies’ inherent multistable character. For instance, WhatsApp was designed to allow private messaging but has been used in Brazil and elsewhere to broadcast information to a wide number of people or to organise protests (Machado et al., 2019; Resende et al., 2019; Ribeiro & Ortellado,

2018; Rossi, 2018; Santos et al., 2019). Hence, technological intentionalities are dependent on the stabilities they acquire through their use (Verbeek, 2011).

To the same extent, social media provide us with a specific reading of the world. Likes, comments, and the number of followers, for example, represent “abstract values relating to social interactions” that are interpreted by users (Schwartz & Mahnke, 2018, p. 373). A profile with a high number of followers might be considered a more reliable source and the views it expresses can be seen as shared and by accepted a broader range of people; the same goes for a post that gets several *likes* (Nelson, 2020; Walther et al., 2011). When the content of these interactions are political values and projects, how we perceive them can lead to significant outcomes for democracy or other political systems.

One issue commonly found in political interactions on social media is that these traces, *follows* and *likes*, can be fabricated by diverse forces. Along with the use of automated systems they can create “the illusion of popularity for a candidate” or political views that can for instance produce a “manufactured consensus” (Woolley & Guilbeault, 2019, p. 186). In this case, social media can guide citizens to a misleading interpretation of which political views are approved by others in their community. These automated systems, or bots, have been commonly used in Brazilian politics to spread political information on various social media platforms creating “large-scale support or opposition for a wide range of issues” (Arnaudo, 2019, p. 147). In a case study of the use of political bots in Brazil, Dan Arnaudo (2019) observes how easy and inexpensive is to buy *likes* on profiles or posts on social media: ten thousand likes on a Facebook post could be obtained for the equivalent of 23 AUD. These observations indicate that various actors have been aware of the power of social media in constituting citizens’ perceptions of political issues, using manipulative tools to shape this perception in their favour with computational propaganda (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Treré, 2016; Woolley & Howard, 2017, 2019).

This section addressed how technologies transform human perception of the world through a continuum of embodiment and hermeneutic relations, in which aspects of the world are amplified and reduced (Ihde, 2009; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). The notion of embodiment relations assists in the understanding of how social media amplify our communicative capabilities, and hermeneutic relations contribute to the comprehension of how social media translate specific aspects of the world, constituting a specific reality shown to us (Gertz, 2018; Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Both dimensions contribute to the analysis of how participants in this study come in contact with political struggles through social media's mediation. The subsequent section considers mediation from the perspective of action, or the ways that technologies transform how humans become present in the world.

### **2.3 Mediation of Action: Becoming Present in the World with Technologies**

While the mediation of perception is about how the “world is present for humans,” the mediation of praxis, in which *action* is the main category, is concerned with “the way humans are present in their world” (Verbeek, 2011, pp. 9-10). This dimension of the technological mediation assists this study in the analysis of how individuals act to support or challenge political struggles by engaging in actions invited by social media.

As observed in the mediation of perception, where aspects of the experience are amplified and others reduced, here there is also a tension at play (Verbeek, 2011). In the mediation of action, some actions are “invited,” and others are “inhibited” (Verbeek, 2011, p. 10). The technology encourages some actions while discouraging others. For instance, the instantaneous feedback on content posted on social media platforms such as YouTube, through viewer statistics, comments, likes and so on, “*invites* creators to focus on repeating what makes their audience happy, and *invites* others to copy what those creators are repeating so that they can build their own happy audiences” (Gertz, 2018, p. 68, emphasis added). This invitation to follow what works best for the audience can be observed in the discussion, in Chapter 3, about political

influencers (Lewis, 2018), a mode of political action utilised by some of the participants in this study.

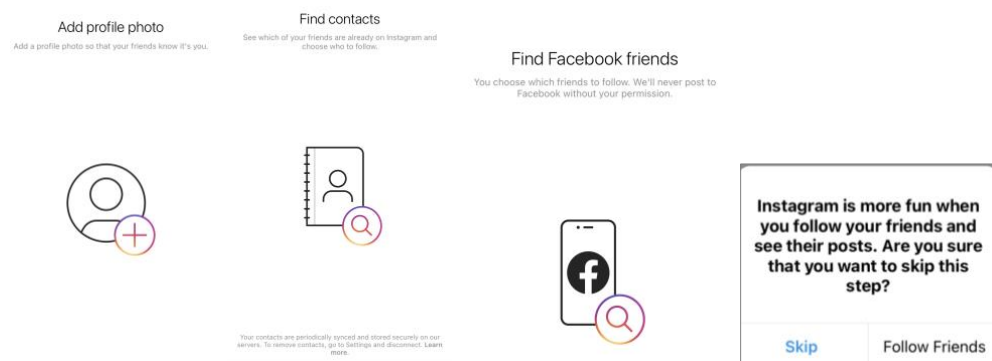
In the mediation of action, when we come into contact with technologies we interpret their invitations, and together with these artifacts, we can engage into certain actions, which becomes a composite action comprising both human and technological counterparts (Verbeek, 2011). For instance, if a person who desires to “prepare meals quickly” engages with a microwave, which main invitation is to “quickly heat small portions of food,” the result might be the composite action of “regularly eat instant meals individually” (Verbeek, 2011, p. 10, emphasis in original). The desire of the individual is met with the invitation of the technology. Both agents are necessary composite action of regularly eating instant meals individually (Verbeek, 2011). The decision of eating instant meals frequently is not made by the microwave or the individual; it is a “joint effort” of the human and the technology (Verbeek, 2011, p. 58). This situation reveals a composite intentionality, with “intentionality distributed among the human and the nonhuman elements in human-technology relationships” (Verbeek, 2011, p. 58). The human’s desires or needs are met with what the technology has to offer. It is noteworthy that technological invitations can be declined.

On social media, humans’ need and desire for connection are met with expansive networking possibilities, and the networked self emerges (Papacharissi, 2019a). A quick look through the process of creating an account on Instagram can demonstrate how the platform invites some actions which shape the user’s experience in the space. Upon the registration on the social media, users are asked to provide personal details, such as name, age, sex, and location, and to create a presence of themselves on the platform, which can include a picture and a personal statement (Papacharissi, 2011). Next, individuals are prompted to connect to those whom they know, or by allowing the technology to access their contacts stored on the phone or the connections they have on other platforms, such as happens with Instagram and Facebook (*Figure 2.2*). Instagram asks twice to gain access to the user’s contacts, and

when ignored, it informs how the platform becomes *more fun* when friends are part of it, making a stronger invitation. We can ignore these invitations, but then, we would miss the *fun*. In a joint work (Verbeek, 2011), the individual and Instagram create a space where the new user can connect to known and unknown people, fulfilling the human desire for connection and Instagram's program of action for getting more data into its system (van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018).

## Figure 2.2

### *Selected Steps of Creating an Account on Instagram*



*Note.* Screenshots by the author, taken on Instagram on 27 April 2021.

This view of actions as distributed across human and technologies supports a non-determinist understanding of social media, especially concerning how we engage in political processes. From this perspective, we cannot say that social media make revolutions or create the Far-Right, for instance. To the same extent, we cannot exempt technologies from their impact on human behaviour. Actions involving technologies and humans involve shared accountability. An illustration of the disregard for the technological impact on human action can be observed in the pro-guns movements' slogan, "guns don't kill people; *people* kill people". This famous saying places the responsibility for killings by guns solely on humans, exempting the technology from

any liability in these acts. However, guns cannot be seen as neutral tools. They transform the person who holds it in a significant way:

A gun is not a mere instrument, a medium of free will of human beings; it helps to define situations and agents because it offers specific possibilities for action. A gun constitutes the person holding the gun as a potential killer and his or her adversary as a potential lethal victim. (Verbeek, 2011, p. 64)

A person holding a gun cannot be seen as equal to a person without a gun. Gun and human become a hybrid entity constituted by *human* and *technology: gunman* (Verbeek, 2011). Correspondingly, we are not the same with social media; our experiences, including those with political becomings, acquire specific shapes by their associations with these technologies. These platforms invite certain actions, such as sharing life stories and information about current events with many known and unknown others, or connecting to groups of shared beliefs which can be geographically far away from us (Ekström & Sveningsson, 2019; Lewis, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). These invitations impact how we engage with political discourses and what kind of political subjects we become, which this study examines more deeply in Chapters 6 and 7.

This section addressed how technologies mediate action by inviting and inhibiting certain actions (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). The conception of mediation of action assists in the analysis of how individuals in this study act to support political discourses they become invested in. By engaging in certain actions invited by social media, such as creating YouTube channels to foster political activism or expressing their political identifications through diverse means, the participants in this study assert their political position to their publics and challenge or support political views. Next, another human-technology relation, composite relations, is discussed to attend to a central characteristic of contemporary political processes: personalisation.

## **2.4 Human and Technological Intentionalities in the Personalisation of Social Media**

A central characteristic of social media is a high degree of personalisation, translated to all experiences in and around these technologies, including political processes, (Barassi, 2018; Bennett, 2012; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018). This section looks at the personalisation of experiences involving social media through a postphenomenological lens, including another kind of human-technology relation to address this issue: composite relations (Verbeek, 2008).

The personalisation of social media is attained through these technologies' design around personal profiles and algorithmic selection (Rojas, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). When the user follows the social media's invitation and connects with friends and contacts (as seen on Instagram's invitation in the last section), they are building an initial "niche audience," to whom their self is made present (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 305). From this preliminary audience, other connections follow, and an egocentric public is formed around the user, a public based on their "cumulative social interactions" (Rojas, 2015, p. 94). These connections are the main road through which content flows on social media and other connections are forged. Associated with algorithms, egocentric publics serve as filters and enablers of information in these spaces (Gillespie, 2014; Rojas, 2015; Silveira, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Social media are online platforms, programmable digital spaces "designed to organise interactions between users—not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 4). These online architectures function around "the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data" that shape the interactions facilitated by them (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 4). In a detailed analysis of how online platforms work, the Dutch media scholars José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018) maintain that these technologies operate on three mechanisms: datafication, commodification and selection. Datafication refers to the interpretation and translation of many aspects of the social

into quantifiable data, including not only information normally volunteered by users (such as demographics) but also invisible and visible tracking of online behaviours, such as likes and follows (van Dijck et al., 2018). These data become commodities are valued through different currencies, like attention and money (van Dijck et al., 2018). Finally, datafication and commodification are tied to selection, or “the ability of platforms to trigger and filter user activity through interfaces and algorithms, while users, through their interaction with these coded environments, influence the online visibility and availability of particular content, services, and people” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 41). Thus, from the massive pool of information that the internet and social media potentially open users to, what a person is exposed to in these environments is defined by a combination of human and technological intentionalities, which aims to provide a hyper-personalised experience to each individual (Bozdag, 2013; Pybus, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2011).

The data provided by users feed the algorithms that run in the background of these platforms (Bozdag, 2013; Gillespie, 2014; Just & Latzer, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018). Broadly speaking, algorithms are procedures that translate large amounts of data into certain outputs, as in the content displayed on one’s social media feed or suggestions of whom to engage with or topics to follow (Gillespie, 2014; Just & Latzer, 2017). The phrase above, “large amounts of data,” actually means colossal. Just to give an idea of the size of the pool of data algorithms go through, on YouTube only, every minute, over 500 hours of content becomes available (YouTube, 2021). To determine what users see, algorithms compute information from a broad range of sources, crossing data derived from personal profiles with global trends in content and other inputs, with the purpose of choosing those pieces of information with higher chances of being consumed by individuals (Bozdag, 2013; Davidson et al., 2010; Gillespie, 2014; Just & Latzer, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018). The aim is to build an inviting environment where people spend a high amount of time “creating high-yield audience attention for advertisers” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 121).



Algorithms have become the dominant model through which humans relate to information (Gillespie, 2014; Just & Latzer, 2017; Silveira, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Through this model, anyone can have a personalised media environment designed to fit their views of the world, including political orientations (Just & Latzer, 2017; Sunstein, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018). One issue that arises with the personalisation of content is the possibility of social fragmentation, with users immersing themselves in “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011) or “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2017) that arguably prevent individuals from engaging with diverse information and people. In contrast, customisation can also benefit citizens, who can consume content that is significant to them, deepening their knowledge on issues of interest, or even broadening worldviews by choosing from a wider pool of content options (van Dijck et al., 2018).

While algorithms powerfully shape the information we are exposed to, the final choice of what to consume lies with individuals. One demonstration of such a claim is found in a study conducted by Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing and Lada A. Adamic (2015) involving more than ten million US Facebook users. Comparing algorithmic selection and users’ choices, the authors demonstrate that individuals are exposed to at least some contrasting political viewpoints on social media, but most times they choose not to engage with them, concluding that “the power to expose oneself to perspectives from the other side in social media lies first and foremost with individuals,” rather than algorithms (Bakshy et al., 2015, pp. 1,132). This finding goes against more deterministic views, such as those behind concepts such as filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) or echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017), and indicates how actions are distributed between humans and technologies in the information consumption on social media (Ihde, 2017; Just & Latzer, 2017). Another work that disproves the concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers is Axel Bruns’ *Are Filter Bubbles Real?* (2019). The author assesses the claims behind the impacts of social media on the consumption of political information demonstrating the significance of human action on these environments, concluding

that “in a hyperconnected yet deeply polarised world, the most important filter remains in our head, not in our networks” (Bruns, 2019, chapter 5, para. 39).

When algorithms sort through a massive amount of data and tailor content considered significant for that person, they are not simply providing a representation of the world, as in the example of the thermometer (Section 2.2.2). In fact, they are constructing a reality that is specific for that person, influencing the perception and actions of individuals (Just & Latzer, 2017; Verbeek, 2008; Wellner, 2020a). The construction of this algorithmic reality involves humans and technologies, wherein “humans shape algorithms [as designers and by providing the input that informs the selection processes] and are simultaneously shaped by them,” when they are exposed to the algorithmic output (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 252). That is, humans (developers and users) and technologies (algorithms) act in concert in the construction of algorithmic reality (Just & Latzer, 2017; Verbeek, 2000/2005).

This type of human-technology relation involves double intentionality: “one of the technology toward ‘its’ world,” when algorithms select from the data available in their world (to which we do not have access) and choose what to show to us; “and one of human beings toward the result of this technological intentionality,” which is our relationship with the algorithmic selection (Verbeek, 2008, p. 393, emphasis in original). This is what Verbeek (2008) terms composite relations,<sup>13</sup> represented by the following scheme, where the arrows represent intentionality:

$$\text{human} \rightarrow (\text{technology} \rightarrow \text{world}).$$

Composite relations influence both perception and action: “by presenting specific representations of reality or offering forms of interaction, these technologies help shape human practices and experiences much as mediating technologies do” (Verbeek, 2011,

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<sup>13</sup> Wellner and Rothman (2020) propose a more radical model to describe algorithm intentionality, emphasising the role of these technologies and relegating human intentionality to the background. The authors consider that algorithms “possess an enhanced intentionality” in comparison with previous technologies (p. 199). Their view is a promising new way to see artificial intelligence, which are acquiring more *intentionality* as humans continue to delegate more power to them (Just & Latzer, 2017). However, for the purpose of this study, Verbeek’s (2008) model seems more appropriate.

p. 150). This relation should be considered in conjunction with embodiment and hermeneutic, as our experiences with social media are complex, involving many interconnected layers.

By accessing information through social media, including specifically political issues, we perceive a reality that is created by the technologies, tailored to us. Although we participate in this creation, by providing input data, we know very little about how algorithmic calculations work to predict which content we will engage with (Gillespie, 2014). However, we rely on these technologies to make decisions for us, choosing what content we should consume (prioritising some information over others) or with whom we should engage on social media (displaying some contacts and not others), as transparent threads connecting us to the world (Gertz, 2018; Wellner, 2020a). As the participants in this study demonstrate, we tend to forget that the reality that social media show us is a technological construction, where some parts of the world are amplified, and others concealed, some actions are invited, others inhibited, and we do not even know what is being hidden and why (Silveira, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018).

This lack of awareness can have a significant impact on democratic processes once we increasingly rely on these technologies to perceive political struggles and act upon them, unaware of how these two dimensions are being manipulated by the private corporations that run these platforms for profit (van Dijck et al., 2018), or by powerful political actors through computational propaganda, as observed earlier (Arnaudo, 2019; Woolley & Howard, 2019). Moreover, as algorithmic choices are made through mathematical calculations, they nourish a myth of technological neutrality and objectivity, being defended as precise, exact and impartial representations of reality (Gillespie, 2014; Silveira, 2019). As the philosopher Nolen Gertz (2018) rightly observes,

what is at issue here is not that these algorithms claim to know us but that we believe them. Algorithms make recommendations, recommendations that are claimed to be tailored to us. . . . to our preferences, our profiles, and our past

actions. But we have no way of knowing whether, and to what extent, such claims are true. (p. 96)

The acknowledgement that we are dealing with a necessarily non-neutral, technologically constructed reality, is a step toward a better comprehension of the world we navigate through social media and can inform the actions we must take to deal with their possible impacts (Just & Latzer, 2017). Postphenomenology assists in shedding light on these technological transformations, with attention to how our experiences and ourselves are shaped in a process of continuous becoming by the devices that mediate our encounters with the world.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter established the theoretical grounds of this research, using the mediation theory to consider how technologies transform the human experience from the perspectives of the mediation of perception (how the world is present for humans) and mediation of action (how humans become present to the world) (as synthesised in *Table 2.1 below*) (Ihde, 2009; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Under this theoretical framework, social media assist in the constitution of a specific world for us (mediation of perception) while also inviting and inhibiting certain actions, shaping how we are present in the world, our peers and political struggles (mediation of action) (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Mediation is a co-constitution process through which not only the world and technologies are transformed, but also us, as we become specific subjects through these relations (Ihde, 2009; Ihde & Malafouris, 2019; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). To examine social media and political becomings through the lens of mediation theory is to therefore acknowledge that social media are changing the world we perceive and act on while, at the same time, we are becoming specific political subjects through these processes. This notion that we become specific subjects through technological mediation is one of the dimensions that justifies the employment of the term political becomings in this study, which is further expanded in the next chapter.

**Table 2.1***Summary of Postphenomenological Vocabulary*

| Technological Mediation                                     |   |
|---|---|
| Mediation of Perception: How the world is present to humans |   |
| Amplification/reduction                                     | While some aspects of reality are amplified, others are reduced or concealed.   |
| Embodiment relation<br>(human-technology) → world           | Technologies as extensions of humans' bodies, expanding their capabilities. The world is perceived through the technology (e.g., eyeglasses). |
| Hermeneutic relation<br>human →(technology-World)           | Technologies offer an interpretation of reality. What is perceived is the interpretation of the world (e.g., thermometer).                    |
| Mediation of Action: How humans become present in the world |   |
| Invitation/inhibition                                       | Technologies invite certain actions, while inhibiting others.   |
| Composite Relations: Affect perception and action           |   |
| Composite relations<br>human → (technology → world)         | Human intentionality is directed to a reality created by technologies (e.g., algorithmic selection).  |

*Note.* Adapted from Verbeek (2011, p. 11).

Next, Chapter 3 deals with the concept of political becomings and brings the postphenomenological vocabulary explored thus far into dialogue with contemporary discussions of how social media are impacting political processes.

### 3

## Political Becomings and Social Media

This chapter expands on the notion of political becomings and how these experiences have been transformed by social media, incorporating literature from political participation and media studies. Throughout this chapter, the postphenomenological conceptions explained in Chapter 2 are woven in the discussions advanced in other fields in the construction of the framework utilised in this dissertation to investigate how social media shape political becomings.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first part (Section 3.1) deals with the notion of political becomings from two dimensions, political identifications (Section 3.1.1) and political participation (Section 3.1.2), which are intertwined in individuals' experiences with political struggles (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992). It also explores theories of how contemporary communication technologies shape political processes, chiefly social media, weaving a vocabulary to explore experiences of political participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Barassi, 2018; Bennett, 2012; Dennis, 2019; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010). Respecting its mediated characteristics, Section 3.1.2.2 argues that political participation should be considered as a continuum involving different stages and intensities (Dennis, 2019). The second section of the chapter further explores the *continuum of political participation* (Dennis, 2019), and is presented in Section 3.1.2.2, employing the theory of mediation (discussed in Chapter 2) to enrich the discussions about how social media impact current political processes from the perspectives of the mediation of perception and action (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011).

### **3.1 Political Becomings: Identifications and Participation**

The experiences in which this investigation is interested are the processes through which individuals situate themselves in political struggles and act upon them, conceptualised in this section as political becomings (Holland et al., 2018). The notion of political becomings is explained as encompassing two interrelated dimensions: political identification and political participation. These are addressed in Sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2, respectively.

The primary assumption of postphenomenology, and mediation theory, is that humans, the world and technologies obtain their meanings through their relations. Thus, as humans, we are always in the process of becoming (Ihde & Malafouris, 2019). The notion of becoming is also significant in considerations of political processes. Political becomings refer to ongoing processes through which individuals become aware of being part of a society addressing its organisation, acting to change or maintain values and norms in association with others who share similar views, and constituting themselves as political subjects (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992; Svensson, 2011). As the media scholar Angela Marques and the political scientist Ricardo Mendonça (2018) argue, political subjects do not exist prior to their political interactions but are constituted through political practice. The authors add that the constitution of political subjects involves connections and disconnections in a continuous process of becoming. It is in these processes of becoming political (subjects) that this study is interested.

This section discusses political becomings from two interconnected dimensions: political identification and political participation. Political identification concerns the formation of political subjects through the identification and disidentification with political projects (Laclau, 1994; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b; Rancière, 1992). This process does not happen prior to political participation practices, but through them, in an iterative process of acting and becoming (Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018). Next, political identifications

and political participation processes are considered separately for analytical purposes, but it is important to note that they are intertwined in lived experiences.

### **3.1.1 Political Identifications: Identities as Actions**

The term political identification stems from the work of the political theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, who have expounded on the processes through which political subjects are constituted (Laclau, 1994; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Mouffe, 1992). With the notion of identification, the authors draw attention to the unstable character of political identities, breaking with any remaining attachment to the idea of essential or fixed identities, such as those related to class inherited from Marxism (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014).

This study employs the term *identifications* (as a verb and in the plural) to signal their multiple and active character (Mouffe, 1992). Moreover, political identifications are constructed through action and interaction with other humans and the environment, and while these identifications are formed, they inform the actions we engage with (Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018). Hence, political identifications are constituted through political participation (elaborated in Section 3.1.2), informing political practices and being informed by these actions. Political identification signifies identifications with political principles that guide a political community, and the acceptance of the rules attached to such principles, following a specific grammar or code of conduct (Mouffe, 1992). This compliance with certain values and views “creates a common political identity among persons otherwise engaged in many different enterprises and communities” (Mouffe, 1992, p. 31). What unifies different people to form a political community “is their common recognition of a set of ethico-political values” (Mouffe, 1992/2013a, p. 111). From this perspective, the identification with an ideology places oneself within the boundaries of a “given interpretation of a set of ethico-political values,” creating a sense of *we* (Mouffe, 1992/2013b, p. 140).



The preference for the term identification reflects an anti-essentialist perspective on identities, which emphasises the multiple and messy nature of the individual, maintaining the impossibility of a universal identity (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Mouffe, 2005, 2013). The poststructuralist conception of identification derives from the psychoanalytical studies of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan (Hall, 1996; Laclau & Zac, 1994). As Laclau (1994) observes, the notion of identification makes explicit “a lack at the root of any identity: one needs to *identify with something* because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of identity” (p. 3, emphasis added). Although identities do acquire certain stability at times, they are always bound to fail to constitute a final identity, as these “can always be ‘won’ or ‘lost’, sustained or abandoned” (Hall, 1996, pp. 2-3, emphasis in original). Rather than a possession or a label, identity in this sphere is regarded as a *process of becoming*, with its meanings constantly under negotiation between the individual and the social (Buckingham, 2008).

The notion of identifications also challenges the idea of homogenous identities (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). The individual is seen as a “plurality,” standing in an intersection of identifications (Mouffe, 1992/2013b, p. 134). One person can identify herself, for example, as being a woman, middle-class, Brazilian, young, student, Christian, conservative, and so on (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). From this perspective, it is impossible to conceive any uniform identity, being that of a geographically bounded group (such as individuals from a nation, e.g., Brazil), those belonging to a particular economic class (e.g., middle-class), or even political views (conservatives or progressives). In this study, individuals might share similar identifications, but each one of them is at different “crossroads of identifications,” where one identification might appear to be more prominent than others (Butler et al., 1992, p. 113).

Likewise, as processes of becoming, identifications are always subject to change, especially in periods of crisis, like the political events experienced by Brazilians in

recent years: the 2013 demonstrations and President Rousseff's impeachment and the 2018 elections, each of which is discussed in Chapter 4 (Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mendonça et al., 2019). In such times, the subject might experience a crisis and feel “forced to take decisions—or identify with certain political projects and the discourses they articulate” in order to make sense of the new realities before them (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 14). It is through this process of identification that political subjects are formed (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000).

This movement involves not only the assertion of an identification but also a *disidentification*, a “denial of an identity given by an other,” which no longer serves the subject (Rancière, 1992, pp. 61-62). In these moments, individuals question themselves and their place in society and engage with new possible identifications (Rancière, 1992). For Jacques Rancière (1992), it is in these in-between intervals that the subject acquires their true political character. This is an active pursuit through perception and action where meanings are articulated in the denial of old identifications and the construction of new ones, requiring investments from the subjects (Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Rancière, 1992).

### **3.1.1.1 *It is About Us and also About Them***

Collective identifications shed light on similarities, or what makes a group of people alike, but they also involve differentiation from other groups: the *us* versus *them*, which is essential to the idea of political identifications (Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a). Notwithstanding the notion of similarities being more connected to the idea of identity (or what one identifies with), Stuart Hall (1996) argues that it is through the differences that they are constructed, that

this entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the “positive” meaning of any term—and thus its “identity”—can be constructed. (pp. 4-5, emphasis in original)

This “constitutive outside” both threatens an identification, showing what *it is not*, and makes it possible by the delimitation of frontiers, providing it with some sense of unity (Norval, 1990, p. 137). Thus, what makes identifications possible is “their capacity to exclude, to leave out,” drawing boundaries with what it is not (Hall, 1996, p. 5).

Conflict, therefore, is essential to the idea of political identification put forward in this chapter. Here it is worth taking a step back to see how Mouffe (2000/2013) conceptualises and differentiates political and politics. The political is the antagonist dimension “inherent in human relations,” that is, the political is about conflict (Mouffe, 2000/2013, p. 203). Politics, in its turn, refers to the practices and institutions that seek to organise how humans live together. Thus, politics aims to manage the political present in all human relations, seeking to create some sort of temporary agreement to organise life in society (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013). Starting from this understanding, Mouffe argues that what democracy should strive for is not consensus, but the management of conflicts in an “agonistic pluralism” (Mouffe, 2000/2013, p. 203). This model of democracy should aim to construct a *we* and a *they* in such a way that the other is not seen as an enemy, who should be destroyed (antagonism), but as an adversary, “somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (agonism) (Mouffe, 2000/2013, p. 203). The democratic model that Mouffe (2000, 2000/2013) proposes is not one that removes conflict from society, but the management of conflict by transforming antagonistic relations into agonistic ones. This is done by “providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary” (Mouffe, 2000/2013, p. 204).

Mouffe’s (2000, 2000/2013) arguments for an agonistic pluralism are constructed in opposition to deliberative democracy, which she views as aspiring for a naive consensus built on the elimination of passions. However, deliberation does not have to be understood as an “exchange of passionless arguments” (Mendonça & Ercan,

2015, p. 271). Mendonça and Ercan (2015) maintain that “deliberative processes are discursive exchanges that allow different actors to engage with the task of defining the world in which they live together” (p. 271). According to this definition, deliberation “both requires and generates” conflict, being consistent with Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism (Mendonça & Ercan, 2015, p. 271). Looking at the Brazilian 2013 demonstrations, Mendonça and Ercan (2015) argue that “agonistic politics revitalized the meaning of deliberation,” revealing that deliberation can exist outside of “formal participatory institutions” (p. 279). The protests opened space for debates in Brazilian society and created “an awareness of difference,” bringing to the forefront disagreements that had been silent in public discussions for a long time, such as the disputes over LGBTQIA+ rights (Mendonça & Ercan, 2015, p. 279). Conflictual engagements are central to the experiences of the participants in this study, contributing to the affirmation of their political identifications.

The demarcation of boundaries is particularly evident in the political divisions experienced in Brazil in recent years, with the construction of political identifications around an *anti*-sentiment, observed, for instance, in the identification with *anti*-Workers’ Party (*antipetismo*), *anti*-Bolsonaro or antifeminism, which will be discussed in Chapter 4 (Antunes, 2015; Mendonça et al., 2019; Samuels & Zucco, 2018; Solano et al., 2017). From this standpoint, what makes an antifeminist identification possible is feminism; what makes a conservative identification possible are progressive political identifications. This division of antagonist camps illustrates what political identities are: forms of identification “postulated and fought for in the historical arena” made visible through acts of identification (Laclau, 1994, p. 4). What makes identifications political is the visible dispute of the meanings they convey. This visibility is acquired through acts of identification which demarcate the frontiers between different projects (Laclau, 1994). This can happen on social media, and they are the kinds of experiences investigated in this study. Further, the visibility of these acts of identification can be observed in the processes of political participation, through which individuals construct

these identifications in the act of supporting or challenging political struggles. This is the subject of the next section.

### ***3.1.2 Political Participation: A Continuum from Perception to Action***

As observed earlier, political becomings involve processes of identifications and participation. It is through participation that identifications are constructed and made visible. This section deals with the concept of political participation and how it has been transformed due to the impact of digital technologies, such as social media. The aim is to elaborate a conception of political participation that most closely reflects the lived experiences of study participants and that can be operationalised with the mediation theory, as introduced in the second part of this chapter.

From being associated chiefly with actions involving institutional politics, such as voting or participating in political parties, the concept of political participation has outgrown the electoral field, reaching a vast set of actions and behaviours, from choices of what to consume or not to signing petitions or joining demonstrations (Manning, 2015b; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Stolle et al., 2005; Theocharis & Deth, 2018). Today, political participation can be observed “in a wide variety of individualized, creative, expressive, and everyday forms of engagement with societal and political issues” (Theocharis et al., 2021, p. 31). These new conceptualisations attempt to follow the many transformations the world has experienced. After all, “politics is culture, too,” and as such, it evolves with humans (Schudson, 2001, p. 423). These changes to more individualized engagement with political issues can be observed, for instance, in movements dedicated to the affirmation of certain identifications, such as women’s rights, indigenous peoples, and Black movements (Castells, 2010; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Manning, 2015a).

In this context, the rise of the internet from the 1990s onwards, and social media, starting in the 2000s are particularly significant, as these technologies disrupted how information circulates and provided new venues for political

organisation and action with a logic built around self-expression (Barassi, 2021; Chandler & Fuchs, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2017; Gomes, 2018; Jensen et al., 2012; Manning, 2015a; Margetts, 2019). Consequently, current political participation definitions are intrinsically related to the 21<sup>st</sup> century new media technologies, especially social media. This is discussed in the next section.

### ***3.1.2.1 New Media Textures and Political Participation***

Many scholars have been advancing the understanding of how political processes have been transformed since the popularisation of social media (e.g., Barassi, 2018; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Dennis, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017; Manning, 2015a; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015; Theocharis & Deth, 2018; Treré, 2019; Vieira-Magalhães, 2019). In the last decade, media platforms have been associated with political unrest across the world, such as the Arab Spring (2011, starting in Tunisia and spreading to other five Arab countries), Indignados (Spain, 2011), Occupy Wall Street (the United States, 2011), #YoSoy132 (Mexico, 2012-2012), Black Lives Matter (the United States, 2013 onwards), Gezi Park (Turkey, 2013), to cite a few (Gerbaudo, 2012; Melgaço & Monaghan, 2018; Treré, 2019; Treré & Gutierrez, 2015). In Brazil, social media have been considered a significant actor in the wave of protests that began with the June Journeys (2013), passing through the mobilisations pro and against Rousseff's impeachment (2015-2016) and the demonstrations of 2018 (de Freixo & Pinheiro-Machado, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2019; Sakamoto, 2013). These new forms of communication technologies have affected both the perception of the political, opening new ways to see the world and know about political struggles, and the actions employed to support or challenge political discourses and issues, providing extra spaces for “citizens to express their political views and convey their interests” (Jensen et al., 2012, p. 1). These transformations demonstrate that these media technologies are not neutral spaces, but active mediators “of the character of political interaction,” revealing that political participation is transformed in contact with the material conditions of the

spaces where it happens, acquiring specific shapes through the technological mediation (Verbeek, 2020b, p. 148).

The current media texture, predominantly social media, disrupted the media landscape impacting the political in varied ways. The new media technologies defy the state's control over the distribution of information and have now become intertwined in citizens' everyday lives and democratic institutions (Barassi, 2021; Castells, 2010; Dennis, 2019; Margetts, 2019). The one-directional flow that had dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with few senders to many receivers (as with television or radio), was met with a two-direction flow dynamic: many senders to many receivers (Castells, 2009). This is what the sociologist Manuel Castells (2009) labels as mass-self communication. It is mass-communication due to the potential "to reach a global audience" (p. 55), for example, when a YouTube video reaches millions of viewers; and self-communication because a person can produce their content from their home, not needing the infrastructures of mass communication such as TV stations, which functioned as gatekeepers of information (Naughton, 2014). In this new model, both mass and self-communication coexist with interpersonal communication, interacting and complementing each other (Castells, 2009).

This convergence of old and new media, private and public, made possible by the digital threads of the internet, initiated a cultural shift and transformed how we interact with all sorts of information. That is, it fabricated a new media texture (Jenkins, 2006; Papacharissi, 2010). For Castells (2009),

what is historically novel, with considerable consequences for social organization and cultural change, is the articulation of all forms of communication into a composite, interactive, digital hyper-text that includes, mixes, and recombines in their diversity the whole range of cultural expressions conveyed by human interaction. (p. 55)

This new communication model, which continues to evolve, represents a shift in human experience and enables new spaces and possibilities for individuals to engage with the political (Castells, 2010; Dennis, 2019). These spaces are better understood

through a hybridity perspective, moving from an “either/or” to a “not only, but also” thinking (Chadwick, 2017, “Conclusion,” para 12. ). A hybrid rationale “alerts us to the unusual things that happen when distinct entities come together to create something new that nevertheless has continuities with the old,” allowing for enquiries to move beyond old dichotomies (Chadwick, 2017, chapter 1, “Hybridity’s”, para 4. ). With social media, users can play with a diversity of genres of communication, mix personal, private *and* public, online *and* offline, old *and* new, human *and* technologies, creating hybrid environments in which political processes can take place<sup>14</sup> (as observed, for instance, in Treré, 2019). This hybrid mode of thinking about social media fits the postphenomenological notion of multistability, which acknowledges that technologies can have multiple meanings and uses and are often not confined to one given purpose (Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017).

One substantial change supported by convergent mobile technologies is the dislocation of political actions from public to private spheres (Papacharissi, 2010), or a hybrid of both. Through an analysis of how individuals connect to others and to political struggles, Papacharissi (2010) observes that most of the time, “the citizen engages and is enabled politically through a private media environment located within the individual’s personal and private space” (p. 131). This means that citizens participate in the political from their private spaces, engaging with public demonstrations and events from their homes or phones (Papacharissi, 2010), growing into being-in-multiple-worlds (Verbeek, 2015). The technological mediation gives individuals a sense of a “double presence,” where the “physical, bodily presence in concrete spaces and situations” is complemented with a “virtual, but still bodily-sensorial, presence at other places, with other people, and in different situations” (Verbeek, 2015, pp. 220-221). Citizens might be alone, in their concrete private spaces,

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<sup>14</sup> The hybridity of media and its association with current political activism is demonstrated, for instance, by the media scholar Emiliano Treré (2019) in *Hybrid Media Activism*, where the author explores the issue through the analysis of social movements situated in Italy, Mexico and Spain.



at home, but are not isolated, once the connection with the public is technologically enabled, and they can experience being also at public spaces, with other people, through the mediation of social media (Papacharissi, 2010; Verbeek, 2015).

In the private sphere model, citizens have greater autonomy over how and when they engage with political struggles (Papacharissi, 2010). Even those actions intentionally aimed at a broader public, such as voicing their views on a YouTube channel, often originate from a private space and are then publicised to public or semi-public audiences (Papacharissi, 2010). This means that citizens have greater control over their political practices because they can (to a certain extent) choose whether their political actions should remain confined to the private sphere or reach “diverse publicly positioned audiences and entities” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 20).

The notion of the private sphere underlines the centrality of the individual in contemporary political processes, demonstrating that the political is public *and also* private. As Papacharissi (2010) highlights,

the comfort of remaining in the realm of the familiar while at the same time being able to experience the other or the unknown is a capability of the private sphere *augmented* by online convergent technologies. In the networked private sphere, activities are structured around organizations of space and time determined and conditioned by the individual operating as a private agent. Beyond physical and virtual, the private sphere is rhetorically claimed by the individual and enframed by technology. (pp. 133-134, emphasis added)

This conception reveals how social media shapes political experiences by augmenting human abilities, as discussed in the postphenomenological conception of embodiment relations (Gertz, 2019; Ihde, 1990, 2009; Verbeek, 2000/2005). The technological mediation allows citizens to be in multiple worlds, both private and public (Bakardjieva, 2004; Papacharissi, 2010; Richardson, 2007; Verbeek, 2015). This addition of the private sphere to the spaces where political actions take place is a significant shift to consider in definitions and investigations of political participation

because many experiences with the political can remain invisible to narrower classifications, as further explained later in this chapter.

With an argument that also acknowledges the importance of individuals in political processes, which are the focus of this study, the media scholar Veronica Barassi (2018) maintains that political participation on social media is distinct from other forms of activism in two major aspects: its heavy personalisation (Bennett, 2012) and the reliance on a “politics of visibility” (Milan, 2015, p. 895). Personalisation of political participation is associated with the fact that social media function through personal profiles, which foster the creation of egocentric publics (Rojas, 2015). Individuals rely on these networks constructed around them to *perceive* political issues and information in general and also to *act*, mobilise and organise around specific agendas or collective identities (Barassi, 2016). Moreover, the personalisation of political participation is fostered by social media’s invitations, which constantly ask users to share their thoughts and beliefs (Verbeek, 2011). These platforms invite individuals to display their political identifications in their profiles through images, texts, comments, and profile filters, creating a personal narrative through these visible acts of identification (Barassi, 2016; Laclau, 1994). In sum, with social media, political participation tends to become centred around individuals rather than on collective bodies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010).

The personalisation of political participation is intensified by a logic of visibility, in which private experiences are entangled with political expressions. As the media scholar Stefania Milan (2015) contends, “visibility indicates the virtual embodiment and online manifestation of groups and individuals and of the associated meanings, which are (and ought to be) relentlessly negotiated, bolstered and updated” (p. 895). Again, we are reminded of the significance of the embodiment relations individuals establish with social media (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011). On social media, politically engaged individuals can make their identifications *visible* to their networks and beyond, through mechanisms such as hashtags and profile filters, digital artifacts that

become “the building blocks of collective identity,” fostering a sense of *we* and *them* (Milan, 2015, p. 895). Through these mechanisms, social media *invite* these public acts of identifications which, in turn, *amplify* the perception of the political identifications involved in these actions (Laclau, 1994; Verbeek, 2011). The logic of visibility, the personalisation and the displacement of politics to private spaces point to the value of looking at micropolitical behaviours, as it is pursued in this study (Barassi, 2016; Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010; Treré, 2019).

One divergent discussion on how social media are changing political processes is the notion of *connective action*, which contrasts with collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In connective actions, “the ideas and mechanisms for organizing action become more personalized than in cases where action is organized on the basis of social group identity, membership, or ideology,” and social media become vital spaces for action and mobilisation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, pp. 24-25). Under this logic, individuals join political action through their personal expressions that align with the issue at hand, that is, the individual uses the collective frame to express themselves (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2013) do not proclaim the death of collective identities but the emergence of connective actions, which thrive in the current digital media spaces, and explain part of the contemporary mobilisations. One key characteristic of connective actions is that they do not necessarily involve the construction of a *we* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Instead, they entail more flexible forms of “association with causes, ideas, and political organizations,” respecting the trend of increasing personalisation and autonomy in social and political processes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 5). This understanding is the main point of dispute among scholars who declare that the conception of connective action underestimates the role of collective identities. These continue to be a key element in contemporary political struggles, as it is attested in this study (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2019).

Considering the above-mentioned aspects of how current media technologies are shaping our experiences with political struggles, the following section mobilises a conceptualisation of political participation that is closer to the lived experiences of the young Brazilians listened to in this study. The view of political participation as a continuum is also suitable to be operationalised with the theory of mediation in the second part of this chapter.

### **3.1.2.2 Political Participation as a Continuum**

Contemporary studies often agree that political participation is better comprehended as an open process, a continuum covering many forms and levels of engagement with politics (Dahlgren, 2013; Dennis, 2019; Theocharis & Deth, 2018). This view of political participation as a continuum of activities that range from lower levels of engagement to higher levels of participation had already been present in the work of Lester W.

Milbrath and M. L. Goel (1977), *Political Participation: How and Why do People Get Involved in Politics?*, first published solely by Milbrath in 1965. By focusing on individual actions, the authors propose a hierarchy of political involvement that ranges from inactive (apathetic), spectators (mild engagement) to diverse modes of being politically active (gladiators) (Milbrath & Goel, 1977), which is considered the first model to view political participation as a continuum (Borba & Ribeiro, 2019). Working before the social media era, Milbrath and Goel (1977) addressed how political participation can look differently for diverse people in a view that shares some similarities to the model adopted in this research.

Moving to newer conceptualisations, Yannis Theocharis and Jan van Deth (2018) offer a systematic approach to political participation, which considers new technologies and forms of political actions enabled by them. The authors identify five variants of political participation: (1) at a minimal level, political participation involves those voluntary activities conducted by citizens in the sphere of institutional politics (e.g., voting, campaigning for a candidate or party); (2) a second form includes those

acts targeting institutional politics, the state or the government (e.g., signing a petition, protesting); (3) a third form of political participation involves those acts targeting community issues (e.g., volunteering for a community project); (4) a fourth type includes activities that do not fit with the former variants, but are carried out in a political context, such as using social media to share content related to political issues or encouraging people to take political action (e.g., using #BlackLivesMatter); (5) and finally, political participation can also entail those actions which are politically motivated, such as the consumption or non-consumption of goods for political reasons (e.g., boycotting products from authoritarian countries) (Theocharis & Deth, 2018). This definition stresses important features of political participation, clearly demarcating it from paid activities (such as those performed by state officials) and coerced actions (e.g., appearing in court): political participation emerges from the free will of individuals (Theocharis & Deth, 2018).

However, Theocharis and Deth (2018) limit political participation to *activities* not encompassing *latent* forms of participation, such as paying attention to the news, for example, or any process happening before the various modes of actions delimited by the authors. Those who defend the notion of latent forms of political participation, such as Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå (2012), do so grounded on

the observation that citizens actually do a lot of things that may not be directly *or* unequivocally classified as “political participation”, but at the same time could be of great significance for future political activities of a more conventional type.... People of all ages from all walks of life engage socially in a number of ways, formally outside of the political domain but nevertheless in ways that may have political consequences. (pp. 287-288, emphasis in original)

The inclusion of these latent forms of participation can allow an understanding of political participation that is closer to what is lived by citizens in contemporary democracies, permitting the observation of processes that remain in the private sphere, thus not necessarily publicly visible (Papacharissi, 2010).

A more comprehensive approach to political participation is found in the media scholar James Dennis' (2019) critique of the conception of *slacktivism*, a pejorative term employed to refer to forms of online activism as if they lacked effort or substance (Karpf, 2010). With a focus on those practices enabled by social media, and informed by Papacharissi's (2010) conception of the private sphere, among other authors, Dennis (2019) argues against "action-focused" definitions of political participation that leave out significant aspects of citizens' political involvements, demonstrating that "activism is deeply ingrained in everyday experiences" (Dennis, 2019, p. 198). From this perspective, what citizens engage with prior to public political actions, in their private spaces, "also have value" (Dennis, 2019, p. 198). Dennis (2019) concludes by claiming that participation "should be conceptualised as a process, whereby listening, everyday political conversations, and private forms of expression are all indicators of the health of a democracy" (p. 199).

This view acknowledges the transformations fostered (mainly, but not only) by contemporary forms of communication, such as the convergence of private and public, offline and online, proposing that political processes should also be seen as more fluid (Bennett, 2012; Dennis, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010; Papacharissi & Trevey, 2018). The boundaries between what is considered political, social or civic are blurred, "contemporary social movements simultaneously politicize and depoliticize all aspects of public and private life, ultimately rendering determination of what is political subjective, and, thus, individually arbitrary" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 109). Consequently, to talk about a definite set of political forms of engagement is to close our eyes to the transformations that these processes are undergoing in the confines of private spheres (Dennis, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010). This issue is addressed with the proposition to see political participation as a continuum encompassing diverse forms of political engagement, from more private to public activities, some of which are illustrated in *Table 3.1* below (Dennis, 2019). Some of these indicators are employed in

this research to select participants who show some level of political engagement, as discussed in Chapter 5. Moreover, this study takes into consideration what participants conceive as political participation, as the primary aim of this research is precisely to appreciate how social media are transforming these experiences.

**Table 3.1**

*Selected Indicators of Political Participation*

- 
- Attention to political news and issues (regarding institutional politics, political/community issues)
  - Following political interests (following politicians' profiles or profiles dedicated to political discussions on social media)
  - Sharing political information online
  - Interpersonal political discussion
  - Mediated or face-to-face interactions with political actors
  - Expressions of civic or political orientation
  - Production of political oriented content for social media
  - Membership of peer-defined networks and groups
  - Membership of traditional, hierarchical organisations
  - Organising and mobilising political actions
  - Voting in an election
  - Campaigning for a political party or candidate
  - Taking part in political demonstrations
- 

*Note.* Adapted from (Dennis, 2019, p. 81).

Building upon Nico Carpentier's (2011) model of access, interaction and participation in media<sup>15</sup>, and Sandor Vegh's (2003) classification of online activism forms, Dennis (2019) suggests a continuum of political participation consisting of four stages, which, in this study, are associated with the mediation of perception and action, and are also considered in the next section (see *Table 3.2* below). *Access* denotes the ways in which individuals become aware of political and public affairs; *expression* refers to modes of political communications among citizens; *connection* means "the processes of political organisation, as citizens use social media to establish and join

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that, as acknowledged by Dennis (2019), in Carpentier's (2011) conception, access and interaction are "very distinct from participation because of their less explicit emphasis on power dynamics and decision-making" (p. 69). In the author's view, access and interaction matter to the extent that they make participation possible but cannot be equated to participation. Carpentier (2011) supports a definition of participation as processes "characterized by the equalization of power-relations" (p. 354).

networks for a range of purposes”; and *action* encompasses “goal-orientated, public political acts” performed online or offline (Dennis, 2019, p. 11). The four stages are highly interconnected, feeding into each other, as all of them can happen in one space due to the convergence of production and consumption, private and public, characteristic of social media (Jenkins, 2006; Papacharissi, 2010). Moreover, these four stages do not have a deterministic relation; for instance, access does not necessarily lead to expression or any other phases (Dennis, 2019).

**Table 3.2**

*The Continuum of Participation Model*

| Stages of the Continuum of Participation | Description  |
|--|--|
| Access                                   | Cognitive engagement and the ways by which citizens access political content.            |
| Connection                               | Joining groups or networks for political purposes.                                       |
| Expression                               | The use of social media to make visible one’s political identification.                  |
| Action                                   | Goal-orientated, public political acts, or behaviours as part of engagement repertoires. |

*Note:* Adapted from Dennis (2019, p. 84).

The continuum of participation is used here to explore the ways in which social media shape perception and actions associated with political participation. The mediation of perception can be observed mainly in the access stage, whereas the mediation of action is more visible in the other three stages.

Following the arguments presented so far, political participation is conceived as voluntary processes involving perception and actions related to the political, encompassing institutional politics, community issues, political context and politically motivated experiences (Dahlgren, 2013; Dennis, 2019; Zukin et al., 2006). This conception remains flexible however to allow the inclusion of other forms of political participation that the study participants might express (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi,



2010). Through these experiences of participation, individuals construct political identifications, constituting themselves as political subjects: in other words, their political becomings. The next section explains a typology for understanding the diverse modes of participation on social media.

### **3.1.2.3 Typology of Civic Modes on Social Media**

Within the contemporary media texture, citizens have an increased autonomy to choose how they wish to engage with the political (Papacharissi, 2010). In this context, political participation can occur under varying degrees of privacy, beginning in the private sphere and moving towards more public expressions or remaining more private (Dennis, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010; Waeterloos et al., 2021).

Dennis (2019) identifies four modes through which citizens can engage in political participation on social media; three of them are employed in this research<sup>16</sup> (*Table 3.3*).

This typology assists in the identification of the many ways in which participants in this study see themselves as becoming involved in political processes (Dennis, 2019).

The proposed civic modes follow two interrelated axes: one related to the privacy and publicity of behaviours; and the other related to perception which is associated with more latent forms of participation and action, or those activities that involve expressive forms of participation and higher efforts and dedication from participants (*Figure 3.1*).

It is important to note that these are not fixed positions as individuals often move between these modes of political participation, but a particular behaviour can be more salient at given periods of their life (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson,

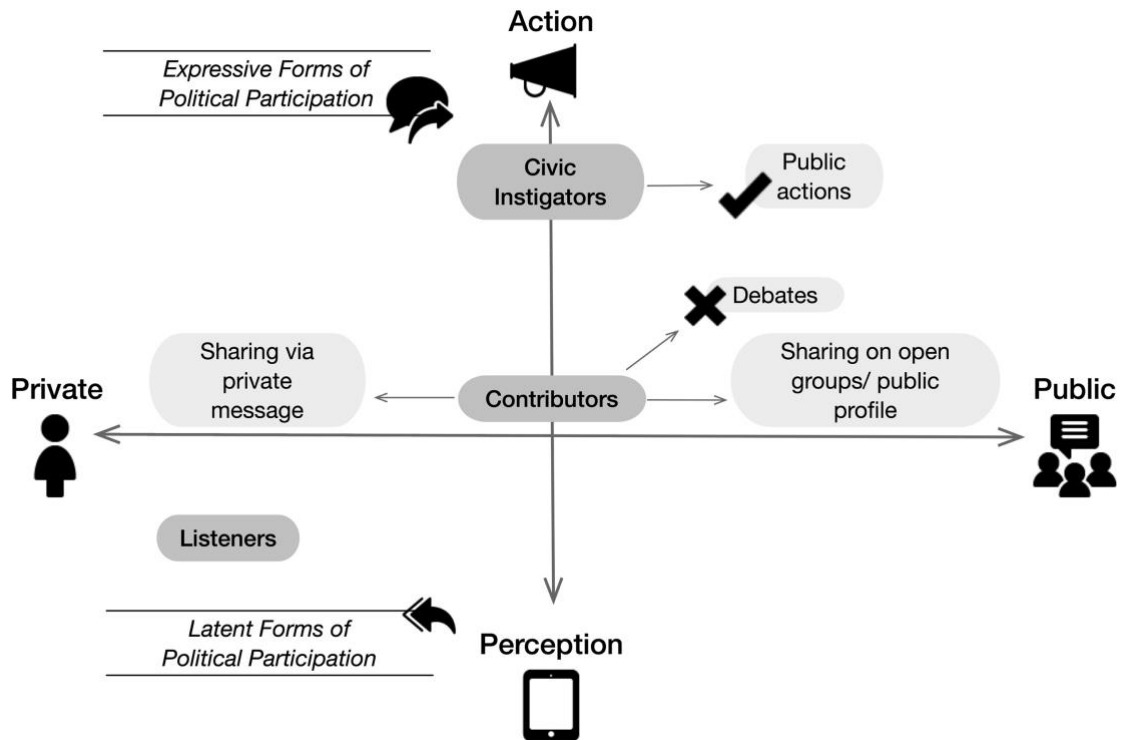
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<sup>16</sup> In addition to the citizens' roles discussed here, Dennis (2019) employs *avoiders*, to characterise those persons who avoid political content. As this research focus on individuals who are politically engaged to some extent, this role is not relevant in this study.

2000). Individuals in this study are assessed against the modes of participation that are more prominent in their experiences with the political.

**Figure 3.1**

*Matrix of Political Participation Modes on Social Media*



*Note:* Adapted from Dennis (2019, p. 84) and Waeterloos et al. (2021, p. 4).

**Table 3.3***Selected Typology of Political Participation Modes on Social Media*

| Participation Mode | Characteristics   | Activities  |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Listener           | Cognitive engagement with the political, monitoring information and reacting when they find it necessary. They can engage in political actions in moments of crisis.  | Following/visiting political pages/channels, being silent participants in political groups.                 |
| Contributor        | Those who want to contribute to others' political learnings by sharing political content.   | Sharing political information among their network, semi-publicly (in groups) or publicly in their profiles. |
| Civic instigator   | Those who become more constant in their political engagement by acting to mobilise political activism. They often engage in diverse forms of micro-activisms enhancing their own political identifications. | Creating/managing online groups, instigating action, commitment to inspire others' activism.                |

*Note:* Adapted from Dennis (2019, p. 84).

*Listeners* are those individuals who maintain a cognitive political engagement. They are interested in political issues, and consume information, but often refrain from expressing their political identifications publicly or engaging in expressive political action, remaining within the *access* stage in the continuum of political participation, in what is considered latent forms of engagement (Dennis, 2019; Waeterloos et al., 2021). Citizens who display this behaviour are often considered politically disengaged by the narrower definitions of political participation (e.g., Theocharis & Deth, 2018). However, these individuals frequently find themselves in what the political communications theorist Michael Schudson (2000) calls “monitorial” mode, engaging in fleeting moments of active political participation when they “identify danger to their personal good and danger to the public good,” or to their beliefs and identifications (p. 16). In postphenomenological terms, listeners are co-constituting (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011) a political world around them, living these political discourses privately, with the mediation of social media, even if they do not express their political identifications. These citizens are capable of more active forms of participation, but

they are more cautious with the risks involved in such actions and prefer to remain in a standby mode (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010).

The subsequent modes address expressive forms of engagement, when individuals express their political identifications through actions reaching varying degrees of publicity (Waeterloos et al., 2021). *Contributors* like to share political content as a way to support the political learning experiences of their peers (Dennis, 2019). Social media allow them to manage (to some extent) the visibility of their contributions when they opt for sharing content via private messages, in private or open groups or openly in a public profile (Papacharissi, 2010). These individuals can *express* their political identifications or *connect* to others through their processes of political engagement but often refrain from political debates due to apprehension about how they can be perceived by their publics (Dennis, 2019). Contributors use “social media as a space to inform others and to learn” rather than for political deliberation (Dennis, 2019, p. 16).

*Civic instigators* display more proactive behaviours from the access to action stages of political participation, choosing their information sources and curating content to share among their peers (Dennis, 2019). These citizens express their political identifications and share content “to challenge others” (Dennis, 2019, pp. 15-16). In this process, “they refine their political identity based on this feedback. As such, digital micro-activism forms part of an experiential learning cycle, as political talk and self-expression shape their political attitudes” (Dennis, 2019, pp. 15-16). Micro-activism refers to those actions performed on social media to assert one’s political identification, mobilise supporters for an issue or political project, or interactions with political elites, as opposers or advocates (Dennis, 2019). Civic instigators aim for publicity, opting to take their actions from the private sphere to public audiences on groups, pages and their personal profiles (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010).

This section aimed to synthesise the notion of political becomings, processes encompassing political identifications and participation practices involving mediated

perception and action (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992; Svensson, 2011). As political processes become increasingly individualised, through algorithmic selection and the actions supported and invited by social media, this dissertation asks: how do social media shape the experiences of political becomings for young Brazilians? The answer to this question is pursued by looking at concrete cases of political becomings through the lens of the theory of mediation, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, provides a framework to explore how technologies transform human perception and action (Ihde, 1993b; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011, 2020b). These experiences are analysed by bringing the four stages of the continuum of political participation (access, connection, expression and action) into the encounter of the theory of mediation. This is the subject of the next section.

### **3.2 Technologically Mediated Political Becomings**

The first part of this chapter considered the notion of political becomings as experiences through which individuals become involved in political struggles through participation and identification processes (Dennis, 2019; Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992; Svensson, 2011). This second part explores some of the ways that social media transform the experiences involved in the continuum of participation and political identification processes through the mediation of perception and action (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011).

It is worth noting that the two dimensions, perception (Section 3.2.1) and action (Section 3.2.2), discussed next, often overlap as a consequence of the hybrid nature of social media and the political processes themselves (Chadwick, 2017; Treré, 2019). Furthermore, the processes of identification (Section 3.1.1) encompass all political participation stages, once subjects question their identities, reinforce or challenge them through the perception and action involved in the political becomings (Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). The perception dimension of the mediation theory refers to how the world is present to individuals, involving a tension

between amplification and reduction (Verbeek, 2011). Hence, it is mainly related to access in the continuum of participation and, to some extent, connection, as discussed subsequently (Dennis, 2019). The mediation of action can be observed in the other three stages, expression, connection and action, involving a dynamic of inhibition and invitation (Verbeek, 2011).

### ***3.2.1 Mediated Perception: Accessing the Political***

The technological mediation of perception is about how the world is constituted and shows itself to us (Verbeek, 2011). To inquire about how technologies mediate perception, we should ask: what parts of the world do these technologies show to us? What do they hide? And how do they transform what we perceive of the world? Social media organise the perception of the world, projecting realities onto us and from us to others, helping “to shape what counts as ‘real’” (Verbeek, 2011, p. 9, emphasis in original). From a postphenomenological perspective, social media can be understood as embodied when they amplify users’ communicative abilities, expanding the potential for network, connection and perception of the world (Gertz, 2019; Schwartz & Mahnke, 2018). To think about social media in terms of perception, particularly embodiment relations, is to acknowledge these platforms as “part of the way one relates to the world” (Rosenberger, 2009, p. 175). Social media shapes perception when individuals’ world is co-constituted (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011) with the help of these technologies, as the participants in this study acknowledge.

In the continuum of participation, we can associate the mediation of perception with the access stage (Section 3.1.2.2), which refers to cognitive engagement (Dennis, 2019). As discussed previously, cognitive engagement refers to “paying attention to politics and public affairs” and includes following the news or talking to friends and family about politics, or merely being concerned about political issues (Zukin et al., 2006, p. 54). With cognitive engagement, individuals co-constitute a particular political world around them, when they chose to follow certain issues or political personalities

which will inform and orient how they experience their environment (macroperception) (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2000/2005) . This is the primary stage in the continuum of participation, as it is through access that citizens engage in the other processes (Carpentier, 2011; Dennis, 2019). By becoming aware of a certain issue or political view, individuals begin to experience these realities, co-constituting specific political worlds around them (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011), they become immersed in these realities that are often far from their immediate environments. Thus, this first stage is crucial to the activities that might follow it. However, despite being a necessary step into the subsequent stages, it is important to note that access does not predict engagement in the other phases, although some studies suggest that the consumption of news on social media positively impacts political participation (Dennis, 2019; Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2012; Kim & Amnå, 2015; Papacharissi, 2009; Zukin et al., 2006). Also, as Milbrath and Goel (1977) observe, several studies on political behaviour have demonstrated that “the more stimuli about politics a person receives,” the greater the chances that they will engage in political participation (p. 35). Thus, perception is of great importance in the experiences of political becomings.

### ***3.2.1.1 Amplification and Reduction of Political Viewpoints***

According to the *2020 Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, access to news through social media is particularly noticeable among young citizens (aged 18 to 24), who tend to access information through these technologies over two times more than those older than 25 years old (Newman et al., 2020). Moreover, in Brazil, in 2020, for the first time in the survey, social media overtook television in news consumption (Newman et al., 2020). Additionally, in a survey conducted as part of this study,<sup>17</sup> 86% of respondents affirmed reading about politics on social media *every day* or *almost every day*, and

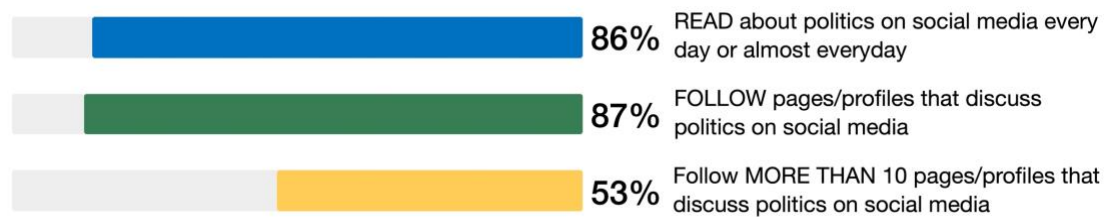
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<sup>17</sup> The online survey was conducted as means of approximation with the field and screening tool to select participants to take part in the in-depth interviews that inform this study. The survey is further discussed in Chapter 5.

virtually the same percentage *follows pages or profiles* that discuss politics on social media, being that the majority follow *more than ten* of such profiles (*Figure 3.2*). These findings demonstrate the significance of social media for Brazilian youth concerning the access to political content.

### Figure 3.2

#### *Consumption of Political Information on Social Media*



*Note.* Data obtained from an online survey conducted as part of the present study between 13 May 2019 and 25 October 2019.

The sample population consists of 146 respondents aged between 18 and 34 years old.

Social media can amplify the access to political content by expanding users' possible sources of information (Yamamoto et al., 2020). On one platform or across several online spaces, individuals have easy access to news coming from a wide range of sources, "journalistic elites, amateur and semi-professional bloggers, the public relations industry, digital marketing firms, and politically active citizens," as well as access to information shared by friends and discussion groups, private or public, spanning 24 hours per day (Chadwick, 2017, chapter 4, "Conclusion", para. 3). This information flows through the egocentric public constructed around one's social media profile (Rojas, 2015), following algorithmic selection, which in turn conceals (Ihde, 1990) parts of this amplified potential pool of information (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Egocentric publics tend to be highly diverse once they are not bound by geography and are built throughout various phases of one's life; moreover, they interconnect with other egocentric publics (Rojas, 2015). This diversity is translated



into the information users are exposed to, increasing the chances of encountering dissimilar political viewpoints on social media (Bakshy et al., 2015; Barnidge, 2015; Kim, 2011). Nonetheless, politically engaged individuals and those who hold stronger political views tend to silence or unfriend disagreeing sources, defusing the initial plurality of views (Andreoni & Mylovanov, 2012; Bode, 2016; Goyanes et al., 2021; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Even when faced with alternative viewpoints, individuals tend to ignore them and engage more with information aligned with their political affiliation (Bakshy et al., 2015; Bruns, 2019).

Exposure to diverging information is believed to have contrasting effects; it can foster both political participation (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2012) and a perception of political polarisation (Bail et al., 2018; Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). Hernando Rojas (2015) argues that the increased perception of political polarisation on social media is due to extreme exemplars of “the other side” views, “when members of our egocentric public decide to post something from the ‘other side’, they usually do so when the ‘other side’ looks particularly bad” (p. 99, emphasis in original). This behaviour amplifies the perception of the worst from the other side, fostering hostile feelings and a sense of political polarisation among opposing political identifications (Mouffe, 2005, 1993/2005; Rojas, 2015). Adding this behaviour to the possibility of silencing contrasting voices or simply not engaging with them, social media can promote an environment of amplification of the worst from the other side and concealment of the regular views of those in opposing groups (Bakshy et al., 2015; Goyanes et al., 2021).

Thus, although social media’s engineering, through egocentric publics, offers the potential to amplify the diversity of political views one is exposed to, users often choose to reduce this plurality, usually in the face of uncivil political discussions, or by developing more affinity with news shared by certain friends over others (Alves & Mutsvairo, 2019; Bakshy et al., 2015; Goyanes et al., 2021; Vromen et al., 2015). Such conditions can nurture the emergence of antagonist relations—when the *other* ceases to be seen as an adversary and begins to be perceived as an *enemy* who should be

destroyed (Mouffe, 2000/2013). This relation between friend/enemy arises “when the others, who up to now had been considered as simply different, start to be perceived as putting into question our identity and threatening our existence” (Mouffe, 2009/2013, p. 217). If we look at the recent political struggles in Brazil, this can be seen in the *anti-sentiments* (*antifeminism, antipetismo, anti-antipetismo*) (Antunes, 2015; Mendonça et al., 2019; Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018a; Ribeiro, 2018; Samuels & Zucco, 2018; Solano et al., 2017), which are constructed around a discourse of fear of the threat posed by those enemies, stances that are discussed in Chapter 4.

### **3.2.1.2 Algorithmic Political Struggles**

As discussed previously, the foremost organiser of our perception (and actions) on social media is algorithmic selection (Gillespie, 2014; Silveira, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). This type of selection is co-shaped by humans and technology, but as algorithms’ mechanisms are obscure, involving inputs that we do not control, these technologies appear at times at the centre of discussions about the dissemination of extremist discourse, conspiracy theories and misinformation on social media (Starr, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2018). For instance, YouTube, the third most used social media for news consumption (after Facebook and WhatsApp), has been found to recommend videos with extreme political views and conspiracy theories once the algorithm had detected users’ political orientation through their initial searches in the platform, leading to the consumption of far-Right and far-Left content (Newman et al., 2019; Nicas, 2018; Ottoni et al., 2018; Reis et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2020; Starr, 2020; Tufekci, 2018).<sup>18</sup>

The algorithm’s choice for extreme material derives from its logic to suggest videos that have the potential to maintain users engaged in the platform for long periods to sell more advertising, thus recommending videos that are high in emotion

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<sup>18</sup> For the Wall Street news report demonstrating the YouTube’s algorithm at work, please see: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-youtube-drives-viewers-to-the-internets-darkest-corners-1518020478>

and novelty, such as conspiracy theories and content that foment fear and antagonism (Davidson et al., 2010; Lewis, 2018; Starr, 2020; Sunstein, 2014; van Dijck, 2013). Consequently, YouTube's algorithms tend to display a reality filled with more extreme political views, concealing moderate views (Nicas, 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2020; Starr, 2020; Tufekci, 2018). In this setting, the visibility of misleading extremist information is augmented while news from journalistic outlets has its reach reduced (Benkler et al., 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). When a given user interacts with this type of story, the algorithm can send more similar content to their timeline and searches, while access to accurate information can require additional efforts from individuals (e.g, searching for specific news outlets).

### **3.2.1.3 Political Influencers**

YouTube has been particularly associated with the dissemination of political ideologies on the far-Right or, in the case of Brazil, the New Right (Lewis, 2018, 2020; Reis et al., 2020). Looking at the US political scenario, the digital media scholar Rebecca Lewis (2018) argues that YouTube's engineering encourages the behaviour of what she labels *alternative influence network* (AIN):

an assortment of scholars, media pundits, and internet celebrities who use YouTube to promote a range of political positions, from mainstream versions of libertarianism and conservatism, all the way to overt white nationalism. Content creators in the AIN claim to provide an alternative media source for news and political commentary. They function as *political influencers* who adopt the techniques of brand influencers to build audiences and “sell” them on far-right ideology. (p. 1, emphasis in original)

Despite holding different political views, the individuals on the AIN are united in their “reactionary” posture, “a general opposition to feminism, social justice, or left-wing politics” (Lewis, 2018, p. 8). These political influencers comprise a network (not only on YouTube but also on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Discord and others) aiming to establish an “alternative media community” (Lewis, 2018, p. 20), opposed to

mainstream media, following strategies similar to those adopted by non-subaltern counter-publics (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Fraser, 1990), as described by Camila Rocha (2021) in her analysis of the Brazilian New Right (discussed in Chapter 4).

This network does more than disseminate (alternative) information; they become a *family* that validates the political identifications of those who reject the mainstream media or do not see themselves in these outlets (Hochschild, 2016; Kreiss, 2018; Lewis, 2018). This view emphasises the role of media in terms of co-constitution of subjects' identifications, "a family provides a sense of identity, place, and belonging; emotional, social, and cultural support and security; and gives rise to political and social affiliations and beliefs" (Kreiss, 2018, p. 94). It does not mean that the information shared in these spaces does not matter, but "identity comes *prior* to information. Identity shapes epistemology. People filter their understandings of information through their political and social identities," they want to belong, to see and feel themselves in the media they engage with (Kreiss, 2018, p. 98, emphasis in original). In the Brazilian case, individuals identified as *anti-Workers' Party* Right-wingers found refuge in an AIN (on YouTube and other social media), where they could find other individuals who share their feelings of rejection by the mainstream media and institutional politics (elaborated in Chapter 4) (Rocha, 2021).

Political influencers constitute a significant source of guidance for participants in this study, particularly on YouTube. In fact, few participants have turned themselves into political influencers with considerably high numbers of followers on YouTube and Instagram (some reaching 70 thousand followers). Thus, political influencers constitute not only a way through which perception of the political is transformed but also a form of political action. These political influencers build trust with their audiences by employing micro-celebrity's tactics (Lewis, 2020), in which they present themselves "as a public persona to be consumed by others, use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans" (Marwick, 2016, pp. 333-334). The aim is to explore social media's politics of visibility (Milan, 2015) seeking "attention and

popularity” in the promotion of diverse political views, which are handled as products to be sold (Lewis, 2020, p. 203).

Micro-celebrity processes involve the high personalisation of content and the employment of advertisement techniques, such as “*ideological testimonials* akin to product testimonials” and vlogging, in an embodiment of political ideologies (Lewis, 2018, p. 25, emphasis in original). These forms of communication “are often highly personal, told through subjective storytelling and affective cues, and take place over long periods of time” (Lewis, 2018, p. 18), contributing to an increased perception of authenticity, transparency and in-depth information, attributes considered by these counter-publics as lacking on mainstream media (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Rocha, 2021).

Moreover, YouTubers monetise content through the platform’s advertising tools (Lewis, 2018), which, through algorithm selection, “does not reward the best ideas, or the most thorough reporting” but “user engagement, and social sharing, and time-on-site” (Karpf, 2020, p. 160). This structure incites the production of controversial and shocking content in the pursuit of higher numbers or visualisations (Lewis, 2018). In this race for viewers (and financial gains), influencers engage in strategies that combine entertainment, political ideologies and drama, framing extremist views “as lighthearted, entertaining, rebellious and fun,” which can be quite attractive to young individuals who feel disillusioned with mainstream media (Lewis, 2018, p. 34).

It is noteworthy that micro-celebrities’ processes are not limited to reactionary or Right-wing content. Progressive individuals also use these strategies to promote their political ideologies (e.g., feminists, progressivists and leftist political influencers in general) (Lewis, 2020). The difference is the ends (often anti-democratic) and the fierce opposition to mainstream media advocated by the reactionary influencers, which can pose significant threats to democratic processes (Lewis, 2020). The AIN affects not only the *perception* of the political by offering alternative political views but, as a culture built around the politics of visibility, also *invites* individuals to engage in

*actions* as ambassadors for their political ideologies (Lewis, 2018; Milan, 2015; Verbeek, 2011).

When technologies mediate perception, they shape not only *how* the world is present to individuals but also *what* of the world is made available to them, influencing what is seen as real and valid (Gertz, 2019; Newman et al., 2020; Verbeek, 2011). By transforming users' perception of the world, social media transform how political content is present to individuals, which in turn informs their actions (Verbeek, 2020b). This transformation involves both technologies (social media and the algorithms that power them) and humans (who provide the information from which algorithms construct reality and can decide to engage or not with what is presented to them) (Bakshy et al., 2015; Just & Latzer, 2017; Schwartz & Mahnke, 2020; Verbeek, 2011). However, as mentioned previously, information circulating on social media comes from various sources that are not always clear to individuals. Often, these sources hold obscure interests, purposely distorting facts for financial or political gains (e.g., in the case of the AIN), or yet the very model of these platforms (which favours content traffic over quality) can make misleading content more visible, contributing to the creation of a twisted reality. Under these conditions, distinguishing *true* from *false* or even "identifying *who* is communicating on social media" becomes a complex and trying task (Fenton, 2021, p. 304, emphasis in original). Thus, although individuals can choose the information they engage with, this choice is not always a straightforward process. The social media mediation of political becomings is considered next through the perspective of *action*.

### **3.2.2 Mediated Action: Supporting and Challenging Political Struggles**

While the mediation of perception is concerned with how the world is made present for humans, the mediation of action is about how humans become present in the world (Verbeek, 2011). From this perspective, technologies invite us to act in certain ways when engaging with them, inviting some actions while inhibiting others, as discussed in

Section 2.3 (Verbeek, 2011). In the continuum of political participation (Section 3.1.2.2), the mediation of action can be associated with connection, expression and action, which are informed by the access to political information, discussed under the mediation of perception (Dennis, 2019; Verbeek, 2011). In this investigation, *connection* is employed to refer to “relationships and networks formed by citizens” around political identifications (Dennis, 2019, p. 106), while *expression* indicates the ways through which individuals make their political identifications visible (Laclau, 1994), and *action* refers to those “goal-orientated public political acts” employed to sustain or challenge political identifications or discourses (Dennis, 2019, p. 35). These stages are closely related, as connections are often forged around the shared political identifications that are expressed (and perceived) in varied ways, and action can take the shape of expression or be enacted through connection.

### **3.2.2.1 Mediated Connection**

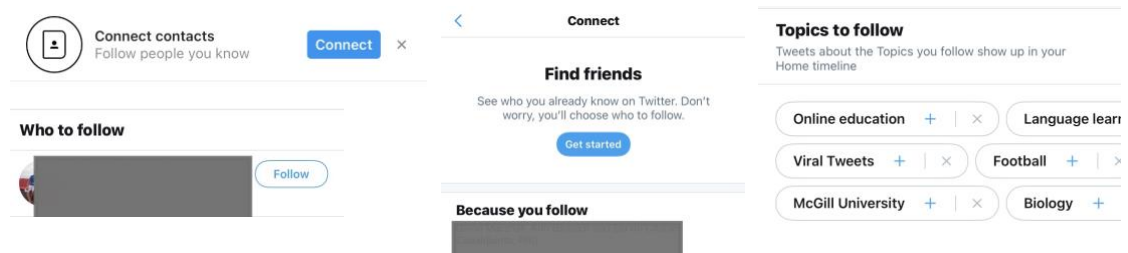
The idea of connection (between humans and humans, and humans and information) is at the heart of social media platforms and is what has driven many users to these spaces, as “these sites primarily promote interpersonal contact, whether between individuals or groups; they forge personal, professional, or geographical connections and encourage weak ties” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 8). Moreover, these spaces converge the connection human-humans and human-content in public-private settings, which contributes to the personalisation of politics discussed earlier (Bennett, 2012; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2009; Vromen et al., 2015).

As happens with the connection humans-information, the connection between humans and humans is also informed by algorithmic selection, in an “automated connectivity” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 12). With a deep knowledge of users’ tastes and behaviours, these technologies are capable of engineering “the sociality in people’s everyday routines” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 12). This happens, for example, when algorithms display potential contacts that might interest users or when they prioritise

content from some contacts while inhibiting others (van Dijck et al., 2018). Social media *invite* us to grow our egocentric networks with prompts like *add these people to your network*, *follow these people* or *hashtags* or *join this group* in calls to expand connections with ideas and people (Figure 3.3) (Verbeek, 2011).

### Figure 3.3

#### *Examples of Social Media Inviting Connection*



*Note.* Screenshots taken by the author from Instagram and Twitter on 24 April 2021.

Connections are a fundamental part of the experiences of political becomings. Through connecting with others, individuals construct a sense of *we* and *act* in concert, honing their identifications and challenging others' political identifications (Mouffe, 1992; Victor et al., 2016). By altering how we connect with others, social media as a result impact what we know about social and political behaviour (Papacharissi, 2011). *Friends*, who used to mean close connections, can now be total strangers *added* on Facebook; and they can be quickly *unfriended*<sup>19</sup> (a verb brought to us by social media); *followers* can denote friends, audience or a public circumscribed by a political figure; *likes* can indicate affiliation to a cause or ideology or simply a trivial reaction (Bode, 2016; Goyanes et al., 2021; van Dijck, 2013). These connections with people, ideas and personalities are visible (most of the time) to the user's audience and integrate one's process of self-presentation, through which political identifications can be expressed,

<sup>19</sup> *Unfriend* was chosen the word of the year by New Oxford American Dictionary in 2009 and means to delete a contact from one's network on social media (Reuters Life!, 2009).



impacting how individuals are perceived by their peers (Papacharissi, 2011; van Dijck, 2013).

For instance, in 2016, after Bolsonaro voiced his admiration for a military officer accused of torturing people during the dictatorship in Brazil, there was a movement of people deleting those *friends* on Facebook who *liked* the politician's page on the platform (Orrico, 2016). The *like*, in this case, was equated to the support of those ideas. Amid the polarisation the country was experiencing at that moment (during Rousseff's impeachment process), *liking* Bolsonaro situated people on one of the opposing poles (despite some individuals arguing that they merely wanted to keep track of what the politician was saying) and led some individuals to question their relationships on the platform based on the perceived political identifications of those in their network.<sup>20</sup> Social media amplified a part of individuals' online profiles (*liking* Bolsonaro) and concealed the reasons for that *like* (which did not always reflect users' political identifications), and many individuals informed their decision to *unfriend* a person based on this partial perspective.

Before social media, intrinsic behaviours such as *liking* or *following* a given political project or personality would be confined to one's private sphere; nobody would know what newspaper section(s) we had read or liked the most (Papacharissi, 2010). When such behaviours gain visibility through social media, their meanings are transformed, and they are equated to acts of political identification, signalling one's position in relation to different political projects and issues (Laclau, 1994; Papacharissi, 2010). To *like* or to *follow* become new forms of political expression made possible through the interaction with social media, constituting these platforms as spaces where political identifications can be asserted and contested (Chayko, 2021; Margetts, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010).

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<sup>20</sup> As an anecdote, I was not aware of all this movement in Brazil and found months later that I had been *deleted* by an old friend, who saw that I *liked* Bolsonaro, which I did for research purposes. We had a conversation regarding the values of a *like* on social media and the implication for her (a lesbian) to be connected to someone who *liked* Bolsonaro's page. It was probably the first postphenomenological discussion that I had, even before being aware of it.

### **3.2.2.2 Mediated Expression**

Social media also alter how individuals are present to others by allowing networked citizens to be in multiple worlds (Hardley & Richardson, 2020; Verbeek, 2015). For some participants in this study, it means being transported to previously unknown political realities, not only perceiving these worlds but making themselves present to different audiences, even when they live in a remote town (Papacharissi, 2010; Verbeek, 2000/2005). For others, it means making their identifications visible to a broad audience, inspiring others to join these political projects, from their private spaces (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010). With social media, users can choose to present themselves and express their identifications to a “variety of potential audiences, some intentional and several accidental,” some more public, others more private, adjusting what is exposed and to whom on different platforms (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 307).

Moreover, there is the possibility of anonymity, although this is not what social media invite. With anonymous profiles, users can create a version of themselves detached from their close ties (family and close friends) and engage in “somewhat freer, more open, and sometimes coarser forms of self-expression” (Chayko, 2021, p. 118). This is the case for a few younger participants in this investigation, who do not feel comfortable associating their political views with their personal profiles due to fearing hate comments or feeling that their political arguments are not strong enough to face public scrutiny (Chayko, 2021). These diverse possibilities of audiences, from more public to more private, including anonymity, provide varied modes in which individuals can experiment with their identifications and engage with political struggles (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2011).

Constructed around personal profiles, social media *invite* flexible and self-centred political expression and action through processes of mass-self communication (Barassi, 2021; Castells, 2009). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube invite “the near-continuous practice of personal expression through text,

photos, videos, and so on as part of their business model” (Chayko, 2021, p. 118). From their home, citizens can use these stages for *self-presentation*, constructing and expressing their political identifications through these networks of visibility and connections (Chayko, 2021; Papacharissi, 2011). By expressing their political identifications, citizens not only support political projects but also influence others to follow the same path. Whether through a YouTube channel (which can yield some financial gains, depending on the visibility), an Instagram, Twitter or Facebook profile, these citizens voice their views and try to have an influence “in shaping the kind of world they would like to live in” (Vivienne, 2016, p. 202). Although these expressions might be performed individually and privately, through this work, activists construct networked publics around them and also become part of a wider network of individually expressed political identifications, which connect around shared values and/or against a common *adversary* (Lewis, 2018; Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a; Papacharissi, 2010; Vivienne, 2016).

### **3.2.2.3 Mediated Action**

As discussed previously, current political actions can “emanate from the locus of a private sphere,” from the comfort of homes and phones and then be broadcasted to public or semi-public audiences (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 20). In the private sphere, citizens have “the autonomy to practice politics in ways they deem meaningful,” being able to choose to whom they want to make their identifications visible and how (Papacharissi, 2021, chapter 1, “Thinking”, para. 1). In this model, the individual is alone but not isolated, as private spheres are connected and “empowered by interlaced and overlapping spheres of public and private activities” through online technologies, such as social media (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 163). Thus, when the activist records a video on a political issue or creates an Instagram profile dedicated to supporting a politician, they are acting in their private sphere; and when the content is published online, acquiring public visibility, social media function as bridges connecting their

private spheres to other private spheres and the public realm, that together comprise a network (Barassi, 2018; Papacharissi, 2010). In this process, what was personal becomes political, yet personalised:

The meaning of the political lies in the ability to express dissent, to think differently. To the extent that the private sphere affords the autonomy, control, and expressive capabilities that enable dissent, it effectively reconciles the personal with the political in a way that enables connection with like-minded individuals. The private sphere, as metaphor, describes and explains the mechanism for civic connections in contemporary democracies. (Papacharissi, 2010, pp. 166-167)

Through these processes, individuals can connect with others, overcoming individualism and feeling part of a share of a collective identification made of “conjoined private spheres” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 166). By allowing citizens to engage in political participation from their private spheres, social media transform these activities, making them more adaptable to one’s routine (Papacharissi, 2010). This way, these technologies expand the possibilities to engage in political action, permitting more individuals to engage in such practices, as they diminish time and geographic constraints, with the remark that access to online spaces is far from equal in conditions (Papacharissi, 2010).

### **3.3 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the notion of political becomings and how social media are transforming these experiences (Dennis, 2019; Holland et al., 2018; Ihde, 2009; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992; Svensson, 2011; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Political becomings are comprehended as processes involving political identifications and political participation practices, through which these identifications are constructed (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). Political participation involves latent and expressive forms of participation (access, connection, expression and action) (Dennis, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010; Waeterloos et al., 2021). Latent forms

of participation include the ways in which citizens access political issues, being associated with the mediation of perception (Dennis, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010; Verbeek, 2011; Waeterloos et al., 2021). Expressive forms of participation involve connection, expression and action in the continuum of participation and are related to the mediation of action (Dennis, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010; Verbeek, 2011).

Under current media textures, political participation often begins in digital-enabled private spaces with the potential for public consequences (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010). This setting is one of increasing personalisation and privatisation of political processes: individuals have more control and autonomy over their political participation practices, being able to join or leave political movements from their private spheres, connect with other private spheres, or express themselves to multiple audiences with varying degrees of publicity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Dennis, 2019; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010, 2021). Moreover, social media invite and favour the materialisation of political struggles in the persons of political influencers, who embody and perform political ideologies utilising the advertising strategies fomented by social media, adding another dimension to the personalisation of political participation (Lewis, 2018; Milan, 2015; Rocha, 2021). Mediation theory and postphenomenology provide valuable tools that can assist in the investigation of how social media are fostering these transformations and others; these can be revealed through the analysis of concrete experiences of political becomings, as it is enacted throughout this study (Aagaard, 2015, 2018; Adams & Turville, 2018; Ihde, 2009; Verbeek, 2011).

With these theoretical tools, this study examines the experiences of young Brazilians as a case study to illuminate how social media shape contemporary political becomings. The contexts of this case study are outlined in the next chapter.

## 4

### **Brazil: Political Polarisation and Social Media (2013-2018)**

Postphenomenological studies often employ case studies to investigate the role of technologies in the relations between humans and the world, looking at their impact on specific dimensions of human experience (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). In this research, the analysis of how social media are transforming micropolitical processes is grounded in a case study of the experiences of young Brazilians with political struggles. This chapter provides information about the broader contexts in which the participants in this study live their experiences with political struggles: Brazil, particularly the many political crises that engulfed the country between 2013 and 2018. The aim is to highlight some of the events and contexts that somewhat influence participants' political becomings, providing a general picture of the background against which their experiences are lived. Furthermore, this chapter functions as a transition from the more theoretical Chapters 2 and 3 to the empirical material derived from the participants' interviews. Throughout this chapter, those political identifications associated with participants' experiences are highlighted, providing the reader with background information to comprehend better who are the participants and the analyses of their political becomings performed in Chapters 6 and 7.

The previous chapter delimited the notion of political becomings as encompassing the participation in political struggles and the identification with political projects, as intertwined processes (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). Political becomings are increasingly mediated by social media, which transform these experiences in significant ways. This is observed, for instance, in the heavy personalisation of political processes (Bennett, 2012), the politics of visibility (Milan, 2015), the notion of the private sphere

(Papacharissi, 2010) and the activities of political influencers (Lewis, 2018). As discussed in Chapter 2, postphenomenology (Ihde, 1990, 2009) and the mediation theory (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011) offer tools to explore how technologies shape human perception and action, assisting this investigation in examining further the intricacies of how social media are transforming individuals' relations with political processes.

This chapter is divided into three parts. Section 4.1 describes the broad contexts in which participants in this study live their political becomings. This first part taps into some of the socioeconomic divides present in Brazil, which inspire political movements and some of the participants' political involvements. These divides also impact the access to technologies, such as social media, which has grown alongside the last decade's political crises experienced by Brazilians. The second part addresses the main political divides characterising recent political struggles in Brazil. These tensions are critical to understanding the political becomings of those participants identified with the Right of the political spectrum. The third part delves into three pivotal periods of the recent Brazilian political history: the June Journeys in 2013, the demonstrations that culminated with Rousseff's impeachment (2015-2016), and the 2018 elections. The aim is to provide a broad picture of the turbulences present in the contemporary Brazilian political landscape and how the sense of political polarisation has increased over these years, coinciding with the popularisation of the internet and social media in the country. During this time, Brazilians experienced waves of political demonstrations that took over the streets and social media in a mix of "bits and asphalt" characteristic of contemporary political movements (Treré & Gutierrez, 2015, pp. 3,810). It is in this period (2013-2018) that most of this study's participants began their journeys with political becomings.

#### **4.1 The Troubles of a Young Democracy**

This section provides an overview of the broad context that informs the political becomings and access to technologies of this study's participants, focusing on political and socioeconomic aspects. The socioeconomic divides explored in this first part foment socio-political movements, which have inspired the political becomings of the individuals listened to in this investigation.

Brazil is a young democracy. After being under a military dictatorship for over two decades, it transitioned to democracy in 1985, and four years later, Brazilians could vote for a president again (Schwarcz & Starling, 2018; Skidmore, 1989). This setting positioned the country among those nations in the third wave of democratisation, including dozens of nations in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America that moved to democracy between 1974 and 1990 (Huntington, 1991).

The early stages of the democratic period were not easy, the country was plagued with astronomic inflation rates, increasing poverty, and the first elected president was impeached due to accusations of corruption in 1992, two years after his inauguration, and amid large scale protests (Abranches, 2018; Kingstone & Power, 2017b; Mendonça & Gurza Lavalle, 2019). Things began to improve from the mid-1990s onwards, with the end of hyperinflation and social reforms that mitigated the high indices of poverty (Avritzer, 2016; Kingstone & Power, 2017b). The 2000s marked a period of prosperity and increasing participatory experiences under a leftist government that ruled the country for 13 years (winning four elections) (Avritzer, 2016; Biroli, 2019; Mendonça & Gurza Lavalle, 2019). However, since the 2010s, Brazil has been swept by massive corruption scandals, numerous waves of protests, political polarisation and an economic decline, culminating with the election of a far-Right president in 2018 (Fernandes, 2019; Hunter & Power, 2019; Kingstone & Power, 2017a; Mendonça & Gurza Lavalle, 2019; Miguel, 2019b; Nicolau, 2020; Puzone & Miguel, 2019a; Solano et al., 2017). At the same time, access to the internet and social media



grew in the country, contributing to changes in how people experienced these political upheavals, as is demonstrated later in this chapter.

The following section describes some of the Brazilian socioeconomic divides that inform significant political struggles in the country. These political struggles contribute to the political becomings of the participants in this study, offering spaces where they construct political identifications while fighting inequalities. As discussed in Chapter 3, the notion of political identification used in this dissertation signifies the identification with political projects, such as Black, Indigenous and feminist movements, discussed next (Laclau, 1994; Mouffe, 2005, 1992/2013b). It is important to note that these identifications can always be challenged, being constantly subjected to changes when newer identifications are forged (Hall, 1996; Laclau & Zac, 1994). Another important aspect of political identifications is that an individual can hold diverse political identifications, with some becoming more outstanding at times (Mouffe, 1992/2013b, 1988/2013).

#### ***4.1.1 Socioeconomic Divides and Political Struggles***

A central feature of this young democracy is its systemic inequality, which shapes Brazilian social relations and feeds the tensions behind the political struggles in the country (Braga, 2016; Hagopian, 2019). Brazil was founded upon inequalities forged during 300 years of slavery-based Portuguese colonialism, which has never been completely erased from its society (Hagopian, 2019; Schwarcz & Starling, 2018; Spyer, 2017). The issue is expressed in interconnected dimensions such as income, geography, race and gender, impacting access to technologies, such as the internet and social media, and political participation (Cavalcante, 2020; Hagopian, 2019; IBGE, 2020b). These tensions motivate social movements which challenge inequalities and inspire the construction of political identifications (Laclau, 1994; Mouffe, 2005, 1992/2013b), such as Black, Indigenous and feminist movements, which have informed the political becomings of part of the participants in this study, as indicated throughout this section.

These inequalities are stirred during moments of crisis, such as those considered in the third part of this chapter.

Concerning the distribution of income, Brazil is among the ten most unequal nations globally (The World Bank, 2021). In 2019, 10% of the population accessed 43% of all income registered in the country (IBGE, 2020b). The uneven share of wealth is significantly associated with geographical location and race (Cavalcante, 2020; Silva, 2017). The North and the Northeast concentrate a higher proportion of people living below the poverty line, and the South and Southeast share most of the wealth in the nation (IBGE, 2020b). These findings reveal a face of the historical racial inequality upon which Brazilian society is structured (Fernandes, 1964/2008). The majority of those living below the poverty line are non-White,<sup>21</sup> whereas a significant part of the wealthiest Brazilians are White (IBGE, 2020b; Vieira-Magalhães, 2019). According to the National Household Sample Survey 2019 (*Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua – PNAD*), non-Whites comprised 56% of the Brazilian population (IBGE, 2020a).

The racial divide indicates that the country has not been able to break patterns of social relations inherited from its slavery dependent colonial past (Fernandes, 1964/2008). To this day, internalised racism plagues Brazilian society (Schwarcz & Starling, 2018). This setting has been challenged by citizens organised in diverse Black activist organisations “concerned with increasing the visibility of Afro-Brazilians in civil society and the media, with fighting for the survival of their communities threatened by ‘development’ projects, and with lifting Afro-Brazilians’ self-esteem by discussing the harmful impact of racism” (Mitchell-Walthour, 2019, p. 77, emphasis in original). As the education scholar Nilma Lino Gomes (2017) observes, the Brazilian Black

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<sup>21</sup> The IBGE’s report mentions Black or *pardo*. *Pardo* is of difficult translation into English, but, as it is employed in the Brazilian Census, it can be read as being non-White, encompassing a variety of heritages (Petruccelli & Saboia, 2013). Accordingly, non-White is the term used in this study to refer to those individuals not perceived or not self-declared as being White in the Brazilian context (Vieira-Magalhães, 2019). A detailed discussion on the evolution of the terms employed to define race in the Brazilian census can be found on Petruccelli and Saboia (2013).

movement performs the role of an educator, working towards the reframing the understanding of race and citizenship, which contributes to the construction of Black identifications (Laclau, 1994; Mouffe, 1992/2013b) in the country.

Some Black activists engage in political actions on social media, such as YouTube and Instagram, where they embrace and express their racial identifications and discuss issues of racism, inspiring others to challenge prejudices (Mitchell-Walthour, 2019). While doing so, these activists might inspire other individuals' political identification and disidentification processes, part of political becomings (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b; Rancière, 1992). A few of these initiatives have contributed to the political becomings of some participants in this study. One of these participants has become a Black activist herself, informed by Black political influencers on YouTube, amongst other offline initiatives (Lewis, 2018, 2020).

Indigenous peoples have also been organising themselves to keep their original lands and fight inequalities (Laschefski & Zhouri, 2019; Lopes & Sjölander, 2020; Munduruku, 2012). Similar to what Gomes (2017) observes about the Black movements, the Indigenous scholar Daniel Munduruku (2012) also emphasises the educational character of the Brazilian Indigenous movement. Historically, Munduruku (2012) asserts that the Indigenous movement's leading role has been to promote the articulation of a new consciousness among the many Indigenous peoples<sup>22</sup> and promote dialogues with Brazilian society as a whole, raising awareness of the cultural and linguistic diversity that compose the Brazilian nation.

In addition to demonstrations and camps that bring together ethnicities from various parts of the country to demand rights and assert their identities, many Indigenous activists and groups use social media to “construct their indigeneity” (Lopes & Sjölander, 2020, p. 153), and tell their stories on their terms and enter in dialogue

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<sup>22</sup> The 2010 Brazilian census registered more than 305 indigenous peoples in Brazil, comprising 897 thousand individuals (0,47% of the Brazilian population) (Instituto Socioambiental, n.d.).

with diverse social actors, like the government and Whites in general (Grillini & Corossacz, 2021; Soares, 2017). One example of Indigenous' social media initiative is the *Mídia Índia* (Indigenous Media), present on various social media platforms, which congregates youth from various ethnicities aiming to strengthen Indigenous voices, demystify stereotypes and assert their position as rightful Brazilian citizens without giving up their diversity (Santos, 2020). One participant in this study is a young Indigenous man and a political activist for Indigenous causes.

Together with racism, deep-seated sexism is another source of divides in Brazil, and more recently, gender has gained a prominent role in political disputes between the Left and the Right (Alves & Corrêa, 2009; Biroli, 2017, 2019; Miguel, 2019b; Santos & Wylie, 2019). Although Brazilian women are almost equal with men in access to health and education, the disparity in pay and political empowerment is still significant, conferring the country with one of the widest gender gaps in Latin America (World Economic Forum, 2019). Female Brazilians have restricted space in the institutional political spheres, which are historically predominantly masculine and White: only 16% of the candidates elected in the whole country in 2018 were women, even though they represent 52% of the population (Biroli, 2017, 2019; IBGE, 2020b; Santos & Wylie, 2019; TSE, 2019).

However, this is not to say that women do not engage in political participation. On the contrary, they have been significant political actors in constructing Brazilian democracy, involved in struggles for fundamental rights, such as education and health, with a critical position against neoliberalism (Biroli, 2017, 2019). Moreover, since the 2000s, the country has witnessed a proliferation of *feminisms*, with diverse discourses, identifications and practices (Alvarez, 2014). Women have been taking to the streets to show that "their needs and the definitions of who they are should be brought to public debate by their own voices" (Biroli, 2019, p. 150). These voices have reverberated in national demonstrations that testify to the diversity of women's experiences, such as the *Marcha das Vadias* (Slut Walk), which challenges rape culture and victim-blaming;

*Marcha das Margaridas*, in which rural workers come together to affirm their identities and demand “rights and citizenship” (Teixeira & Motta, 2020, para. 2); and the *Marcha das Mulheres Negras*, in which Black women claim recognition and protest against violence (Biroli, 2019; Martins, 2017). Furthermore, women have been pressing to legalise abortion in the country (Biroli, 2019).

In recent years, gender has gained increasing importance in the Brazilian political struggles. It has been at the centre of disputes between the Left and (far)Right, as seen in Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016, the feminist demonstrations against Bolsonaro in 2018, and the overall rise of antifeminist discourses, characteristic of the New Right, as discussed later in this chapter (Cruz & Dias, 2015; de Aguiar & Pereira, 2019; dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021; Geraldles et al., 2016; Sosa, 2019). Among those participants in this research who are identified with the Left, one woman is highly active in Black feminism, and other participants (male and female) have spoken about gender issues as influencing their political becomings. Conversely, all female participants who identified with the Right-wing field demonstrated some degree of antifeminist thinking. Antifeminism constitutes one of their primary political identifications for most of them, and some have made it central to their political expressions on social media channels. Antifeminism is addressed later in this chapter, as articulated with the Brazilian New Right discourses. As discussed next, the socioeconomic divides considered in this section also impact access to technologies.

#### **4.1.2 Internet and Social Media Access**

Inequality in income is associated with unbalanced access to services, such as the internet (IBGE, 2020b). As of 2019, 134 million people could access the internet (74% of the population) (Cetic, 2020). However, notwithstanding the continuous growth of the service, there are still 47 million Brazilians excluded from the digital world (Cetic, 2020). The North and Northeast hold lower proportions of citizens with online access than the other three regions (IBGE, 2020b). Furthermore, the conditions in which

citizens go online can be quite distinct, depending on their economic situation (IBGE, 2020b). A high proportion of those with lower incomes access the internet exclusively on mobile phones with more precarious connections, limiting what services they can use (Cetic, 2020). Thus, although numbers on internet access in Brazil are considerably high (74%), this access is still unequal: it reaches fewer of those in the lower-income group, and even when this group goes online, the conditions of access are very different from what is experienced by those with higher incomes. This setting can be observed in this study. Most participants are from a middle-class background, despite efforts to reach more diversity, including online interviews and purposive sampling, as discussed in Chapter 5 (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Dahlberg et al., 2011). Those from lower-income families testify to the difficulties of accessing the internet and technologies such as smartphones and computers, which has impacted their access to political information and newer forms of political participation.

The growth of social media usage in Brazil started in the mid-2000s when the country began to experience a period of prosperity in which millions of people were lifted from poverty, and mobile phones became cheaper (de Almeida & Guarnieri, 2017; Omena de Melo, 2020; Spyer, 2017). Mobile devices contribute to expanding internet access (and, consequently, social media usage) amongst lower-income populations<sup>23</sup> (Doron & Jeffrey, 2013; Miller et al., 2016; Spyer, 2017). With the production of more affordable models and the decrease in overall prices, cell phones ceased to be luxury items to become an everyday tool, even a necessity, attainable by a significant part of the global population (Doron & Jeffrey, 2013; Miller et al., 2016; Rainie & Harrison, 2012; Wellner, 2016).

In 2011, when Facebook initiated its official operation in the country, half of the Brazilian population had access to the internet (Anatel, 2020) and roughly 5% of the

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<sup>23</sup> Doron and Jeffrey (2013) provide an overview of the impacts of cheap cell phones on the low-income population in India, picturing how these technologies popularised access to the internet and its services, which is similar to what happened in Brazil.

nation was on the social media platform (*Figure 4.1*) (Sbarai, 2013). Two years later, access to Facebook had grown exponentially, reaching 38% of the population, a 660% boost (IBGE, 2013; Ministério das Comunicações, 2014; Sbarai, 2013). Facebook and other social media platforms have now penetrated every aspect of Brazilian life, becoming key platforms “for citizens to share news and political information” (Machado et al., 2018, p. 1). Social media have become central to social life in Brazil, as demonstrated, for example, by the digital anthropologist Juliano Spyer (2017) in his investigation of social media usage in a small and underdeveloped town in the Northeast of the country. The significance of social media to Brazilians can also be observed in the nation’s position amongst the countries with the most time dedicated to these platforms. In 2019, with an average of 3 hours and 31 minutes spent per day on social media, Brazilians maintained their title as the third in the global ranking<sup>24</sup> (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020b).

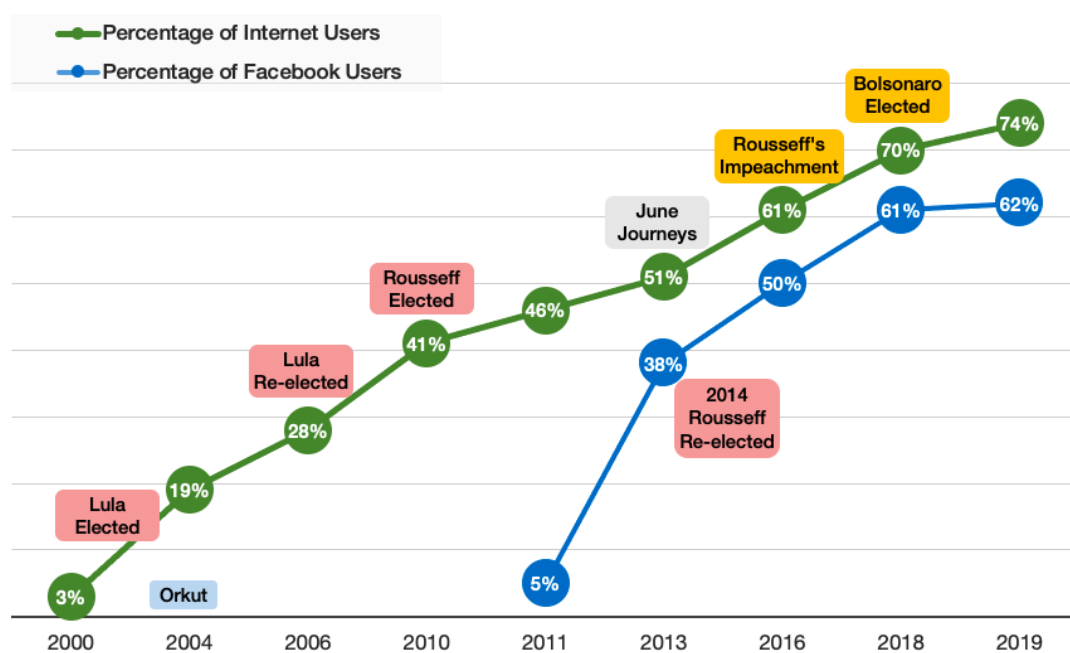
The most popular social media platforms in the country in 2019 were YouTube (96% of internet users aged 16 to 64 years old), Facebook (90% of the same population), WhatsApp (88%) and Instagram (79%) (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020a). These platforms have exhibited a growing importance in recent political events in Brazil (Evangelista & Fernanda, 2019; Machado et al., 2019; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021; Mendonça et al., 2019; Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018a; Ottoni et al., 2018; Resende et al., 2019; Ribeiro, 2018; Sakamoto, 2013; Santos et al., 2019). As *Figure 4.1* shows, the recent political turmoils in Brazil are accompanied by the expansion of social media usage, which makes the investigation of how young Brazilians are becoming involved with political struggles particularly relevant now.

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<sup>24</sup> Colombia and Philippines come in second and first respectively. The global mean was of 2 hours and 24 seconds. The findings refer to a survey conducted in 2019 with internet users aged 16 to 64 years old (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020b).

**Figure 4.1**

*Proportion of the Brazilian Population who Access the Internet and Facebook (2000-2019)*



*Note.* Sources:

Percentage of internet users: Percentage of the Brazilian population who used the internet per year: Data consolidated by the International Telecommunication Union – ITU

(<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>), accessed on 21 March 2021.

Percentage of Facebook users: Percentage of the Brazilian population who are on Facebook. Data consolidated from the following sources crossed with the estimated Brazilian population generated by IBGE (<https://sidra.ibge.gov.br/tabela/6579#resultado>), accessed on 1 June 2021.

- 2011 and 2013: *Veja* (<https://veja.abril.com.br/tecnologia/facebook-alcanca-marca-de-76-milhoes-de-usuarios-no-brasil/>), accessed on 1 June 2021.
- 2016: Facebook for Business (<https://www.facebook.com/business/news/102-milhes-de-brasileiros-compartilham-seus-momentos-no-facebook-todos-os-meses>), accessed on 1 June 2021.
- 2018: Agência Brasil (<https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/economia/noticia/2018-07/facebook-chega-127-milhoes-de-usuarios-no-brasil>), accessed on 1 June 2021.
- 2019: Digital 2019 Brazil (<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-brazil>), accessed on 1 June 2021.

\* Facebook users' data is presented as an illustration of the growth of social media in Brazil, as this is one of the most used social media in Brazil in the past decade.

The dimensions of inequalities mentioned above are sources of tensions that have become more apparent during the political crises the country has been experiencing since 2013; this is covered in Section 4.3. Moreover, these inequalities foster social-political movements and activisms, such as Black, Indigenous and feminist movements and activisms that counteract these movements, such as antifeminism.



These political movements can potentially inform the political becomings of Brazilians, as those who are part of this study. The following section addresses the foremost political divides experienced by Brazilians in recent years in which participants in this investigation see themselves.

#### **4.2 Political Divides: From the Centre towards the New (far-)Right**

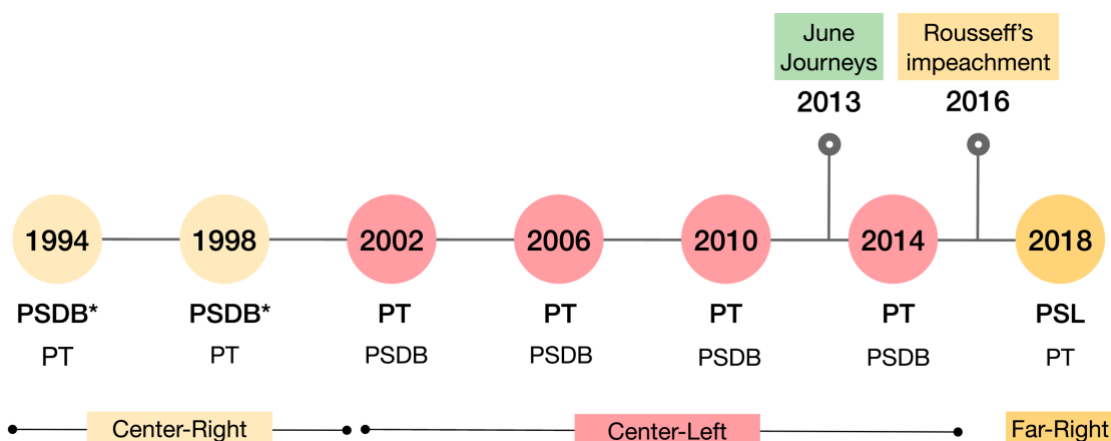
The socioeconomic divides considered in the previous section comprise important contexts in which Brazilians live their political becomings and access technologies, such as social media. These contexts are also intertwined with the political configurations present in the country. This section concentrates on the main characteristics of the contemporary Brazilian political scenario, centring on the two broad political fields in which participants in this investigation see themselves, Left and Right, and some of the specific political identifications mentioned by these individuals when narrating their political becomings.

In the context of this study, the division between the Left and Right is demarcated by the support or opposition to the far-Right candidate, Bolsonaro, in the 2018 elections. As discussed in Chapter 3, recognising a common enemy is central to the idea of collective identity (Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a). The participants on the Right voted for Bolsonaro, and many of them campaigned for the candidate as a way to overcome the threat posed by the Left. For the participants on the Left, the enemy was Bolsonaro, who represented a constitutive outside (discussed in Chapter 3), threatening their existence and assisting in the affirmation of their identifications with the Left (Hall, 1996; Norval, 1990). One participant considers herself on the Centre due to not having voted in the runoff and not engaged in activism to support or oppose Bolsonaro. The common perception voiced during the interviews is that, in 2018, Bolsonaro symbolised the Right, in their views, and all the rest was the Left. This section clarifies the nuances of this division between Left and Right.

One notable characteristic of Brazil's political system is its high partisan fragmentation (Avritzer, 2016; Nicolau, 2020; Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019; Samuels & Zucco, 2018; Zucco & Power, 2021). In 2019, 35 national parties were registered in the Superior Electoral Court, and 30 were represented in the Chamber of Deputies (Ames et al., 2016; *Câmara dos Deputados*, 2019; Kingstone & Power, 2017b; Nicolau, 2020). Despite this proliferation of political parties, between 1994 and 2014 (six elections, as pictured in *Figure 4.2*), the competition for the presidency had been narrowed down to two parties, representing the moderate Right and Left of the Brazilian political spectrum: the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB) and the Worker's Party (PT) (do Amaral & Meneguello, 2017; Kingstone & Power, 2017b; Nicolau, 2020; Samuels & Zucco, 2018).

**Figure 4.2**

*Elected Parties and Second in Votes for the Brazilian Presidency (1994-2018)*



*Note.* Elected parties in bold, above the parties in second in the runoff.

\*Indicates elections won in the first round.

Sources: do Amaral and Meneguello (2017); Samuels and Zucco (2018); TSE (2018a, 2018b); Zucco and Power (2021).

PSDB and PT dominated Brazilian politics during these 20 years, shaping the country's democratic regime while building a solid identity as political actors (Kingstone & Power, 2017b; Samuels & Zucco, 2018; Zucco & Power, 2021). PSDB, which held the presidency between 1995 and 2002, is of progressive origins but moved

towards the Right over the years (Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019). The party is “associated with inflation control and state reform” (Kingstone & Power, 2017b, p. 12). From 2002 onwards, PT, which had established itself as the main face of Left politics in Brazil since the 1970s, won four elections in a row<sup>25</sup> (do Amaral & Meneguello, 2017; Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). Over the years, forged within the resistance of metal workers, progressive groups from the Catholic church, intellectuals and activism against the military dictatorship, the party tended toward a moderate position in the ideological spectrum (centre-Left) (Fernandes, 2019; Goldfrank & Wampler, 2017; Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019; Puzone, 2019; Puzone & Miguel, 2019b; Samuels & Zucco, 2018; Singer, 2012). This tendency was also “associated with pro-poor policies and social inclusion” (Kingstone & Power, 2017b, p. 12). However, despite their strength, both parties were shaken during the 2010s political crisis, losing the 2018 elections to a virtually unknown party, the Social Liberal Party<sup>26</sup> (*Partido Social Liberal—PSL*), of Bolsonaro (Puzone & Miguel, 2019a).

Bolsonaro’s victory, with over ten million more votes than his opponent, symbolised the ascension of far-Right discourses in Brazil (Duque & Smith, 2019; Miguel, 2019b; Nicolau, 2020; Puzone & Miguel, 2019a). The candidate distanced himself from the traditional centre-Right, articulating an anti-establishment discourse that resonated with those discontent with political institutions and a variety of political identifications part of the Brazilian New Right, which is discussed later in this chapter (Nicolau, 2020). Bolsonaro’s campaign fomented a division between his candidature and the rest (Soares et al., 2019), visible in the participants’ experiences in this study. The majority of the citizens interviewed as part of this research either supported

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<sup>25</sup> During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century at least 10 countries in Latin America elected leftist leaders. This phenomenon became known as the *pink tide* (Ballestrin, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> The PSL was a very small political party, in 2014 it had only one seat in the Chamber of Deputies. In 2018, with Bolsonaro’s candidacy the party’s representativeness skyrocketed to 52 seats. Moreover, as with most Brazilian political parties, the name Social Liberal Party has very little relation with social democracy, its politicians are known for antisystem and anti-minorities discourses (Puzone & Miguel, 2019a).

Bolsonaro in 2018 or challenged his candidature, with only one who did not engage in this dispute abstaining from voting in the elections runoff. Acknowledging this movement from the Centre towards the far-Right, this section addresses some of the aspects involved in the emergence of the New Right, which informs the identifications of this study's participants considered on the Right. These aspects are also part of the Left-leaning participants' political becomings, since many of their political actions were performed to counteract the rise of the New Right in the country.

The Brazilian New Right involves an amalgamation of political identifications which combined and grew concurrently with social media access in the country from 2006 onwards (Rocha, 2021). The following sub-sections consider aspects often articulated with the rise of the Brazilian New Right, concentrating on those dimensions narrated by the participants in this study as significant in their political becomings. The aim is to grasp some of the intricacies of the two main broad fields in which these individuals view themselves. The first section describes the *petismo* (PT's partisanship) and *antipetismo* (antipartisanship towards the PT), which constitute strong political identifications in the country since the 1980s (Samuels & Zucco, 2018). Subsequently, Section 4.2.2 expands on other significant dimensions of the rise of the New Right, particularly the use of social media, followed by a conclusion of the second part of this chapter.

#### **4.2.1 *Petismo and Antipetismo***

Loved and hated, the PT is a central political player in Brazil (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Fuks et al., 2021; Kalil, Moretto, et al., 2018; Puzone, 2019; Ribeiro, 2018). Out of more than 30 political parties in the country, PT is the only one that "has managed to cultivate a strong psychological attachment among a substantial proportion of Brazil's voters," known as *petismo* (Samuels & Zucco, 2018, p. 6). However, the strong support has been met with intense feelings in the opposite direction. Part of the population strongly dislikes the party and would vote for anyone but PT: the *antipetismo* (Davis &

Straubhaar, 2020; Fuks et al., 2021; Ribeiro, 2018; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). In this study, all the participants aligned to the Right share a degree of *antipetismo*. In comparison, those on the Left are not *petistas* (PT's supporters) but certainly anti-Bolsonaro. This section taps into the tension between *petismo/antipetismo*.

The PT first took the Brazilian presidential office in 2002 and enjoyed a decade of relative stabilisation (do Amaral & Meneguello, 2017; Kingstone & Power, 2017b; Puzone, 2019). The hyperinflation was over, and the country experienced a period of economic expansion and poverty reduction under the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a former union leader and one of the founders of the PT (Mendonça & Gurza Lavalle, 2019; Puzone, 2019). By that time, the leftist party had constructed a broad support base, “half of all Brazilians who identified with any party identified with the PT” (Samuels & Zucco, 2018, p. 6).

David Samuels and César Zucco (2018) note that *petistas* (PT's supporters) are very diverse and do not share many demographic or socioeconomic characteristics, but they are usually “open to political and social change, and relatively likely to engage in some form [of] sociopolitical activism before ‘encountering’ the PT” (p. 30, emphasis in original). That is, becoming a *petista* does not tend to be Brazilians' first political engagement experience. In this study, only one person demonstrates an identification more aligned to *petismo*, acquired through their family. Other Left-leaning participants display diverse identifications on the Left, as they are not particularly attached to the PT.

In 2010, the Workers' Party elected Rousseff as president, PT's third mandate, and Lula finished his term with a historical popular approval rating of 83% (Singer, 2019). The country was growing, and inequalities were diminishing, with workers having access to goods formerly only available to the upper classes (Fernandes, 2019; Goldfrank & Wampler, 2017; Kingstone & Power, 2017b; Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019; Puzone, 2019; Singer, 2019). However, reducing poverty unintentionally disrupted the traditional middle-class lifestyle and confronted the “ruling classes”

(Singer, 2019, p. 56). As discussed later in this chapter, these troubles would soon be seen on the streets during the struggles that unfolded in the country from 2013 onwards (de Almeida & Guarnieri, 2017).

The PT's success, unintentionally, gave rise to an antagonist identification (Mouffe, 2009/2013, 2000/2013), the *antipetismo* (anti-PT), which, to this day, is one of the most important political forces in Brazil (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Fuks et al., 2021; Nicolau, 2020; Ribeiro, 2018; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). The roots of *antipetismo* are difficult to assess. Even after analysing an extensive pool of data, Samuels and Zucco (2018) cannot offer a definite explanation about what divides *antipetistas* and *petistas*. However, the authors suggest that this identification may derive from authoritarian psychological tendencies since “antipetismo emerged as a response to the rise of the PT and its particular way of doing politics, which insisted on promoting social, political, and economic change through mass, grassroots participation” (Samuels & Zucco, 2018, p. 48). To the same extent that this way of doing politics attracted supporters (*petistas*) and votes that secured four presidential mandates, it also

increasingly repulsed Brazilians who rejected its approach, those who viewed democracy ambivalently and/or who opposed the PT's efforts to promote social change. That is, to become an antipetista one must not merely disapprove of the PT's performance in government; one must also reject the party's stated political principles. Antipetismo is not driven by PT corruption or incompetence. It rests on opposition to political, social, and economic change. (Samuels & Zucco, 2018, p. 48)

This assertion indicates that *antipetismo* constitutes a particular view on political values, which is opposed not only to the PT in itself but also to a progressive political agenda, which favours social change and grassroots participation (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Fuks et al., 2021; Rennó, 2020; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). *Antipetismo* has grown in importance throughout the years, gaining strength in the 2010s political crises, especially during the demonstrations calling for Rousseff's impeachment (2015-2016) (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021; Rennó, 2020). Moreover, *antipetismo* is articulated with

the Brazilian New Right's values and has been pointed out by some scholars as one of the drivers of the far-Right victory in 2018 (Messenberg, 2019; Nicolau, 2020; Rennó, 2020). A survey conducted in 2018 revealed that 30% of voters considered themselves *antipetistas*, whereas *petistas* consisted of 10% of respondents (Nicolau, 2020).

*Antipetismo* is one of the central aspects of the formation of the Brazilian New Right, which has grown concurrently with the nation's access to the internet and social media. In addition to *antipetismo*, other political identifications are articulated with the Brazilian New Right. These are addressed in the next section.

#### **4.2.2 The Rise of a New Right**

The *petismo* and *antipetismo* grew out of the PT's success (Nicolau, 2020; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). The *antipetismo* constitutes a significant force in the recent Brazilian political struggles, but other important political identifications flourished in the 2000s, informing the political involvements of the participants in this study. This section discusses aspects of the emergence of the Brazilian New Right, which involves the articulation of political identifications such as antifeminism, conservatism, libertarianism and monarchism, as cited by participants in this study.

In the mid-2000s, PT's support took a dip after a corruption scandal known as *mensalão*<sup>27</sup> stained the party's image of being ethical (Samuels & Zucco, 2018) and fuelled a "distrust in the political system as a whole" (Rocha, 2021, p. 8). This setting inspired the creation of the first movement connected with the Brazilian New Right, the *Movimento Endireita Brasil* (Brazil towards the Right), formed by young lawyers who intended (without success) to push for Lula's impeachment (Rocha, 2021). The *mensalão* diminished Lula's support among the upper classes feeding *antipetismo*, but his approval amongst the lowest classes grew in response to the social policies

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<sup>27</sup> The *mensalão* was a scheme in which deputies received monthly payments for voting in favour of projects that interested the Executive (which was under the PT presidency) (Rocha, 2021).

implemented to address the poverty in the country (Singer, 2012). The president managed the political crisis and, benefitting from a well-performing economy, was re-elected in 2006 (Rocha, 2021; Samuels & Zucco, 2018).

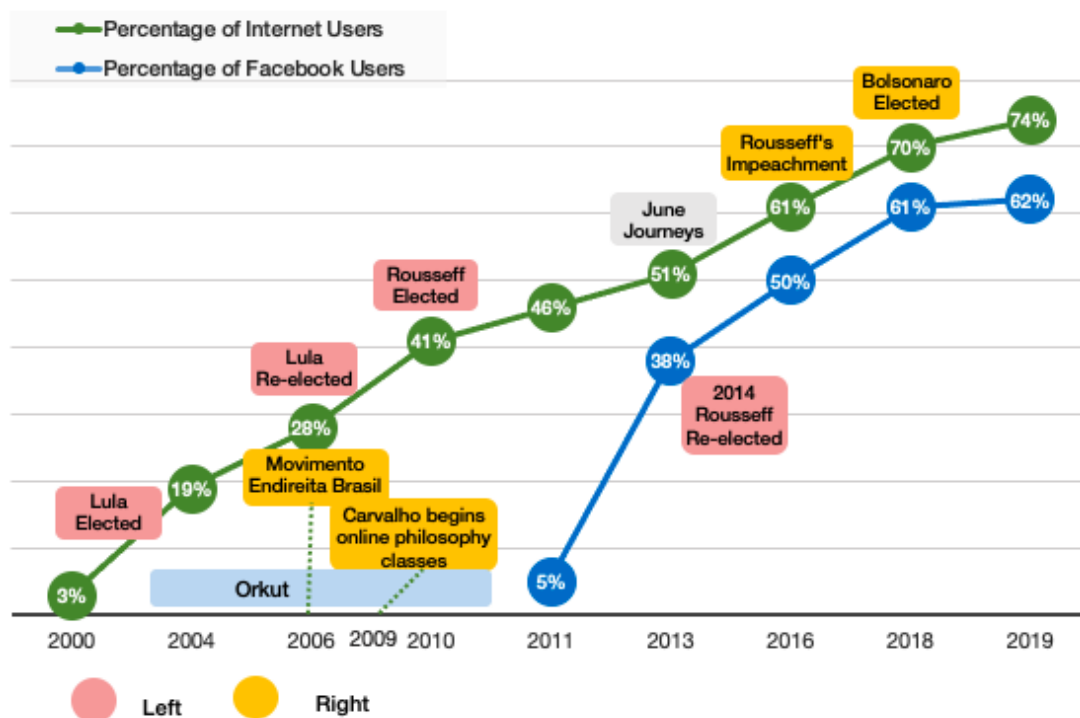
During Lula's administration (2002-2010), opposition to the PT among political elites and mainstream media did not get much attention, being confined to a few journalists and online forums (Rocha, 2021). Having little space in the mainstream media and public discourse, these dissonant voices turned to the internet (Rocha, 2021). When the *Movimento Endireita Brasil* was created in 2006, the internet had just begun to take off in Brazil (as observed in *Figure 4.3*), and its access was confined to highly educated citizens and upper classes (Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil, 2007). Internet access in the country only reached half of the population around 2013 (Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil, 2007). This setting places the growth of the Brazilian New Right happening simultaneously with the expansion of the country's internet and social media access.

The new online environments (blogs, websites, and online forums) facilitated the creation of "non-subaltern counterpublics" formed by "traditionalists, anti-globalists, supporters of the military regime, among others, who influence the formation of the Brazilian New Right" (Rocha, 2021, p. 9). Counterpublics, subaltern or not, gather members of society who believe that "their ideas do not circulate in dominant audiences and the very manifestation of their worldviews and lifestyles are at risk" (Rocha, 2021, p. 9). By coming together in counterpublics, these individuals elaborate "alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech" (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). In 2004, Orkut, the first social media to win Brazilians' hearts, turned into the main space for New Right groups (and, afterwards, Facebook) (Rocha, 2021). In these online spaces, these groups could form communities and discuss issues such as the free market, the defence of Christian values and national politics, fomenting a discursive space that they did not find elsewhere (Fraser, 1990; Rocha, 2018b, 2021).



**Figure 4.3**

*Emergence of New Right Political Actors contrasted with Internet and Social Media Access in Brazil*



*Note.* Orkut started in 2004 and remained the most popular social media in Brazil until 2011, when it was surpassed by Facebook.

Sources: As mentioned in figure 4.1 and Rocha (2021).

Another way to understand the surfacing of these New Right groups is through the lens of countermovements, as proposed by the sociologist Marcelo Kunrath Silva (2018). Silva (2018) interprets the emergence of New Right groups as a response to the achievements of social movements (such as those mentioned in Section 4.1.1), which produced social changes interpreted by some (conservative) sectors of society as threats to their way of living (de Almeida & Guarnieri, 2017). Both Rocha (2021) and Silva's (2018) analyses emphasise the perception that these rightist groups saw themselves at risk, threatened by an enemy materialised in the image of the Left, on the figure of leftist governments and social movements' agendas. This common observation brings us back to Mouffe (1993/2005, 1992/2013a) and the argument that the figure of

an enemy, a constitutive outside, is crucial for the constitution of collective identities. The enemy both threatened the existence of these groups and brought them together.

A primary influence of the New Right is Olavo de Carvalho, a former journalist and writer who started a website in 2002 to publicise his ideas and, later on in 2009, began to offer paid online philosophy lessons (see *Figure 4.3*) (Rocha, 2018b, 2021). Carvalho argues that the Left had constructed a “cultural hegemony in Brazil” following Gramsci’s communist ideas (Rocha, 2021). The supposed formation of a cultural hegemony involves the media, NGOs, universities, and several other national and international institutions, which are all part of “an ongoing worldwide revolutionary process called ‘globalism’,” which aims to solve contemporary problems with the intervention of an ultra-powerful “global authority” (Rocha, 2021, p. 10, emphasis in original). This view positions Carvalho’s followers as privileged knowers of a reality blocked by educational, media and political institutions. Carvalho became known for voicing the dissatisfaction of Right-wing supporters, saying what no one would say, and bringing citizens together to fight the leftist hegemony (Rocha, 2021). This view is very present in contemporary Right-wing discourses and has been primarily spread through online forums and social media platforms since the 2000s. All participants in this study who are aligned to the Right have cited being influenced by Carvalho to some extent, mainly through his YouTube channel and books.

Carvalho’s ideas contributed to constructing a “shared political language” that brought together diverse political strands on the Right spectrum (Rocha, 2021, p. 12), as those addressed below. As the political scientist Luis Felipe Miguel (2018) remarks, the Brazilian New Right is not one thing but a confluence of diverse groups united around a common enemy, often the Left. Some of the identifications articulated with the New Right are addressed next.

#### ***4.2.2.1 Conservatives: Preserving Traditions***

Conservatism is not new to Brazil, but it has grown in support over the last decade (Demier, 2016), particularly among young people (von Bülow, 2018). In the words of the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton (2017), who is an influence on some of the participants in this study and Brazilian conservatism as a whole, conservatism maintains the “conviction that good things are more easily destroyed than created, and the determination to hold on to those good things in the face of politically engineered change” (ch. 6, para. 1). For this reason, conservatives are united in their defence of society’s traditions against signs of progress “in the realm of values and customs,” considered worse than those cultivated over the years (Rocha, 2021, p. 1). Scruton (2017) also maintains that conservatism is about the defence of religion, notably Christianity, and the high culture, intending to preserve the classical ideals of beauty. Being conservative, Scruton (2019) asserts, is about a specific moral posture towards the world and is a distinct way of being human in all dimensions of life: in the arts, music, literature, sciences and religion. Conservatives argue that there is a conception of beauty that should be protected, be it in the arts or the figure of women, for instance, which contrasts with feminist and progressive views (Scruton, 2011, 2019).

The conservative view of protecting society’s traditional values and customs shares affinities with those promoted by the traditional strands within the Christian religions in Brazil, such as Evangelicalism and Catholicism (Nicolau, 2020; Smith, 2019). Brazilian conservatives and traditional Christians often voice the aim to protect the traditional family (composed of a married woman and man, and their children) against new forms of families (e.g., gay marriage) or actions that are seen as potential threats to this tradition, such as sex education in schools, especially those addressing sexual diversity and gender issues such as abortion (von Bülow, 2018). Brazilian conservatives also believe that the Left has promoted an inversion of morals corrupting the youth with promiscuous values, promoting sex, drugs and abortion (Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018).

The convergence of religion and political views is found in the experiences of the conservative participants in this study. All conservatives notice that their religion significantly influences their political identifications. For some, this influence is the leading force driving them to identify with conservatism. For one participant, it was the contrary. Her political identification with conservatism directed her to subscribe to a traditional vein of Catholicism, demonstrating the intimate relationship between Christianity and conservative views in Brazil.

#### ***4.2.2.2 Antifeminists: Against the Fallacies of Feminisms***

Antifeminism is a political identification antagonist to feminism and articulated with the New Right as a whole, especially conservatism, once conservatives see feminism as a threat to the traditional values of family and religion (de Aguiar & Pereira, 2019). Antifeminists question feminist discourses, claiming that they foment the hate towards men, the family and traditional values (Cruz & Dias, 2015; de Aguiar & Pereira, 2019). Antifeminist activists engage in a quest to debunk feminist claims (with statements such as *You owe nothing to feminism!*) and re-educate women about the *fallacies of feminisms* (de Aguiar & Pereira, 2019). As an illustration, the sociologists Maria Helena Santana Cruz and Alfrancio Ferreira Dias (2015) mention the blog *Antifeminismo*, which declares that its mission is to fight and dispose of the feminist ideology by exposing its lies. Among the main issues of dispute is gender equality (Cruz & Dias, 2015). As with conservatism, antifeminists are usually associated with Christian religions and argue for the submission of women to their husbands as a way to maintain religious traditions and contribute to a healthy marriage (de Aguiar & Pereira, 2019). Antifeminists also esteem femininity and traditional gender roles, refuting progressive views that challenge gender norms (Cruz & Dias, 2015; de Aguiar & Pereira, 2019).

In this study, all women on the Right manifest a certain degree of antifeminist sentiment, even those who do not view religion as an essential aspect of their political

becomings. Antifeminism constitutes a central political identification for many of these women, driving a significant part of their political expressions (typically online).

#### ***4.2.2.3 Libertarians: Free-Market and Minimum State***

Libertarians endorse a “free market without any restrictions” and radical individual freedom not coerced by the state or the market (Rocha, 2021, p. 1). They are also referred to as ultraliberals and reject social rights and solidarity, limiting citizens’ rights to those associated with private property (Miguel, 2018). The political scientist Camila Rocha (2021) notes that libertarians usually reject being “labelled as either left or right,” but in reality, they tend to associate with Right-wing political projects and parties (p. 1). Moreover, despite promoting individual autonomy and radical freedom, libertarians in Brazil often connect with conservative leaders (Miguel, 2018), as was observed in the 2018 elections. There are also those who see themselves as liberal-conservatives, maintaining a liberal view on the market and state while adhering to conservative moral values (Rocha, 2021).

Only one participant in this study claimed to be identified as a libertarian at the time of our interview. Another one, who identified as Centre, has voted for the Partido Novo, which Rocha (2021) considers a Right-wing libertarian party.

#### ***4.2.2.4 Monarchists: The Restoration of a Glorious Past***

The Brazilian monarchy was dissolved in 1889 (Schwarcz & Starling, 2018) and in 1993, during a referendum, 87% of the population indicated their preference for the republic as a form of government (Quadros, 2017). However, the movement supporting the restoration of the monarchy in Brazil has not died. These activists propose a parliamentary constitutional monarchy, restabilising the Brazilian royal family (in the figure of the next in line for succession) as the head of state (Casa Imperial do Brasil, n.d.; Quadros, 2017). For monarchists, this model would solve Brazil’s corruption problems and guarantee stability, unity and continuity in the nation (Monarquia por

Débora Settim, 2018; Quadros, 2017). Monarchism engages with nationalist discourses, valuing a utopian past that should be exalted, as the glorious times of the monarchy were better than the present (Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018; Quadros, 2017). Consequently, monarchists often associate themselves with conservative values and groups, being usually involved with Christianity (Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018; Quadros, 2017). Three out of the seven participants in this study aligned to the Right consider themselves monarchists and conservatives, displaying different levels of political engagement with this cause.<sup>28</sup>

The political identifications described here are some of the many identifications articulated around contemporary Brazilian Right-wing activism. Some individuals hold a number of them or have experienced diverse aspects of these identifications in their political becomings. These political identifications are often interconnected and brought together by political influencers on social media, comprising “a metaphorical ‘family’” (Lewis, 2018, p. 20, emphasis in original) to those rejecting Left-wing policies, mainstream media and institutional politics (Rocha, 2021). Also, within each of these identifications, individuals display varying levels of adherence to democracy and radicalism (Dias et al., 2021). As conveyed by the notion of identification employed in this research, these political identifications are multiple and messy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Mouffe, 2005, 2013).

#### ***4.2.3 Multiple Left, Multiple Right***

As seen in the previous sections, both the Right and Left have many interconnected aspects (Bringel & Pleyers, 2019). Those aligned to the Left are frequently organised in the fight against diverse socioeconomic inequalities and involved with Black, Indigenous or feminist activism movements. Those aligned to the Right usually contest

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<sup>28</sup> This proportion is not representative of the current Brazilian Right (once monarchists are not so numerous in Brazil), was not pursued intentionally, and none of these three individuals are connected to each other.

leftist movements, engaging with interconnected values and worldviews, such as conservatism, libertarianism, antifeminism and monarchism. These Left and Right movements and identifications are often articulated around shared enemies, a constitutive outside that assists in the delimitation of frontiers between two opposed camps (Hall, 1996; Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a; Norval, 1990). In 2018, what united the identifications mentioned as part of the Brazilian New Right (conservative, libertarian, antifeminist and monarchist) was their opposition to the Left, seen as the enemy to be defeated by Bolsonaro. Moreover, those on the Left had in Bolsonaro their primary threat, which demarcated the boundaries between Left and Right.

The following section outlines a series of political crises which constitute important moments through which many of the individuals listened to in this investigation first participated in political struggles. Through the participation in the discussions and political demonstrations, individuals constructed political identifications, often in opposition to the other camp, constituting themselves as political subjects (Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 2009/2013, 2000/2013). For the study participants, most of the engagement with these political identifications happens in and through social media, which shape, to a certain extent, how they perceive their political movements and their opponents.

### **4.3 Contemporary Political Struggles in Three Acts**

The first two parts of this chapter introduced important political identifications present in current Brazilian political struggles: the diverse social movements fighting inequalities and the Brazilian New Right, with its many faces. This section moves into the recent political crises experienced by Brazilians, when many of the identifications discussed in the first two sections of this chapter emerged or gained strength (Bringel & Pleyers, 2019), hence, informing participants' political becomings analysed in Chapters 6 and 7.

The following historical moments are considered *events*, acknowledging that they “represent ruptures and foster the reinterpretation of the past and the future, while opening up a space for new political possibilities” (Mendonça et al., 2019, p. 4). From 2013 to 2018, the events narrated next promoted a break with old forms of activism while fostering new possibilities of political identifications and new grammars for political action (Mendonça & Bustamante, 2020). And whilst these events overtook the streets and digital networks, individuals (like those listened to in this study) were making sense of their own political processes, interpreting the world and acting in it. Hence, this section aims to provide a broad description of what these events encompassed, providing the background against which the individual experiences analysed here are lived (Ihde, 2012).

#### **4.3.1 Act 1: June Journeys (2013)**

In June 2013, the streets of Brazil became the stage of one of the most significant uprisings in the country’s recent history (Avritzer, 2016; Omena de Melo, 2020; Pleyers & Bringel, 2015). The wave of protests began in São Paulo when the *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Fare Movement) marched against the increase in public transport fares (Saad-Filho & Morais, 2014). The first rallies were relatively small, gathering up to five thousand people. However, after violent police repression on the fourth protest (13 June), the movement gained energy and popular support (including favourable views from the mainstream media), sparking several demonstrations throughout the month in hundreds of cities across the country (de Freixo & Pinheiro-Machado, 2019; Singer, 2013, 2014). There were no central organisers anymore, and the streets were then filled with socially heterogeneous citizens who expressed a shared frustration with state institutions in an explosion of multi-ideological demands, ranging anywhere from far-Left to far-Right orientations (Fernandes, 2019; Romão, 2013; Saad-Filho & Morais, 2014; Singer, 2014). The Journeys reached their peak on 20 June, with protests involving more than two million people in more than 100 cities in the country’s five



regions (Antunes, 2013; dos Santos & Aldé, 2014; Mendonça et al., 2019; Singer, 2014). The increase in the public transport fare was revoked, and by the end of June, the mass demonstrations had come to a halt, and mobilisations were reduced to a few dispersed gatherings with far fewer participants (Saad-Filho & Morais, 2014). However, this short, intense period had already carved its mark in Brazilian history (Bringel & Pleyers, 2019; Machado & Miskolci, 2019; Mendonça & Figueiredo, 2019; Pleyers & Bringel, 2015).

The June Journeys not only symbolised the opening of the country for a cycle of protests, but the fervour of the streets also inspired the formation of new activist groups, which built their micro-movements inside the big wave of demonstrations (Bringel & Pleyers, 2019; Machado & Miskolci, 2019; Pleyers & Bringel, 2015). These groups realised that they could organise themselves around their own demands, with no need for an institutional political actor to arrange such mobilisations (Pleyers & Bringel, 2015). Before 2013, national demonstrations in Brazil can be situated predominantly around leftist agendas, but after a decade under a Centre-Left presidency, the streets were occupied by heterogeneous groups influenced by diverse (and often antagonist) ideologies (Singer, 2013). Notably, there was a presence of multiple variations of the Right, from monarchists, and libertarians, to conservatives with a shared nationalist sentiment, who had been coming together since the mid-2000s (as discussed in Section 4.2.2) and were beginning their experiments with larger political demonstrations on the streets (de Freixo & Pinheiro-Machado, 2019; Silva, 2018). Moreover, surveys suggest that most demonstrators were young (between 14 and 29 years old) and not politically organised, thus, new to the streets (Antunes, 2013; Pinto, 2017).

A significant portion of the protestors joined the demonstrations in response to calls on the media and social media, particularly on Facebook (Mendonça et al., 2019; Scherer-Warren, 2014). A survey conducted in eight cities on 20 June indicated that the majority of demonstrators (77%) were mobilised through Facebook (G1, 2013). As

mentioned earlier, in 2013, mobile internet had expanded, and the number of Brazilians on Facebook had recorded a 660% boost: it went from 10 million, in 2011, to 76 million, in 2013 (Omena de Melo, 2020; Sbarai, 2013). Similar to what had happened a few years before in other parts of the world, with the Arab Spring (2010), Occupy Wall Street and Indignados (2011), Brazilian activists benefited from social media's potential for broadcasting information and assembling diverse people around shared interests (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Machado & Miskolci, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2019). Armed with cell phones and their cameras, activists broadcasted the protests through diverse social media, *becoming present* for citizens who were not on the streets but could *perceive* what the demonstrations looked like through assorted interpretative lenses, depending on the political affiliations of the profiles broadcasting the protests (*Figure 4.4*) (Mendonça et al., 2019). With the mediation of social media, activists who were on the streets, and citizens who were at home, could engage in a double presence in the world, being-in-multiple-worlds, both on the streets (in public spaces) and in private spaces, homes and phones (Papacharissi, 2010; Verbeek, 2015). As discussed earlier (section 3.1.2.1), this technologically enabled presence is still bodily-sensorial (Verbeek, 2015), providing opportunities for political engagement at a distance, beyond one's immediate surroundings (Papacharissi, 2010).

**Figure 4.4**

*Activists Broadcasting Demonstration in Belo Horizonte on 22 June 2013*



*Note.* [photograph] by Mídia Ninja, 2013, Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/midianinja/9129128435/in/album-72157634271575183/>) CC BY-SA.

As *Figure 4.4* shows, these live broadcastings provided opportunities for individuals to make themselves present in the demonstrations through comments on the videos, which can be seen as “private, digitally enabled” forms of participation (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 131). Publications of this kind were common throughout the protests, extending the reach of the demonstrations to a broader public and bringing political activism closer to daily life on one’s social media feed (Mendonça et al., 2019; Pleyers & Bringel, 2015). These social media posts also revealed struggles over the meaning of the protests, as diverse actors (each with their own agenda) kept leading interpretations in different directions, expressing different possible identifications within the June Journeys protests (Laclau & Zac, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mendonça, 2017; Mendonça et al., 2019; Mouffe, 1992).

Various actors used these platforms to instigate participation in the marches, driving the attention to their particular demands (dos Santos & Aldé, 2014).

João Guilherme Bastos dos Santos and Alessandra Aldé (2014) remark that one single demonstration could appear in dozens or hundreds of convocations on Facebook. These calls emerged from multiple groups featuring the most varied demands, having in common solely the place and time for the gathering (dos Santos & Aldé, 2014). Hence, even if participants were part of the same big protest, the pleas that persuaded them to attend the demonstration might have been quite different. For instance, one could go to the same place and time to protest for the return of military rule or equal rights for LGBTQIA+ individuals (de Almeida & Guarnieri, 2017). Such diversity provided individuals with fertile spaces for political participation and experimentation with assorted political identifications.

Some of the actors and individuals who began to experiment with street mobilisations in June 2013 would grow into more organised groups in the following years, particularly on the Right, such as those associated with conservatism, liberalism, antifeminism and monarchism (discussed in Section 4.2.2). This can be observed in the prominence of conservatism in the protests calling for the impeachment of Rousseff, discussed next.

#### ***4.3.2 Act 2: Rousseff's Interrupted Mandate (2015-2016)***

The seeds of the struggles and transformations planted in June 2013 continued to sprout in the subsequent years (Pleyers & Bringel, 2015). In 2014, the discontentment with the Workers' Party resulted in the tight re-election of Dilma Rousseff for the presidency and the questioning of the legitimacy of her victory by the defeated candidate from the PSDB, the main centre-Right political party in Brazil (de Freixo & Pinheiro-Machado, 2019). The already unstable political scenario was aggravated by two complicating factors that grew into an increased polarisation, having at its core the impeachment of Rousseff (Kingstone & Power, 2017b). First, just after Rousseff's re-election, Brazil plunged into a deep recession (Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019). On top of that, throughout 2015, corruption schemes were uncovered almost weekly by

*Lava Jato Operation* (Operation Car Wash),<sup>29</sup> implicating government members and PT's figures, among many others (Antunes, 2015; Da Ros & Ingram, 2019). *Lava Jato* drove political conversations, eroding the public trust not only in PT but in the political elite as a whole (Nicolau, 2020). The combination of the economic recession and corruption scandals pushed down the popularity of Rousseff and the Workers' Party, and protests emerged everywhere, revealing a split among part of the Brazilian population into two main camps: one calling for Rousseff's impeachment and the other defending the maintenance of the president in the office (Solano et al., 2017).

Protests demanding Rousseff's removal showed a predominance of the nationalist and anti-politics repertoires seen in 2013, coupled with a growing *antipetismo* surrounded by misogynist elements (Antunes, 2015; dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021; Mendonça et al., 2019). If in 2013 there was no apparent organisation, this time, the groups were coordinated around conservative and Right-wing ideologies, with some clusters advocating for military intervention to solve the country's crisis (Abers & von Bülow, 2019). Movements and protestors began to openly identify themselves as aligned with the Right, and the country witnessed a passionate Right-wing activism take to the streets and go on social media (Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019; Solano Gallego, 2018; Tatagiba, 2018). As Tayrine Dias and colleagues (2021) observe, Right-wing activism is not new in Brazil, but "it had not taken to the streets in massive numbers for fifty years" (p. 7). Another characteristic of the pro-impeachment protests was a significant presence and leadership coming from the middle classes, evidencing the changes in activism initiated in 2013 (Pinto, 2017; Pleyers & Bringel, 2015; Tatagiba, 2018).

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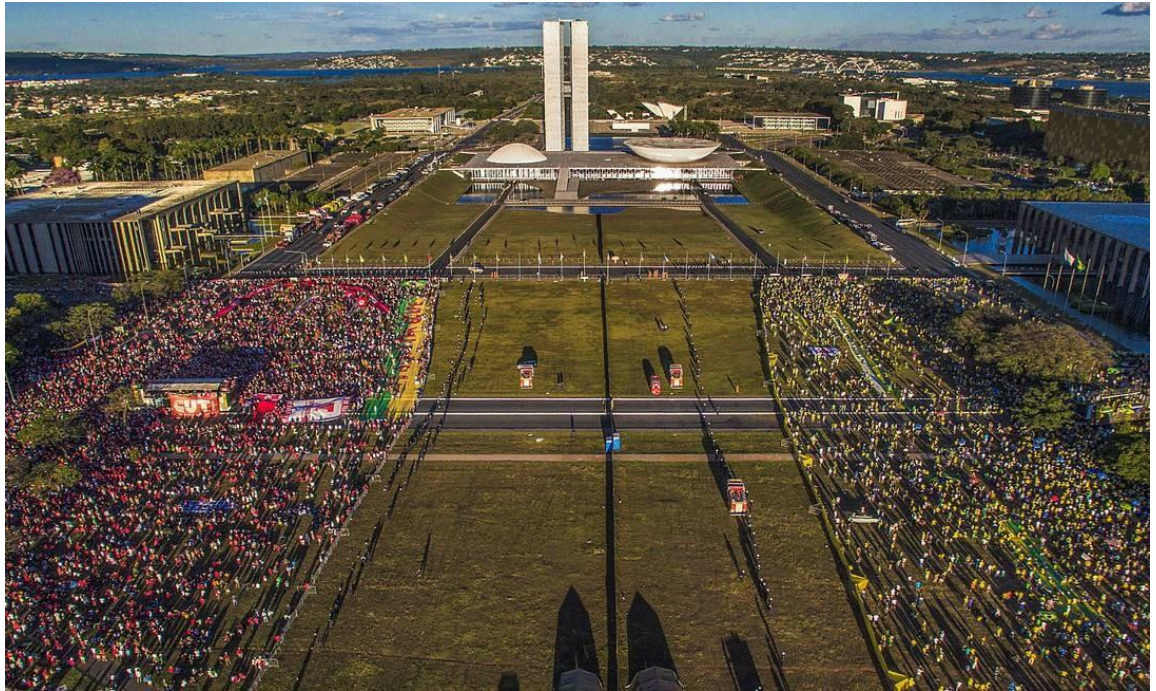
<sup>29</sup> *Lava Jato Operation* is a massive criminal investigation looking into corruption in Brazil's state-owned oil company, Petrobras. It began in 2014 and is still ongoing, having exposed corruption networks involving several political parties and business. The operation is highly controversial as it involves unlawful leaking of information and some other manoeuvres being questioned in higher courts (Miguel, 2019b). The operation is still running and as of January 2021, it was in its 79<sup>th</sup> phase. For a timeline of the *Lava Jato Operation*, please see: <http://www.mpf.mp.br/grandes-casos/lava-jato/linha-do-tempo>

The pro-impeachment movement was not limited to demands for Rousseff's removal. It encompassed a widespread opposition to the Left, unions and the progressive culture at large, feeding into the *antipetismo* discussed earlier (Miguel, 2018; Tatagiba, 2018). For the political scientist Luciana Tatagiba (2018), the hate towards the PT made it possible for dispersed groups to construct themselves as a collective identification. The PT, in this sense, was a constitutive outside (Hall, 1996; Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a; Norval, 1990) of the Right identifications gathered together to demand Rousseff's impeachment. This collective identification was constructed around conservative values, taking the shape of a moral crusade of good against evil, which continues to this day. Many of the Right-wing participants in this study reflect this notion of a crusade. Some consider their Right-wing activism as a fight to defend people of goodwill against the threats posed by the PT.

The demonstrations on the Right led to responses from the Left, with pro-Rousseff movements taking to the streets, deepening the sense of political polarisation in the country (Abers & von Bülow, 2019). The days of mixed repertoires on the streets seen in 2013 were gone, and protests became clearly demarcated into two main camps (Solano et al., 2017). The image of a polarised nation was materialised in the wall built outside the Brazilian Congress to keep apart pro and anti-impeachment protestors during the voting session that approved Rousseff's removal from the presidency for budgetary crimes in August 2016 (*Figure 4.5*) (Watts, 2016). On the left side, mainly in red (the colour of the PT's flag), are the protestors supporting Rousseff; on the right, activists in green and yellow (the Brazilian national colours), claiming for the president's removal.

**Figure 4.5**

*Wall of the Impeachment. National Congress. Brasília, 2016*



*Note.* Demonstrators against the impeachment on the left side (in red), those in favour, on the right (in green and yellow). Reprinted from Agência Brasil, by J. Varella, 2016. <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/politica/noticia/2016-04/nos-dois-lados-do-muro-da-esplanada-comemoracoes-e-vaias-cada-voto>

Social media continued to be highly present in political discussions. In 2016, Facebook was the preferred platform to obtain political information among protestors for and against Rousseff's impeachment; WhatsApp appeared in second place (Solano et al., 2017). Analysing 400 Facebook pages dedicated to politics, the scholars Esther Solano, Pablo Ortellado and Márcio Moretto (2017) found that the meaning struggles over the Workers' Party organised the political discussions on the platform, leading users to one of two poles: *anti-PT* (which included the groups pro-impeachment) or *anti-antiPT* (involving individuals against the impeachment). Both sides were heterogeneous within themselves, but what united them was their strong position associated with or against the *antipetismo* (Ribeiro, 2018; Solano et al., 2017). Moreover, the authors point to the high level of polarisation on Facebook's political

pages, where the diversity of political debates is reduced to only two poles (Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018b; Solano et al., 2017).

A similar tension between the two main poles is identified by Marisa von Bülow and Tayrine Dias (2019) in the analysis of the disputes around Rousseff's impeachment on Twitter. The authors consider how both sides, pro and anti-impeachment, occupied the online space with hashtags (Bülow & Dias, 2019). The investigation demonstrates that those against the impeachment used hashtags to promote a debate about the quality of Brazilian democracy, whereas those in favour of the impeachment employed hashtags to publicise the popular support for their cause through images of the demonstrations on the streets connecting streets and online networks (Bülow & Dias, 2019). The study also reveals that the pro-impeachment hashtags reached more people than those associated with their opposition (Bülow & Dias, 2019). This division on social media between two major camps would continue in the third and final act, which is discussed next.

#### ***4.3.3 Act 3: The (far)Right Wins (2018)***

If from 2015 to 2016 the watershed was Rousseff's impeachment, in 2018, the dividing line was Bolsonaro's candidacy and the inflamed conservative rhetoric around it (Duque & Smith, 2019). The anti-PT and anti-antiPT dichotomy remained strong but was met with a multiplicity of issues that divided citizens, notably those related to "social and moral questions," pointing to an alignment of part of the population to a rightist ideology (Rennó, 2020, p. 18). However, Matthew L. Layton, Amy Erica Smith, Mason W. Mosely and Mollie J. Cohen (2021) argue that identities characterised by race, gender and religion were at the centre of the political dispute and "shaped responses to Bolsonaro's candidacy" (p. 5). These identities were significant not only in relation to citizens' own identification with a given race, gender or religion but also in their "attitudes towards groups defined by race and sexuality" (Layton et al., 2021, p. 5). This view illustrates the significance of socioeconomic inequalities (such as those



addressed in Section 4.1.1) and religion (Section 4.2.2) for the political processes witnessed lately in Brazil. While technologies such as social media can amplify these dimensions, they are not created by them, indicating the problems with deterministic views on the role of social media in recent Brazilian political struggles.

Bolsonaro has a lengthy compilation of offensive statements towards women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, Indigenous and Afro-Brazilians. Regarding religion, the candidate aligned himself with evangelicals and their conservative Christian policy agenda, such as opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights and abortion (Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019). According to Layton et al. (2021), Bolsonaro's polarising statements involving gender, race, and religion aggravated old divides present in Brazilian society, "for certain individuals, his [Bolsonaro] rhetoric and policy positions regarding minority groups represented a red flag; for others, they served as a rallying point" (p. 5). This assessment demonstrates that conservative segments of Brazilian society organised themselves in countermovements to fight progressive achievements, such as quotas for Black students in universities or gay marriage (Silva, 2018). Layton et al. (2021) conclude that in 2018 individuals' political choices were based on identity, their own, or how they perceived certain identity groups. Thus, the notion of belonging to a group, the construction of a *we* (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Hall, 1996; Milan, 2015; Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a; Treré, 2019), seems particularly important to this new trend in Brazilian politics (as evidenced in this study).

During 2018, levels of mass affective polarisation soared, with many implications for the everyday life of Brazilians (Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019), as testified by the participants in this study. However, it was also a period when many citizens explicitly identified themselves politically. As Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman and Murat Somer (2018) argue, a certain level of political polarisation can lead to a greater political engagement. This was observed in surveys conducted in São Paulo, with protestors attending demonstrations against corruption in 2017 and 2018 (*Table 4.1*) (Kalil, Moretto, et al., 2018). In March 2017, 70% of the participants in a

protest against corruption said they had no preference for a political party, and none said they were aligned with the PSL (Bolsonaro's party). In the protest held in October 2018, the proportion of those who affirmed having no party preference dropped to 34%, and the PSL reached 44% in preference (Kalil, Moretto, et al., 2018). The data indicate that many of those sceptical about political parties and institutions constructed identifications with the far-Right from 2017 to 2018. In the same study, it is possible to observe a rise in individuals questioning feminism (from 56% to 70%) and an increase in *antipetismo* (from 77% to 91%).

**Table 4.1**

*Evolution of Political Identifications among Demonstrators Called by Anticorruption Groups (2017-2018)*

| Political Identification      | March 2017 | October 2018 |
|-------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| No political party preference | 70%        | 34%          |
| PSDB preference               | 11%        | 2%           |
| PSL preference                | 0%         | 44%          |
| Spectrum Left-Right: none     | 35%        | 1%           |
| Spectrum Left-Right: Right    | 29%        | 72%          |
| Spectrum Left-Right: Left     | 11%        | 0%           |
| Highly conservative           | 44%        | 74%          |
| Highly anti-Workers' party    | 77%        | 91%          |
| Not feminist at all           | 56%        | 70%          |

Note. Adapted from Kalil, Moretto, et al. (2018).

On the other side, those fighting the rise of conservatism organised themselves in mobilisations such as *#EleNã* (*#NotHim*), a feminist initiative that challenged antifeminist issues raised by Bolsonaro and his followers (Barajas, 2020; Cal et al., 2020). The movement, organised through a Facebook group, went to the streets in

massive protests with a clear message: *vote for anyone but him*,<sup>30</sup> being regarded as one of the most significant demonstrations in Brazilian history (Barajas, 2020; Rossi et al., 2018). The movement *#elenão* was one of the several political actions and interactions happening on and through social media during this time.

A distinctive characteristic of the 2018 elections was the significance of social media for political campaigns and citizens' political discussions and mobilisations (Duque & Smith, 2019; Hunter & Power, 2019; Nicolau, 2020). In this setting, WhatsApp became known as a silo for misinformation where "false rumors, manipulated photos, decontextualized videos, and audio hoaxes" were converted into political weapons (Resende et al., 2019, p. 1). The private messaging app turned into a network of interconnected groups, from family groups to those dedicated to political discussions, where misinformation can quickly go viral (Santos et al., 2019). The fact that information shared on WhatsApp is only available to those participating in the conversation makes this application particularly appealing to the spread of misinformation, once content monitoring is virtually impossible (Resende et al., 2019). Moreover, groups on WhatsApp are often composed of friends and/or family or are small enough to create a sense of "personal circle", inciting a feeling of trust among members (Evangelista & Fernanda, 2019, p. 17). This characteristic makes content shared in these environments more believable, as information comes from a trusted source (a friend, family member, or group colleague frequently seen on the app) (Evangelista & Fernanda, 2019, p. 17).

YouTube also held an important position as a source of political information during the 2018 elections (Reis et al., 2020). Data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report demonstrate that in 2019 the video platform was used by 80% of respondents for diverse purposes and by 42% for news consumption (Newman et al., 2019). Political activists have been building communities around certain ideologies on

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<sup>30</sup> The group was created in August 2018 and in 2020 and had the participation of 2.4 million women (data accessed on 2 February 2020). <https://www.facebook.com/groups/grupomuch>

YouTube (Duque & Smith, 2019; Reis et al., 2020), engaging in the platform as political influencers (discussed in Chapter 3) (Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018; Lewis, 2018). This trend appears to be particularly prominent among Right-wing and conservative activists (Duque & Smith, 2019; Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018; Reis et al., 2020). A significant actor in this environment is Olavo de Carvalho, who, as mentioned earlier, has built a strong community around him with the dissemination of far-Right ideas (Duque & Smith, 2019). The political influencer has over one million followers on YouTube (de Carvalho, n.d.). Additionally, many of the movements and activists who commenced in the political arena from 2013 onwards joined YouTube to share political content (Duque & Smith, 2019). One of these new activists is Arthur do Val, who launched his YouTube channel in 2015 (mamaefalei, n.d.). The YouTuber became famous in 2016 for his interviews conducted during leftist demonstrations, criticising the blind activism of the protestors (Esteves, 2020). In 2018, Arthur do Val was elected for the legislative assembly of São Paulo as the second most voted candidate (Esteves, 2020). In an interview on YouTube granted to Esteves (2020), Artur do Val explains that people are willing to spend more time on long videos, which favours the construction of more elaborated thoughts on politics.

Progressive groups also occupy this online space, although apparently with a lower reach. Studies in Brazil and elsewhere indicate that YouTube benefits far-Right content (Lewis, 2018; Nicas, 2018; Ottoni et al., 2018; Reis et al., 2020). In an investigation to map Brazilian political channels on YouTube, Rainer de Oliveira, Márcio Ribeiro, and Pablo Ortellado (2019) examined 320 YouTube channels with more than 10,000 followers in the category *News and Politics*. The authors found that most of these channels are on the Right-wing spectrum, display conservative views and support Bolsonaro. Moreover, Right-wing channels accumulate a much higher number of followers compared to those on the progressive side (composed of leftist and alternative journalism channels). De Oliveira and colleagues (2019) affirm that the Brazilian YouTube is a predominantly Right-wing space, which leads the algorithms to

direct more videos displaying these political views to users, increasing their visibility. Moreover, the authors find that the viewers of Right-wing content on YouTube constitute an audience isolated from the mainstream media, a behaviour not found among the consumers of progressive content. For the participants in this study, YouTube, more than WhatsApp, is an important source of influence, primarily at the beginning of their contact with political struggles.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This section described the broad contexts in which the participants in this study became involved in political struggles, addressing socioeconomic and political divisions, street demonstrations and the increased usage of social media for political purposes. During the last decade, Brazil experienced a series of political crises and waves of demonstrations, when many citizens began to identify themselves with certain political discourses. Recent political mobilisations in the country involved political identifications constructed around two main broad camps, Left and Right (Fernandes, 2019; Mendonça & Bustamante, 2020; Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019; Romão, 2013; Saad-Filho & Morais, 2014; Singer, 2014). Through the participation in political protests and discussions, individuals constructed identifications with one of these two fields, and many engaged in actions to support or defy one of the groups, quite often with the use of social media (Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mendonça et al., 2019; Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019; Solano Gallego, 2018). Internet access and social media usage in Brazil grew substantially in the last decade, concomitantly with the aforementioned political crises. This setting makes Brazil an interesting case for the study of the impact of social media on experiences of political becomings. By looking into the intimate relations individuals establish with social media, using these technologies to perceive and act in the world, this research investigates how social media are transforming Brazilians' political interactions. In which ways are these platforms organising their political perceptions and actions? The next chapter discusses

the methodological choices that guide the steps taken to answer this central question and the sub-research questions proposed.

## 5

# Methodology: Exploring Lived Political Experiences with Social Media

This chapter describes the methodological steps taken as part of this research, elaborating on the choices which made possible (and limited) the empirical material that comprises the foundation of this study. This is a postphenomenological investigation of *how social media transform young Brazilians' political becomings*. By having young Brazilians as a case study, this research examines how social media transform political becomings, conceptualised in Chapter 3 as experiences encompassing both political identifications and participation.

The first section of this chapter deals with postphenomenology from a methodological standpoint, considering the aspects that guide this investigation as a whole, such as the focus on how technologies impact human-technology relations, the employment of empirical work as a point of departure for philosophical analysis and variational theory (Ihde, 1993a, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Section 5.2 draws onto the research questions that drive this investigation, constructed following the tenets discussed in Section 5.1 and the research design employed to answer these questions. This study is constructed using a postphenomenology of practice methodological approach (Adams & Turville, 2018), in which issues of validity, reliability and openness to the phenomenon acquire precise meanings (van Manen, 2016). The last part of Section 5.2 introduces the research instruments employed in this investigation. Section 5.3 deals with the construction of the field through the selection of participants, which addresses the aim of looking at the phenomenon in multiple contexts (Ihde, 2009). In this investigation, this is translated into the selection of individuals who live their political becomings in various socioeconomic and political settings. Subsequently, Section 5.4 concentrates on the construction of the empirical

data, expanding on the employment of the semi-structured in-depth interviews, followed by considerations of the analysis of the empirical material through the observation of hermeneutic rules (Ihde, 2012) and thematic analysis (van Manen, 2016). This section also describes the design of Maps of Political Becomings to visualise the interviews and the many interconnected moments narrated by the participants. The chapter ends with ethical considerations on the risks posed to participants, the research and the researcher, and the steps taken to deal with them.

### **5.1 Postphenomenological Research in Practice: To the Things in their Multiple Contexts**

This study derives from a postphenomenological understanding of the world, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 (Ihde, 1993b, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Investigations of this kind arise from the empirical analysis of technologies and the practices around them, rather than from the application of concepts to technologies (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). The starting point of postphenomenological investigations is the experience with technologies, which constitutes the foundation for philosophical analysis (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). This section addresses some crucial aspects of postphenomenology that inform the methodological choices employed in this research; each are detailed in the subsequent sections.

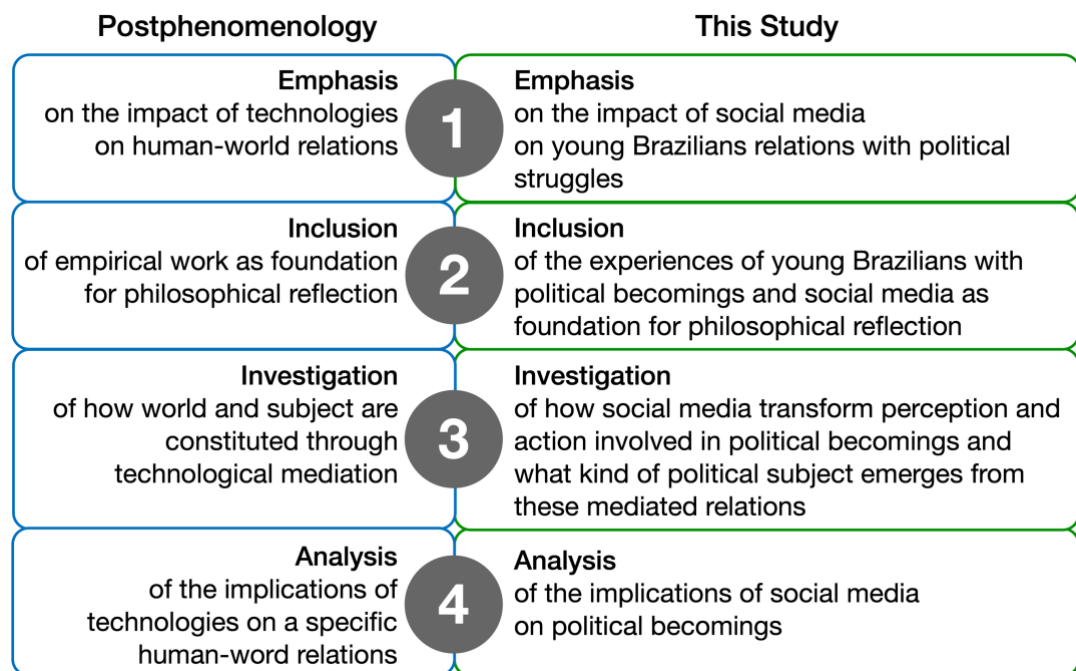
As a high context-dependent approach, postphenomenology does not presuppose the commitment to a precise methodology; these investigations come “in just as many flavors as there are scholars in the field” (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a, p. 10). However, postphenomenologists Robert Rosenberger and Peter-Paul Verbeek (2015a) observe four main commonalities shared by studies in this domain: 1) an emphasis on exploring the roles of technologies in the relations humans-world, “and on analyzing the implications of these roles”; 2) the inclusion of empirical work as the foundation for philosophical reflection; 3) an investigation of how, “in the relations that arise around a technology, a specific ‘world’ is constituted, as well as a specific



‘subject’,” as discussed in Chapter 1 and finally, 4) a “conceptual analysis of the implications of technologies for one or more specific dimensions of human-world relations” (p. 31). These characteristics are observed in this study’s exploration of the role of social media on political becomings (Chapter 3), and the examination of how these technologies transform the perception and action part of these experiences (as synthesised in *Figure 5.1*).

**Figure 5.1**

*Common Features of Postphenomenological Investigations and their Application in this Study*



*Note.* Adapted from Rosenberger and Verbeek (2015a, p. 31).

Postphenomenological investigations are typically characterised by the adoption of a particular way of looking at technologies, an approach “that combines an empirical openness for the details of human-technology relations with phenomenological conceptualization” with the goal of analysing “the networks of relations around technologies” (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a, p. 32). Openness to the phenomenon under examination is reflected throughout the entire process of this

research, informing the methodological and analytical steps taken, and which are detailed in this chapter. The following section covers another central characteristic of postphenomenological research: the employment of variational theory.

### ***5.1.1 Variational Theory***

To do postphenomenology is to practice variational theory, the most significant “methodological strategy” in this field (Ihde, 1993b, p. 7). Variational theory is derived from Husserl’s (1901/2001) method of variations, which involves observing a phenomenon from various angles to identify stable characteristics, or the essence of the phenomenon, which would remain the same independently on the perspective of the observer. Nonetheless, when applying such a method, Ihde (2009) reached a different outcome, “what emerged or ‘showed itself’ was the complicated structure of multistability” (p. 12, emphasis in original). Therefore, postphenomenology retains the Husserlian method, incorporating it into an antiessentialist view in which meanings are situated, and experiences are understood as embedded in historical, cultural-social contexts (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Instead of essences, postphenomenologists find many dimensions or possibilities of the phenomenon, once technologies acquire multiple meanings when experienced by humans (Ihde, 1990, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Each of these possibilities, meanings, modes of usage, or purpose is considered a stability (also referred to as variation), “and their collection is termed multistability” (Wellner, 2020b, p. 105).

If we want to explore the multiple stable ways in which a given technology transforms experiences, we are required to change our point of view slightly to allow the object to show itself differently (Ihde, 2009). In this study, this change in perspective is attained by listening to individuals who live their political becoming under varied contexts. The participants of this investigation hold different political identifications, live in big and small cities and come from various socio-economic backgrounds. The aim is to explore the diverse ways in which social media transform

Brazilians' political becomings, identifying certain stabilities across multiple contexts; that is, identifying transformations that remain stable when looking at the phenomenon through varied angles. The following section describes the research design employed in this study, which is informed by the main characteristics of postphenomenology (summarised in *Figure 5.1*), and attention to variational theory.

## **5.2 Research Design**

Inspired by the recent Brazilian political crises and discussions about the impact of social media on their unfolding (see Chapter 4), this research delves into individual involvements with social media and processes of political becomings to explore how social media transform such experiences. This goal is pursued from a postphenomenological standpoint. This section addresses the research questions that direct this investigation and how the investigation is designed to answer them, adopting a postphenomenology of practice approach (Adams & Turville, 2018).

### **5.2.1 Research Questions**

Deriving from the postphenomenological tenets discussed in Section 5.1, the main research question (RQ) this study aims to answer is:

*How do social media shape young Brazilians' political becomings?*

This question stems from the postphenomenological assumption that technologies shape our experiences. Thus, this is not a quest to find out *if* social media change these experiences but an investigation on the *shape* that political becomings take when mediated by social media. Moreover, this question is broad enough to allow the identification of multiple ways in which social media transform these processes, addressing the concept of multistability (Ihde, 1990, 2009). The focus on *young Brazilians* delimits the broad context in which the experiences of political becomings

are investigated: Brazil, with an emphasis on the youth, as expanded in Section 5.3.2. As discussed in Chapter 3, the term *political becomings* encompasses not only the processes of political identifications but also political participation activities in which individuals engage in iterative processes of acting and becoming (Dennis, 2019; Laclau, 1994; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Mendonça, 2017; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). Further sub-research questions (SRQs) assist the answering of the central question as follows:

**SRQ 1.** *How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?*

This question aims to map the processes through which young Brazilians construct their political identifications and become engaged in political activities (Holland et al., 2018; Marques & Mendonça, 2018) and observe how social appear in them, acquiring diverse meanings. This non-media-centric approach (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013) allows the observation of which role social media have in the broad processes of political becomings. The answer to SQR 1 builds the foundation upon which the SRQ 2 is addressed.

**SRQ 2.** *How do social media transform the perception and action involved in the political becomings of young Brazilians?*

This question directs the analysis to how social media transform political experiences through the mediation of perception and action (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Concepts from media and political participation studies are incorporated into the postphenomenological framework aiming at a postphenomenological understanding of how social media transform political processes (Dennis, 2019; Holland et al., 2018; Lewis, 2018; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Papacharissi, 2010, 2011).

To answer these questions, this research adopts a postphenomenology of practice approach (Adams & Turville, 2018). This is discussed in the following section.

### **5.2.2 Postphenomenology of Practice**

Postphenomenology does not prescribe a methodology, and researchers are free to find approaches suitable to their specific studies (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). The research questions discussed in Section 5.2.1 are addressed through a *postphenomenology of practice* (Adams & Turville, 2018). This methodological approach by Catherine Adams and Joni Turville (2018) builds upon Max van Manen's (2016) *phenomenology of practice*. As Adams and Turville (2018) observe, van Manen's approach is "already pragmatic and empirical" and, thus, highly suitable for analyses of experiences with technology (p. 12).

A postphenomenology of practice begins "by making a distinction between the prereflective (the natural attitude) and the reflective (the phenomenological attitude), which roughly corresponds to the familiar division employed in empirical research between data collection and data analysis" (Adams & Turville, 2018, p. 12). The prereflective data is generated through descriptions of lived experiences with technologies that can be constructed with interviews or observations (Adams & Turville, 2018; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Richards, 2015). These instruments aim to craft "anecdotes that describe a particular technology or thing as occurrent in everyday life" (Adams & Turville, 2018, p. 12).

As expanded later in this chapter, this study relies primarily on prereflective data generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals who have lived experiences with political becomings and social media (van Manen, 2016). Postphenomenological studies often derive from auto-ethnographic observations or readings of science journals, seldom relying on "empirical studies of *other* people's technologically mediated experiences and practices" (Aagaard, 2015, p. 92, emphasis in original). Nonetheless, as Adams and Turville (2018) assert, postphenomenological research can benefit from a greater engagement with empirical studies. Interviews with diverse individuals can be an outstanding avenue for generating data about the multiple ways in which technologies transform experiences (Aagaard, 2015; Adams &

Turville, 2018). Before addressing the instruments employed to answer the research questions, this section considers how validity, reliability and openness to the phenomenon are comprehended in this methodological approach to avoid unsuitable expectations (van Manen, 2016).

To do phenomenological research is foremost to reflect on human experiences and explore how they are lived (Aagaard, 2021b; van Manen, 2016). These investigations are of course accompanied by concepts and theories, “but the point is that they should point toward lived experiences that people may recognize when reading about them,” incorporating vivid accounts of human experiences in the philosophical discussions (Aagaard, 2021b, p. 3). The validity of a phenomenological study can be evaluated by this resonance with readers’ understandings as something present in lived experiences (Aagaard, 2018).

Moreover, Van Manen (2016) proposes to assess the level of validity of phenomenological studies against four questions, which are adapted here for a postphenomenological investigation (van Manen, 2016, pp. 350-351):

1. *Is the study based on a valid postphenomenological question?*

To reach vivid accounts of human experiences, phenomenological research should ask questions such as: “what is this experience like?” (van Manen, 2016, p. 31). In the case of postphenomenological studies, research questions revolve around what roles technology play in a given human-world relation (Verbeek, 2000/2005). In this study, the main question revolves around the role of social media in the experiences of political becomings interrogating: what does the experience of political becomings look like when they are mediated by social media?

2. *Is the analysis performed on descriptions of human-technology-world experiences?*

The analysis should focus on descriptions, not opinions, of human-technology-world experiences, following the hermeneutic rules described later in Section 5.4 in this chapter (Ihde, 2012).

3. *Is the investigation rooted in postphenomenological and phenomenological literature and assumptions?*

Postphenomenological studies should stem from interrelational ontology, the notion that humans, the world and technologies are constituted in their relations, mutually shaping each other (Verbeek, 2000/2005). Other phenomenologies are also employed in philosophical discussions, as they are the foundations of postphenomenology. Furthermore, each investigation might call for a dialogue with fields particular to the phenomenon under investigation (e.g., Verbeek, 2020b). This study, for instance, engages with various media and political participation studies.

4. *Does the study avoid trying to legitimate itself with criteria derived from non-phenomenological methodologies?*

Phenomenological studies differ from other kinds of social or human sciences methodologies, which “are based upon very different assumptions” and, for this reason, should not be evaluated following the same standards (van Manen, 2016, p. 342). Phenomenology aims to grasp the meanings of a phenomenon, “however, phenomenological evidence is ultimately ambiguous and never complete” (van Manen, 2016, p. 351). The aim of this kind of research is not to find an ultimate truth but to gain insights into the nature of an experience.

These questions assist in the avoidance of misconceptions in the expectations of postphenomenological studies such as this one.

Another characteristic of phenomenological research is embracing an openness toward the phenomenon, which, in this study, translates into rather iterative processes, allowing for the phenomenon as it appears through the empirical material to guide the investigation (Dahlberg et al., 2011; Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2016). This

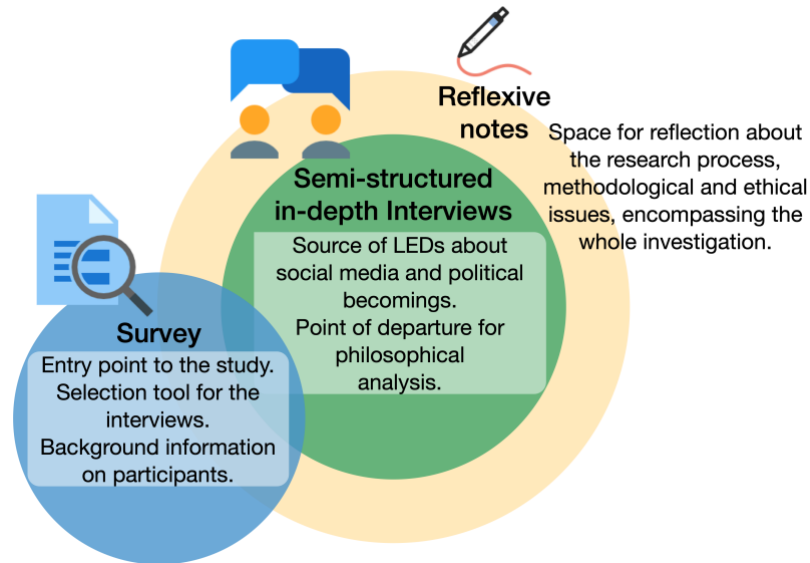
standpoint is influenced by the understanding that the components of phenomenological studies follow an “open and shifting cyclical pattern,” in which they are constantly revisited and subject to change (Vagle, 2014/2018, p. 139).

Consequently, assembling this dissertation involved many *doings* and *undoings*, informed by the phenomenon and the empirical material at hand (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018; Vagle, 2014/2018). The next section describes the research instruments employed to answer the research questions.

### **5.2.3 Research Instruments**

Lived experiences with technology are usually obtained through one of three methods (or a combination of them): self-observation, in which the authors analyse their own experiences with the technology, observations of others or interviews (Adams & Turville, 2018; Bergen & Verbeek, 2020). This research turns to semi-structured in-depth interviews as its main instrument (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Della Porta, 2014). Semi-structured in-depth interviews are considered highly suitable for generating data about the diverse ways in which technologies help transform human-world relations, thus, appropriate to answer this study’s questions (Adams & Turville, 2018; van Manen, 2016). A survey and fieldnotes are employed as secondary instruments to enhance the engagement with the phenomenon and participants and support the in-depth interviews. This section introduces the research instruments and their purpose in this investigation, while Section 5.3 details the application of the survey in the selection of participants, and Section 5.4 explains how these instruments are employed in the construction of the empirical data. The instruments are addressed next in order of importance to the overall investigation, beginning with the semi-structured in-depth interviews, which constitute the core of this investigation, as *Figure 5.2* illustrates.



**Figure 5.2***Research Instruments*

*Note.* Source: The author.

The purpose of the semi-structured in-depth interviews is to “elicit lived experience descriptions (LEDs) about the research participant’s everyday engagements and encounters with the technology [and phenomenon] of interest” (Adams & Turville, 2018, p. 15). The aim is to construct<sup>31</sup> qualitative data that can help understand experiences of political becomings and their interconnection with social media (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Richards, 2015). Although relatively uncommon in postphenomenological studies, Adams and Turville (2018) note (and this study confirms) that interviews

can be an excellent way to generate multiple experiential variations or multistabilities in relation to a particular technology, as well as to potentially disrupt one’s certainty about how a technology may or may not appear or be used. For a postphenomenology of practice, interviewing others is a core method for generating a rich and diverse body of first-hand examples of everyday human-technology-world engagements. (p. 15)

<sup>31</sup> In this study, qualitative data are seen as constructed (not simply gathered) through the interactions between researcher, participants and environments (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Richards, 2015). Thus, in this document, the term data construction is preferred over data gathering, as employed by van Manen (2016), for example.

The study interviews were planned as one-hour semi-structured conversations (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Della Porta, 2014) in which the researcher can “be with” the participant and the phenomenon of interest (Gadamer, 2004, p. 387). They are semi-structured in the sense that they address specific themes,<sup>32</sup> with questions about political becomings, for instance, but the conversations allow enough flexibility to explore unaccounted issues brought up by participants, in a collaborative construction of the lived experiences descriptions (Aagaard, 2018; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Della Porta, 2014).

A survey and reflexive notes are also employed as means to contribute to a “sustained engagement with the phenomenon and the participants who have experienced the phenomenon” (Vagle, 2014/2018, p. 72). This sustained engagement requires a scientific openness, a commitment to seeing and understanding things in a new way, respecting the phenomenon and allowing methods and other scientific tools to be adapted during all phases of the research (Dahlberg et al., 2011; Gadamer, 2004; Ihde, 2012; Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2003). By maintaining an open position, the researcher “lets the phenomenon demonstrate how it can and should be studied” (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p. 98). This openness to the phenomenon guided all stages of this research.

The exploratory online survey<sup>33</sup> (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was designed on LimeSurvey, a software developed for conducting online questionnaires and suggested by UTS Information and Technology services due to its security and privacy measures. The survey was employed as an entry point to the research, where potential participants could familiarise themselves with the study before agreeing to a face-to-face interview. Speaking about political behaviours in a politically polarised environment can be a reasonably sensitive issue (Blee & Latif, 2021). For this reason,

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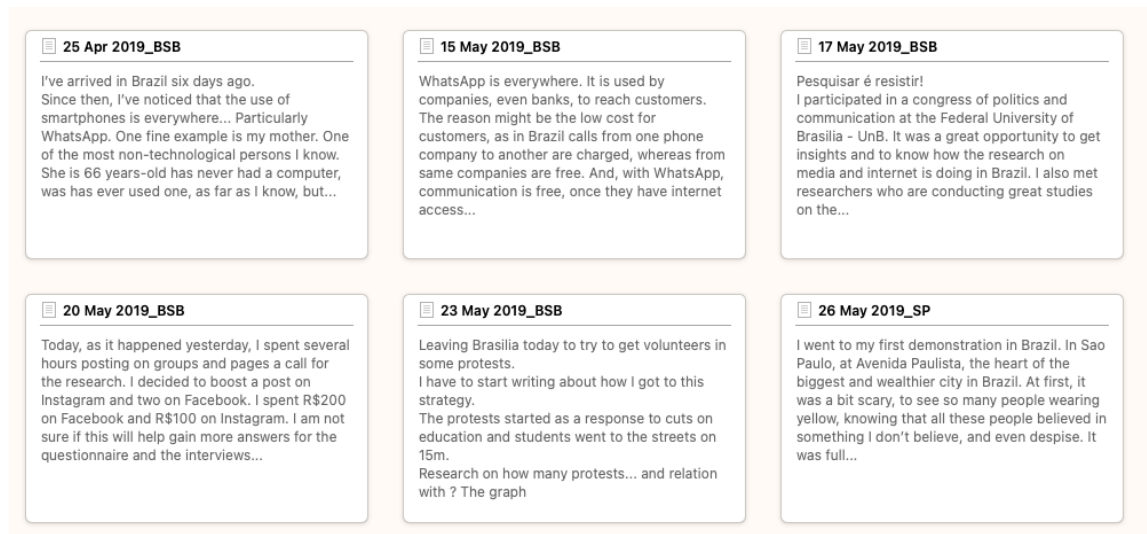
<sup>32</sup> The interview protocol is available on *Appendix D*.

<sup>33</sup> As approved by UTS Human Research Ethics Committee on 12 April 2019, under the number ETH19-3385.

employing an online survey as a first contact with the research could potentially be less intimidating for individuals, especially those on the Right in Brazil, who tend to be suspicious of academic research. In the survey, participants could choose to be contacted for an interview or not.

The survey facilitated finding volunteers who fit the selection criteria discussed later in this chapter (age, diverse political identifications, locations, usage of social media) (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The responses also served to prime the in-depth interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All participants had answered the survey before the interviews, and their responses informed some of the questions asked during the conversations. For example, item 17 of the questionnaire asked individuals about the primary sources of information that influenced their vote decision in 2018 (*Appendix C*). This answer could be expanded during the interview. The questions also prompted participants to think about their political becomings prior to the interviews, as observed by some interviewees.

Finally, reflexive notes accompanied the whole research process, from before the fieldwork to the analysis phase (Aagaard, 2017; Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Dahlberg et al., 2011; Vagle, 2014/2018). Reflexivity addresses the fact that it is “neither possible nor desirable” for the researcher to suspend all their knowledge or assumptions as proposed in the classical phenomenological *epoché* (Aagaard, 2015, p. 92). Researcher reflexivity allows for a constant critical assessment of the researcher’s assumptions and practices, providing a space for questioning the phenomenon and the experience of the research in itself (Aagaard, 2017; Dahlberg et al., 2011; Vagle, 2014/2018). The notes were taken usually on a smartphone or a notebook, dated and labelled with the city in which they were written, to allow for easy revisitation during the analysis of the interviews. These notes were then organised in Scrivener for better visualisation (*Figure 5.3*).

**Figure 5.3***Snapshot of Reflective Notes Taken During the Research*

*Note.* Source: The author.

The notes were originally written on a phone or on a notebook. Then, they were transcribed and organised in Scrivener for better access, as shown in this figure.

To summarise, the research questions and the design employed to address them draws upon a postphenomenology of practice approach, which presupposes specific views on reliability, validity and openness to the phenomenon under examination. The main instrument employed as part of this investigation is semi-structured in-depth interviews (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Della Porta, 2014), which are appropriate for the generation of data about how technologies transform the relations individuals establish with the world around them (Adams & Turville, 2018; van Manen, 2016). A survey and reflexive notes are employed as secondary instruments. The survey aimed to assist in approaching potential participants and serves as a tool to select individuals who meet the criteria addressed in the next section. The reflexive notes support a sustained engagement with the phenomenon under study, providing a space for the researcher to consider methodological, ethical and conceptual issues. The following section deals with the contexts and criteria that inform how the participants of this study were selected (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Richards, 2015; van Manen, 2016).

### **5.3 The Construction of the Field: Time, Places and Participants**

Once phenomena are socially produced, they consequently become susceptible to changes depending on their situatedness (Ihde, 2012; Vagle, 2014/2018, 2019). For this reason, it is important to reflect on the specific contexts, within the broad context of Brazil (considered in Chapter 4). These specific contexts comprise factors such as the period in time, specific places, and the selected participants. They constitute the field in which the phenomenon of political becomings and its interconnectedness with social media occur (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Vagle, 2014/2018, 2019). The next subsections consider how the case study was affected by the period in time in which the interviews were conducted, the participants' selection criteria for the interviews, the strategies employed to reach potential participants, and the singularities of the selected individuals.

#### ***5.3.1 Time***

The fieldwork began six months after the 2018 general elections in Brazil, in May 2019. The euphoria before and just after the elections had been missed, and individuals had had some time to digest the turmoils of 2018. After the political and social storm that took over Brazil in 2018, the following year (2019) seemed calmer, with a certain feeling of a hangover, or some tiredness around the topic of politics, which made individuals not so eager to talk about such issues. Additionally, due to incidents involving aggression, arrests and fights around political identifications and actions, individuals from across the political spectrum disclosed that they were sceptical about talking to a researcher (an outsider and unknown person) regarding their political involvements. This scenario made it challenging to reach out to possible participants who could agree to a face-to-face, in-depth interview. For this reason, as discussed previously, a survey was first employed as a less intrusive means to facilitate the initial interaction.

### ***5.3.2 Participants' Selection Criteria – Interviews***

The participants' selection criteria reflect the purpose of achieving a diverse pool of individuals who had experienced social media and political involvement in Brazil and showed the potential to “provide a thorough and rich description of the phenomenon” as lived in varied contexts (Vagle, 2014/2018, p. 147). More relevant than the number of participants is the diversity of experiences they could potentially share (Della Porta, 2014; van Manen, 2016), and observations how social media can transform processes of political becomings from different perspectives. As discussed in Section 5.1.1, phenomenological theory is applied in this study (Ihde, 2009); this involves the use of purposive sampling to select individuals who are knowledgeable of the experience being studied, agree to talk about it, and represent a range of varied perspectives, different ages (within the target age), cities, political identifications, socioeconomic background, gender, and skin colour. These are all necessary in order to have a broad view of the phenomenon (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Dahlberg et al., 2011; van Manen, 2016). Moreover, snowball sampling was also employed, but only one participant demonstrated a willingness to invite others to take part in the study (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Della Porta, 2014). This section describes the selection criteria and the strategies employed to contact and choose participants who met these criteria.

A chief preoccupation when selecting participants was to reach individuals holding different political views, and to observe how social media shape the processes of political becomings in varied contexts (Ihde, 2009; Vagle, 2014/2018). As mentioned earlier, Brazil has been experiencing an increasing sense of political polarisation since 2013, and in 2018 there were two broader opposed (and distant) political camps (Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019; Miguel, 2019a; Soares et al., 2019). As the fieldwork began six months after the 2018 general elections, the voting choices in the runoff, when the voters had to choose between the Left (in the person of Haddad) and the Right (Bolsonaro), were used to distinguish individuals as identified with one of the two aforementioned political camps. A balance between the two fields was pursued by

including in the online survey (*Appendix C*) a question regarding their voting choice in the 2018 elections runoff (Bolsonaro or Haddad), followed by efforts to have both choices evenly represented during the selection for the interviews.

The concern of reaching diverse political identifications also informs the age criteria set for this study, leading to the adoption of an extended notion of youth, 18 to 34 years old (Abramovay & Garcia Castro, 2015).<sup>34</sup> The choice for this age range has three main reasons. First is the wish to listen to the youth, as most of this population has grown up in digitally textured environments, being considered natives of the digital media culture we now live in (Hepp et al., 2014; Irwin, 2016; Nicolau, 2020). Second, before the elections, there were indications that most of Bolsonaro's supporters (60%) were in the age range of 16 to 34 years old<sup>35</sup> (Machado, 2017). As discussed in Chapter 4, in 2018, Bolsonaro represented the face of the New Right in Brazil; thus, the choice to extend the notion of youth aimed to reach the individuals who engaged with this political identification over the last few years (Avritzer, 2016; Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018; Miguel, 2018, 2019b; Nicolau, 2020; Rocha, 2021). Third, surveys conducted during major demonstrations in 2018, such as *Mulheres Contra Bolsonaro* (Women against Bolsonaro), on the Left, and *PT Nunca Mais* (PT Never More), on the Right, indicated that the majority of demonstrators were in the age range 18-34 years old, denoting that citizens in this age range were politically active across both broad political fields (Kalil, Moretto, et al., 2018; Moretto & Ortellado, 2018).

There was also an effort to reach participants from various regions in Brazil, in an attempt to have experiences from diverse micro-contexts (social, economic, and political environments) so that the phenomenon can be studied in different settings

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<sup>34</sup> Globally, the United Nations considers youth those with ages between 15 and 24 years old, however, in Brazil, since 2005, are considered in the youth spectrum those aged between 15 and 29 years old (Abramovay & Garcia Castro, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> This data is retrieved from voting polls conducted prior to 2018, as reported, for instance, in Machado (2017). However, more recent studies demonstrate that Bolsonaro won across all ages, displaying higher support among adults older than 45 years old (Nicolau, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Individuals younger than 18 years old are not included due to ethical considerations.

(Della Porta, 2014; Vagle, 2014/2018). This was one of main the reasons for the incorporation of online interviews in the process of construction of the empirical material, as detailed in Section 5.4. The face-to-face interviews also occurred in different cities: São Paulo (Southeast), which is the biggest city in Brazil (12 million inhabitants) and has been highly politically active on both sides of the political spectrum, serving as the stage of some of the largest demonstrations in Brazil in recent years (Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018; Kalil, Moretto, et al., 2018; Moretto & Ortellado, 2018; Rossi et al., 2018); Rio de Janeiro (Southeast) and Salvador (Northeast). The next section explains the strategies employed to reach out to individuals and select the participants who met the previously discussed selection criteria.

### ***5.3.3 Chasing Stories: Strategies Employed to Reach Participants***

Social media platforms were employed to create an online presence for the study, allowing for a broader reach and a multiplicity of experiences to emerge from the field (Vieira-Magalhães, 2019). On that account, diverse tactics were applied to obtain enough responses to compose a varied pool of participants (Vagle, 2014/2018). The instruments were employed simultaneously to address the difficulties of connecting with participants, and all had their value in this process (*Table 5.1*).



**Table 5.1***Strategies Employed to Reach Participants*

| Strategy  | Aims   |
|---|--|
| Blog<br>(WordPress)   | To have an online space with the research's information in informal language.<br>To connect to the social media accounts.  |
| Social Media Profiles dedicated to the Research<br>(Facebook and Instagram) | Online presence for the research with informal language.<br>To facilitate for the research to be shared and found by diverse publics.<br>To post visual content to attract participants. |
| Posts on Political Pages and Groups   | To target specific groups not represented in the survey's responses (e.g., those identified with the Right).   |
| Leaflets<br>(printed)   | To facilitate conversations between the researcher and prospective participants during demonstrations.<br>To provide further means of contact.   |
| Paid Adverts<br>(Instagram and Facebook)                                    | To increase the response to the survey.<br>To target specific audiences (as set the selection criteria).   |

*Note.* Source: The author.

Highly popular in Brazil, with a concentration of young users, Instagram emerged as the best means for participants' recruitment (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020a). Instagram has been acknowledged as a significant online space for political communication across the globe (as documented, for example, by Filimonov et al., 2016; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Larsson, 2019; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021). Additionally, calls for the research were posted on political pages and online groups from Left to Right (on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube) (Vieira-Magalhães, 2019). At some point, Right-wing pages, channels and individuals were targeted due to limited responses received from participants aligned with these political views. Also, printed leaflets were distributed in diverse political demonstrations to facilitate the contact between the researcher and prospective participants and provide other means of contact (See *Appendix A* for the research publicising strategies).

However, the previously discussed recruitment tactics did not provide enough results. Thus, paid adverts were employed with a call for the research to direct viewers

to the survey (Samuels & Zucco, 2014; Vieira-Magalhães, 2019; Vitorino, 2019). A total of 11 adverts were placed (two on Facebook and nine on Instagram), purchased in several waves, from 20 May to 23 October 2019, with a total cost of approximately AUD 300 (R\$851,84).<sup>37</sup> The target audiences for the adverts were set by age (18 to 34 years old), location (targeting the cities of Salvador or São Paulo, for example), and interests (such as *Left-wing politics*, *God*, *education*, *Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva*, or *Jair Bolsonaro*<sup>38</sup>).<sup>39</sup> Different adverts targeted different audiences, sometimes aiming at Right-wing supporters, as these were harder to obtain responses from, and also responding to current affairs, when a topic became more prominent on media, such as the *Amazon fires*, in August 2019, or the comedian Danilo Gentili, often cited in Right-wing conversations due to his political statements. The most effective tools to gain more survey responses were the paid adverts on Instagram and the Instagram profile created to publicise the research (see *Table 5.1*). However, the survey responses were only responsible for half of the participants interviewed in this study. Despite the high number of responses to the survey, few respondents left contact details to be interviewed, as detailed in the next section.

#### **5.3.4 Composition of the Research Participants**

As noted earlier, the number of participants aimed for this study was less important than the diversity of experiences that these individuals could contribute to the analysis of how social media shape political becomings (Della Porta, 2014; Ihde, 2009; van Manen, 2016). This section addresses the composition of the pool of citizens who participated in the semi-structured in-depth interviews, addressing some of their

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<sup>37</sup> A report of adverts placement and reach and examples of the adverts placed on Instagram are found on *Appendix F*.

<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that the interests have to be chosen amongst the ones offered by Facebook and Instagram at the time of the advertisement's placement.

<sup>39</sup> For examples of audience targeting of paid adverts, please refer to *Appendix F*.

particular characteristics, which both make possible and limit the analysis of how social media transform political becomings performed in this study.

It is worth remarking that phenomenological research “cannot strive for empirical generalization—from a sample to a population” and, thus, issues such as data saturation or proportions of gender and skin colour, for instance, do not pertain to this type of study (van Manen, 2016, pp. 352-353). What is important when selecting participants is to attempt “to gain ‘examples’ of experientially rich descriptions” (van Manen, 2016, p. 353, emphasis in original). Accordingly, the number of participants in a phenomenological study can vary from none to many (Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2016). In fact, van Manen (2016) states that “too many transcripts may ironically encourage shallow reflection” (p. 353). Generally, a study of this type should therefore aim to have

enough experientially examples or anecdotes that help to make contact with life as it is lived. In the end, the outcome of the study should contain the right amount of experiential material (whether in single sentence or story form) that creates a scholarly and reflective phenomenological text. (p. 353)

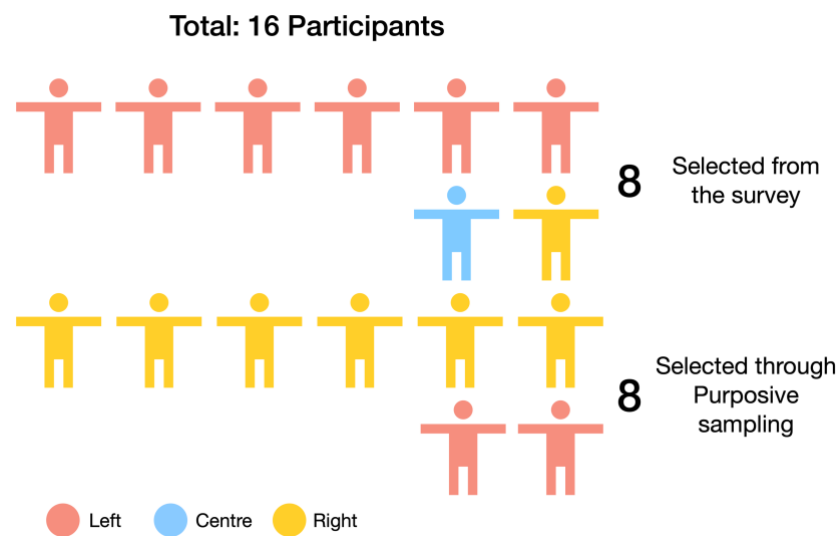
Along these lines, this investigation is built upon the lived experiences described by 16 individuals who participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews, performed both face-to-face (seven) and through online means suggested by the interviewees (nine) (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Della Porta, 2014; Gadamer, 2004; Richards, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Of the 16 individuals who participated in the interviews, half were selected from the survey and half through purposive sampling outside the population of the survey (see *Figure 5.4*) (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). The main reason for that is the low number of participants aligned to the Right who had answered the survey and provided their contact details. At the beginning of the fieldwork, most respondents did not indicate their willingness to participate in the interviews and most of those available for an interview were identified with Left-wing politics. Furthermore, some respondents

did not provide contact information or provided invalid contact details, such as an incomplete email address or wrong phone numbers. Others did not respond when contacted. Due to these complications, purposive sampling was employed to reach individuals outside of the survey's population with the aim of reaching a more diverse group, especially Right-wing participants and non-White citizens.

**Figure 5.4**

*Distribution of Participants According to the Mode of Selection*



*Note.* Source: The author.

The purposive sampling outside of the survey's respondents was operationalised by commenting or sending private messages to certain individuals or activist groups, who seemed to meet the selection criteria. In addition, two women aligned to the Right were referred by a Right-wing participant. After a conversation about the research, these purposively selected individuals were sent the link to the survey to be filled out before the interviews. The majority of those originating from the survey are aligned to the Left (6 individuals), while most citizens coming from the purposive sampling performed outside of the scope of the survey are aligned to the Right; the two aligned to the Left are non-White activists, who were also under-represented in the composition of participants (see *Figure 5.4*). This outcome demonstrates that the survey was not successful in directly reaching out to Right-wing activists willing to participate in the

interviews, whereas targeting individuals and engaging in conversations with them, explaining the research and building trust, produced better results.

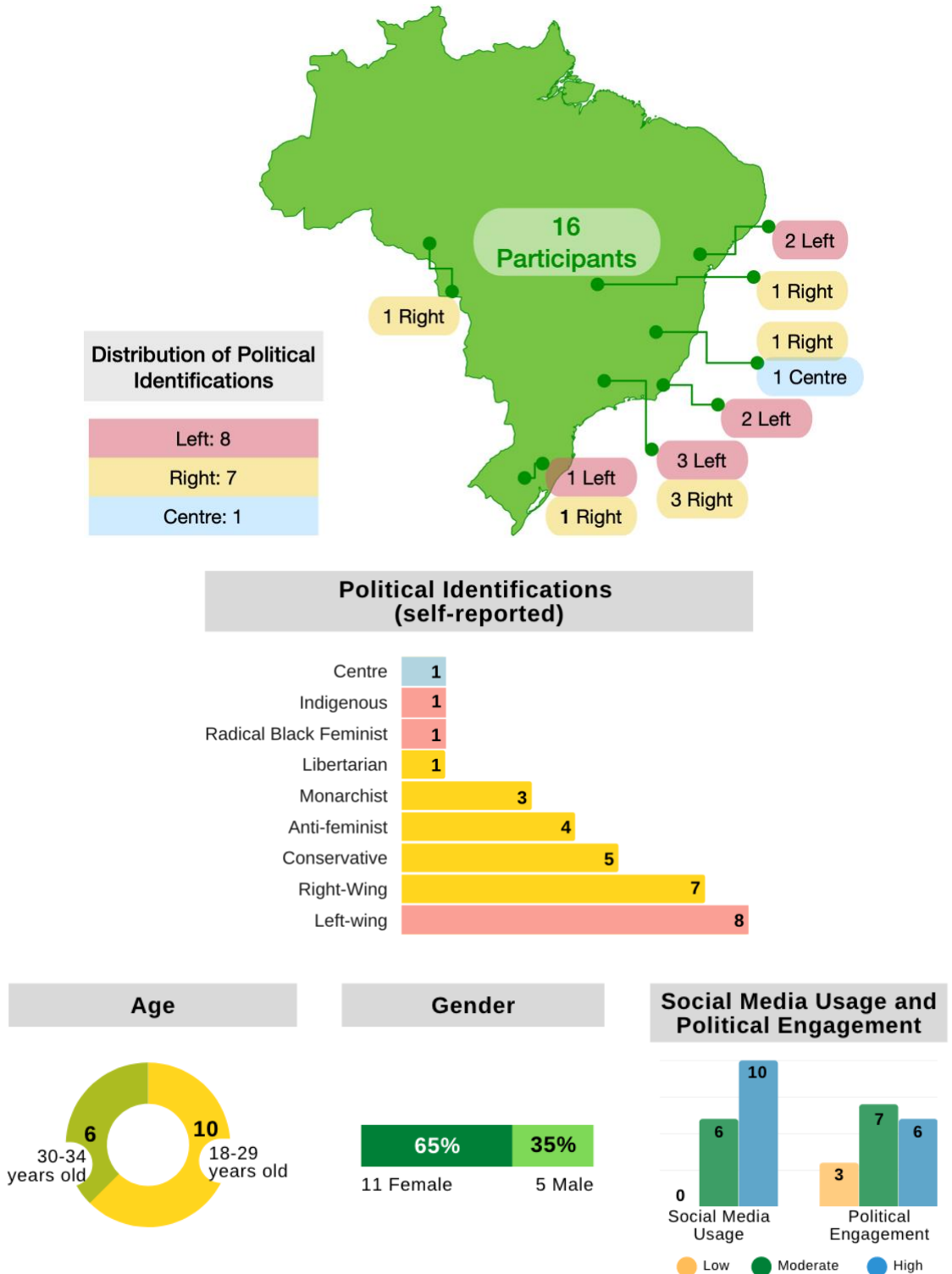
Another change implemented to promote more diversity in the composition of participants was the inclusion of online interviews (Richards, 2015). The means used to perform these interviews included WhatsApp calls (voice only, video calls or voice messages), Discord (voice only) and Hangout (video call). The instruments used were always the ones the interviewee was most comfortable with. Whenever possible, the online interviews were performed as a video call to build rapport. However, for different reasons, such as poor internet connections or not being comfortable with video calls, some interviews were conducted via voice only (Richards, 2015).

In terms of interviewee characteristics, they are citizens of different ages, six in the *mature* group (30 to 34 years old) and ten in the *youth* one (18 to 29 years old); twice as many female participants as male individuals (*Figure 5.5*); and, regarding their skin colour, participants are predominantly White (12 out of 16), despite the efforts to reach more non-White participants, through purposive sampling, such as asking for participants directly in Indigenous and Black movements' social media profiles. As previously observed, these disproportions do not pose a threat to this postphenomenological research, once the foremost objective was to reach a balance in the main political identifications (Left and Right), which was achieved (*Figure 5.5*)<sup>40</sup> (Adams & Turville, 2018; Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2016).

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<sup>40</sup> The composition of participants is also detailed in the *Appendix E*, which discloses the political identification, level of engagement and social media usage of each of the participants.

**Figure 5.5**  
*Composition of Participants*



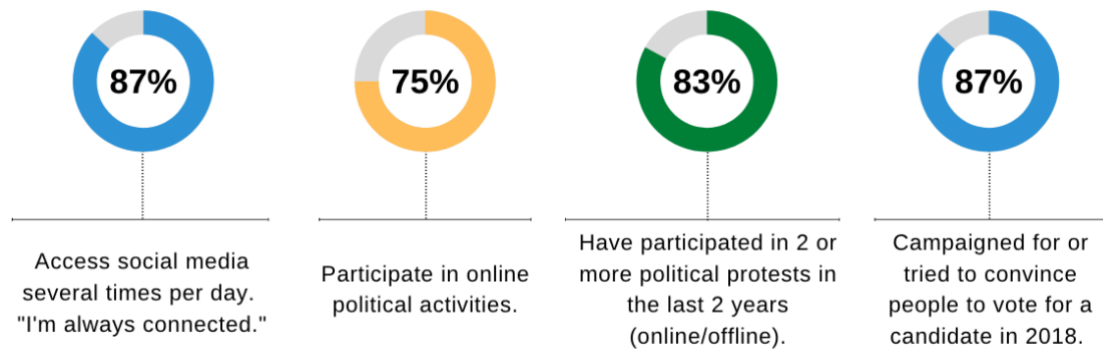
*Note.* Participants report more than one political identification.  
*Source:* The author.

Regarding the geographic locations, there are participants from all five regions of Brazil, in seven different states, with a concentration in the Southeast (the most populous region in the country), which was expected (*Figure 5.5*). An advantage of online interviews was to reach participants in small towns located far from big cities and capitals. Hence, the pool of participants comprises a group of diverse individuals from various walks of life, making it possible to explore how the phenomenon of political identification and social media usage manifest in different settings and contexts (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Della Porta, 2014; Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2016).

Seven individuals consider themselves aligned to the Right, while eight are considered to be on the Left, and one considers herself identified with the Centre.<sup>41</sup> Having only one participant identified with the Centre does not harm the balance on political identifications strived for in this study but can be seen as adding to the diversity in the participants' composition. Moreover, this specific participant has voted for a liberal Right-wing candidate in the first round of the 2018 elections, but, as she is still learning about politics, she prefers to remain more neutral. In addition, most participants demonstrate a high social media usage and moderate to high political engagement (*Figure 5.5* and *5.6*). These characteristics were self-reported on the survey and also discussed during the interviews (*Figure 5.6*). The level of participants' political engagement is also evaluated against the indicators of political participation discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1.2.2), such as the attention to political news, following political interests, the expression of political identifications, taking part in political protests or campaigning for or against a candidate (Dennis, 2019). Most participants mentioned devoting considerable energy and time to politics in the year prior to the interviews, sometimes jeopardizing personal relationships in the process (*Figure 5.6*).

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<sup>41</sup> As discussed earlier, for the purpose of having diverse political views amongst the interviewees the vote choice on the runoff of the 2018 elections was considered a marker in this division Left and Right.

**Figure 5.6***Participants' Social Media and Political Behaviour*

*Note.* Data from the survey responded by participants prior to the interviews.  
Source: The author.

To summarise, this section discussed the construction of the field considering the dimensions of time, participants selection criteria and strategies employed to reach potential participants. The survey, employed to reach a diverse pool of participants, did not provide enough responses from Right-wing activists willing to be involved in the interviews. Hence, this approach did not seem to be a good strategy to reach the diversity proposed in this study. This limitation was addressed by employing purposive sampling outside of the scope of the survey, building trust through conversations or by being referred by a Right-wing participant. With the purposive sampling employed beyond the survey, it was possible to achieve diversity in political identifications and in the geographical locations of participants. Conversely, the participants in the interviews are predominantly White (10), middle-class (11) and female (11), which pose limitations to but do not pose a threat to the investigation, once phenomenological studies do not strive for empirical generalisations (van Manen, 2016). Nonetheless, the individuals interviewed as part of this investigation come from various walks of life, and their accounts of how social media impact political becomings from different perspectives, enriching the construction of the empirical data, is addressed in the next section.



#### **5.4 The Construction of the Empirical Data: Lived Experiences of Political Becomings and Social Media**

This section deals with the construction of the empirical data, attained chiefly through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which capture lived experiences descriptions of political becomings and their interconnectedness with social media usage (Adams & Turville, 2018; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Dahlberg et al., 2011; Della Porta, 2014; Richards, 2015; van Manen, 2016). Although authors who inform the methodological approach operationalised in this research often employ terms such as “gathering phenomenological material” (Vagle, 2014/2018, p. 85) or “gathering lived experiences” (van Manen, 2016, p. 312), this study favours the notion of *data construction* over *data gathering* (Aagaard, 2015, 2018; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Brinkmann, 2012, 2014; Della Porta, 2014; Richards, 2015). Referring to qualitative data as a construction indicates that this information results from the interactions between the researcher, participants and environments (Aagaard, 2018; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Brinkmann, 2012, 2014; Della Porta, 2014; Richards, 2015).

Likewise, data construction acknowledges the role of the researcher in this process, from the research design, selection of participants to the questions asked during interviews (Aagaard, 2018; Richards, 2015). As researchers, “we *take* bits and pieces of the world” to deal with the questions we set ourselves to answer (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 39, emphasis in original). This stance is also shared by Aagaard (2018), who remarks that “empirical research is never a view from nowhere. Data are always codetermined by theory and methodology, and in this respect, data is not simply given; it is taken” (p. 55). This research is informed, for instance, by the theoretical readings about the phenomenon of political becomings and the postphenomenological interrelational ontology in addition to the researcher’s experiences of the world, which have been used as tools to assist in the generation of the empirical material upon which the postphenomenological analysis is performed (Aagaard, 2015, 2018; Brinkmann,

2012, 2014). This section considers how the empirical data was constructed through a survey, semi-structured in-depth interviews and reflexive notes.

#### **5.4.1 Survey**

As stated earlier, the semi-structured in-depth interviews were preceded by an online survey, to which all participants had responded before the encounters. The survey was published on 13 May 2019 with a final expiration date on 25 October 2019, with responses ranging from 16 May to 24 October 2019, resulting in 146 valid entries from Brazilians aged 18 to 34 years old. Although the data generated via the survey are not used in the analysis, the content informs the interviews, adding initial knowledge about the participants (Della Porta, 2014).

The questionnaire covered demographics (age, city and gender) and internet and politics issues with a total of 19 questions. The first set of three questions addressed demographics (age, gender, location) (*Appendix C*). In the second group (internet and politics), 15 items focused on social media usage, political information consumption habits, political engagement and activism (Magallares & Talò, 2015). Political engagement was inferred using some of the indicators of political participation addressed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1.2.2), with queries regarding participation in political demonstrations online or offline and whether individuals had campaigned for candidates during the 2018 elections (Dennis, 2019; Magallares & Talò, 2015). Two open questions were included to provide a space to receive information diverse to the researcher's assumptions: one item asked which social media platforms were most used for political information, and another inquired which source of information was most significant in their choice for president in 2018. In this first moment, to select a balanced pool of individuals identified with the Left and to Right, political identification was determined by the voting choice in the 2018 runoff for president (votes for Bolsonaro were considered on the Right, and Haddad, on the Left). This initial categorisation was further problematised with participants during the

interviews. The survey finished with a question about their willingness to participate in the interviews, to what respondents were prompted with a space to leave their contact information.

While the survey's responses are not directly considered in this study's analysis because they do not provide useful experiential material, they have benefited this investigation in at least three main ways: (1) by informing the researcher's overall understanding of political involvements and social media usage in Brazil (such as the data about the consumption of political information on social media utilised in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.1.1); (2) by providing background knowledge about the participants; (3) by prompting potential participants with cues for reflections on their political becomings, which were later discussed during the interviews (as mentioned by some of them). Hence, regarding the construction of the empirical material, the survey served the purpose of facilitating the interaction between participants, researcher and the phenomenon under investigation. The next section concentrates on the core instrument of this research: the semi-structured in-depth interviews.

#### ***5.4.2 Semi-structured In-depth Interviews***

Semi-structured in-depth interviews constitute the core of this investigation (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Della Porta, 2014). This instrument is considered to be well suited for producing data about how technologies transform human-world relations (Adams & Turville, 2018; van Manen, 2016). This section details how this instrument was operationalised in this investigation.

The interviews were conducted between 25 May and 27 October 2019 and were planned to last one hour. However, few continued beyond that. The initial information provided by the participants' through the online survey assisted in the reduction of the length of the interviews (Della Porta, 2014), as issues such as demographics and voting behaviour had been already addressed in the online questionnaire. The interviews are semi-structured open conversations around the participants' political becomings and

their use of social media in such experiences<sup>42</sup> (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Dahlberg et al., 2011; Della Porta, 2014; Gadamer, 2004; van Manen, 2016). As Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) tells us, an open conversation

is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. (p. 387)

This understanding of the interviews aligns with the open attitude towards the phenomenon, which encompasses this whole study (Dahlberg et al., 2011). It also prevents the researcher from being too attached to their own political beliefs and assumptions, which could hinder the interview processes (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Della Porta, 2014). These conversations were thought of as a way to come in contact with the phenomenon through the participants' eyes (Della Porta, 2014; Gadamer, 2004).

As van Manen (2016) stresses, it is important to consider aspects of tone and setting before the interviews. As part of this investigation, before arranging each interview, the place was carefully decided with the interviewee to find a quiet spot, convenient for the participant and somewhat public, allowing both researcher and participant to feel safe (Della Porta, 2014; Trivelli, 2016). There was an effort to create a friendly and safe space for sharing (Della Porta, 2014), which is critical when “the phenomenon being studied touches on fragile matters” (van Manen, 2016, p. 315), such as political identifications in a polarised environment. This attitude informed the means through which the interviews were conducted. For example, a participant agreed to speak only via recorded voice messages on WhatsApp due to privacy issues at her home and poor internet connection. Being open to such changes allowed for a more diverse account of experiences and granted more control to participants, who could

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<sup>42</sup> For interviews' protocol, please refer to *Appendix D*.

choose how they wanted to take part in the study (Brinkmann, 2012; Dahlberg et al., 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Trivelli, 2016; Vagle, 2014/2018).

Before each interview, participants were provided with an overview of the study and a brief introduction of the researcher (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The ethical guidelines were emphasised, stressing that the participant's information was treated confidentially and that their identities would be anonymised once the data were processed (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Due to the high levels of distrust in academic research in Brazil at the time,<sup>43</sup> particularly regarding politics, this step was carefully thought each time, always asking if more clarification was needed and assuring that they could stop the conversation at any moment or skip a question if they felt uncomfortable (Blee & Latif, 2021; Vieira-Magalhães, 2019). These procedures aimed to make participants feel in control of the conversation, thus, feeling more at ease to answer the questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Waterton & Watson, 2016).

Informed consent was sought either in writing or verbally (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). Informed consent ensures that participants are aware of the purpose of the study and any potential risks or benefits involved in their participation in the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moss et al., 2018). After a few encounters with participants, it became clear that signing a paper to an unknown person caused some apprehension for most of them. For this reason, oral consent was accepted, particularly for the online interviews, going over the main aspects of the research and emphasising that participation was voluntary and could be ended at any moment by the participant (Moss et al., 2018). All interviews were conducted in Brazilian Portuguese and recorded with a voice recorder after the participant's consent (Richards, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These conversations occurred in one encounter and were supplemented by

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<sup>43</sup> The distrust in academia and public institutions as a whole have been one of the discursive points promoted by the New Right in Brazil. For this reason, it has been particularly challenging for researchers to reach individuals aligned to these discourses.

further online conversations (email, WhatsApp messages or private messages on Instagram) when necessary, always respecting the participants' willingness to maintain such conversations (some were more open to that, others less) (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The purpose of the interviews is to generate examples of the engagement with social media regarding the participant's political becomings (Adams & Turville, 2018). As these experiences are highly individualised, the interviews follow few guidelines but maintain an openness to allow the meanings to come from the participants (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Dahlberg et al., 2011; Della Porta, 2014; Richards, 2015; Vagle, 2014/2018). First, there was a focus on the experience of political becomings, rather than a restriction on social media's experiences (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013; van Manen, 2016). By positioning these experiences at the centre of the conversations, it is possible to observe the significance of social media in particular moments and then dig deeper into their nuances (Couldry et al., 2007; Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The interviews began with a broad question: *Who are you?* This question prompted the participants to emphasise any aspect of themselves or their collective identifications; some included their political identification, indicating the importance of this feature for their overall identity (Della Porta, 2014). After that, the interviews were conducted having the research questions in mind, as to map the individuals' encounters with political struggles, from when they first became interested in political issues to the most significant and recent events (addressing the SRQ1), aiming to address the interconnections of their processes of political becomings and social media usage (attending to the SRQ2) (*Table 5.2*) (van Manen, 2016). Then, the conversations took diverse directions, depending on the interviewee's particular experiences, aiming to identify when social media transformed perception and/or actions concerning their political involvements (van Manen, 2016). Participants were often asked if they recalled specific moments that could illustrate their political experiences in a pursuit to "obtain

concrete stories of particular situations or events” (van Manen, 2016, p. 317). The interviews ended with a reflection on what social media mean for their political becomings.

**Table 5.2**

*Research Questions and Operationalisation in the Interviews*

| Central Research Question  |  |
|--|--|
| How do social media shape young Brazilians’ political becomings?   |  |
| SRQ 1  | Interview  |
| How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?                            | <p><i>1 - When did you first become interested in politics? How was the experience like?</i></p> <p>This prompted participants to recall their involvements with politics, from a young age or recently as young adults.</p> <p><i>2 - How did you become more active in politics? What made you become more active?</i></p> <p><i>3 - How did you identify with the political discourse you identify now (Right or Left)? Have you changed along the years? How?</i></p> <p><i>4 - How did you experience the elections campaign in 2018?</i></p> |
| SRQ 2  | Interview  |
| How do social media transform the perception and action involved in the political becomings of young Brazilians? | <p><i>5 - Were any social media present in these involvements?</i></p> <p>Questions like this permeate the interviews a whole.</p> <p><i>6 - How are social media present in your political engagement?</i></p> <p><i>7 - How do you use social media regarding politics overall?</i></p>  |

*Note.* The division presented here is an illustration, questions asked during the interviews varied greatly, but always being aware of moments when descriptions of experiences with social media could be elicited.

The semi-structured in-depth interviews provided rich accounts of how the participants in this study live their political becomings and the interconnections of these experiences with the use of social media. The employment of online means to conduct the interviews proved to be a useful resource. As these individuals are highly familiar with online means, the participants seemed quite comfortable with the interviews performed this way; some even said they would prefer to do it online. Moreover, the employment of online interviews allowed the study to reach individuals living in small and difficult to reach towns, and the information shared by these

participants is of great value for this investigation. The next section considers the role of the reflexive notes in the research process.

### ***5.4.3 Reflexive Notes***

Reflexive notes were employed in this research to enhance the engagement with the phenomenon and reflect upon methodological, ethical and conceptual issues (Aagaard, 2018; Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019; Vagle, 2014/2018). In this study, these notes contemplate reflections on fieldwork activities, interviews, events and the research process as a whole (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). Through these notes, the engagement with the phenomenon under investigation and the methodological and ethical issues that emerged during the research process could be reflected upon, always maintaining an openness to the phenomenon and how it would be better studied (Dahlberg et al., 2011; Gadamer, 2004; Ihde, 2012; Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2003). For instance, when arriving in Brazil for the fieldwork, I reflected on how WhatsApp was much more present in everyday communications than in Australia:

BRASÍLIA, 29 APRIL 2019: I arrived in Brazil six days ago. Since then, I've noticed that the use of smartphones is everywhere, particularly WhatsApp. One fine example is my mother, one of the most non-technological persons I know. She is 66 years old has never had a computer nor has ever used one, as far as I know, but she is an avid WhatsApp's user. She sends audio, receives and send videos all the time. In Brasília, on the bus, a means of transport used mostly by the working class, smartphones are everywhere. Pre-paid phone services offer packages to use social media as low as 2 dollars per week. (Patricia)

This reflection speaks to the differences in contexts and the varying significance technologies can acquire in diverse societies (Ihde, 2009; Vagle, 2014/2018).

The notes taken after the interviews included reflections about methodological issues, such as the decision to incorporate online interviews and not only face-to-face encounters, as initially proposed:

BRASÍLIA, 18 JUNE 2019: Yesterday, I interviewed two Right-wing participants online. These were my first online interviews. Both participants live far from big.



Initially, my aim was to have only face-to-face interviews. However, logistics in Brazil is very difficult to manage and time. As I wasn't receiving much response in the survey, I have to adapt and allow for interviews to be conducted in ways that suit better the participants and the research. (Patricia)

These two interviews were highly rich in content, and both participants lived in small towns, difficult to reach from where I was located. This reflection considers how online interviews could reach more diverse participants, providing richer data to the study.

The notes also functioned as a space to reflect on the conducted interviews, aiming to avoid bias and consider ways to enrich the research processes. The reflections involved first impressions about the conversations and how to improve for the next interview (Aagaard, 2018; Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019; Vagle, 2014/2018). These notes addressed issues such as: *What questions could have enriched the conversation? What sparked as most interesting? Have some new findings emerged? What am I missing? Are the questions working?*

Additionally, the notes contemplate impressions of the political demonstrations (on the Left and the Right), which were attended as means to maintain a sustained engagement with the phenomenon of political becomings in Brazil, to better understand participants' experiences with current political struggles, and to potentially invite individuals for the study (Vagle, 2014/2018):

RIO DE JANEIRO, 30 JUNE 2019: Demonstration pro Bolsonaro and pro Lava Jato in Copacabana. It was a slightly awkward experience. I dressed in yellow and green: yellow shorts and a green and white t-shirt. I took the subway, and there were many people dressed the same, in yellow and green. By wearing these colours, I instantly saw myself as part of this group. As they were leaving the subway, they began chanting things like: "I came for free." Others, from inside the train, began shouting "free Lula." (Patricia)

The engagement in these demonstrations, especially the Right-wing ones, helped me to better understand the interviewees' experiences and become more comfortable around Right-wing supporters, enhancing the overall connection with participants.

As seen above, the empirical material collected as part of this investigation comprises diverse descriptions of how individuals become involved with political struggles, and live under varied contexts. This material is derived from semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are informed by a survey and the researcher's reflexive notes. The next section details the analytical process through which these lived experience descriptions are examined.

### **5.5 Analysis of the Empirical Material**

The starting point of postphenomenological analysis is technologies as experienced in everyday life (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). This assertion directs the researcher's gaze to look, in the lived experience descriptions, for the experiences with the technology under scrutiny. At first, it is important to maintain a state of wonder during the analysis of the empirical material, initially looking at the generated information as new findings, constantly questioning pre-conceptions by exercising the researcher's reflexivity (Aagaard, 2017; Ihde, 2012; van Manen, 2016).

The first step of the analysis was performed during the transcription, by the author in the original language, Portuguese, as soon as possible after each interview to make use of memories of the encounters (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Transcribing interviews is often seen as tedious work or, more recently, as something that can be relegated to software to save time. However, transcribing interviews is "an interpretative process" that should be carefully considered (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 106). Moreover, there are advantages to performing this seemingly lengthy task. Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale (2018) remark that

researchers who transcribe their own interviews will learn much more about their own interviewing style; to some extent they will have the social and emotional aspects of the interview present or reawakened during transcription, and will already have started the analysis of the meaning of what was said. (p. 109)

Correspondingly, transcribing the interviews in this study provided an opportunity to take notes of the parts where some clarification was needed, something that caught the attention, or issues that would be good to explore with future participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). The points that needed clarification led to follow-up questions sent to interviewees via email, WhatsApp, or Instagram (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Vagle, 2014/2018). These answers were then added to the transcripts. The transcripts were also sent to participants, who were given the opportunity to review them and make comments if they wished (Brinkmann, 2012; Della Porta, 2014). Nonetheless, none of the participants offered any comment on the transcripts.

Ihde (2012) proposes the following four interrelated *hermeneutic rules* when looking at a phenomenon (*Figure 5.7*). The first rule is to “attend to phenomena as and how they show themselves,” avoiding initial judgments or imposing beliefs or conceptualisations on them (Ihde, 2012, p. 22). In this research, this step is translated into an openness toward the experiences encountered through the interviews, avoiding attempts to fit participants’ descriptions into conceptual frameworks (Dahlberg et al., 2011; Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2016).

**Figure 5.7***Hermeneutic Rules and Application in this Study*

| Rule   | Application in this Study  |
|--|--|
| <b>Attend to the phenomenon as it appears</b><br>Avoid judgments until there is sufficient information to assess the experiences                           | <b>1</b> Openness to the experiences provided by participants, avoiding attempts to fit their descriptions into conceptual frameworks  |
| <b>Describe</b><br>Do not Explain.   | <b>2</b> Careful <b>analysis</b> of the transcriptions through line-by-line readings.<br>Translation of the narrated experiences into <b>Maps of Political Becomings</b> .           |
| <b>Equalise</b><br>Initially, all experiences are considered of equal importance   | <b>3</b> <b>Avoidance</b> to set aside experiences that appear less important than others.<br>Reading each transcription <b>at least twice</b> to search for new elements.           |
| <b>Seek structural or invariant features</b><br>Look for the various ways in which the phenomenon appears: what remains stable in the variants identified? | <b>4</b> In which ways are social media used in participants' political becomings?<br>What are <b>stable ways</b> in which social media transform participants' political becomings? |

Note. Adapted from Ihde (2012, pp. 17-23).

Secondly, Ihde (2012) tells us: “describe, don’t explain” (p. 18). In this stage, the focus lies on describing the experiences as they appear, steering from any possible explanation of them. This exercise helps to maintain the attention on what the experience really is. In this study, this step is pursued by a careful analysis of the interviews’ transcriptions through line-by-line readings and in the translation of these interviews into Maps of Political Becomings (addressed later in this section). At first, these maps merely translate the participants’ experiences with political becomings, avoiding further analysis of what they might mean.

The third rule is to “equalize all immediate phenomena,” that is, to accept all experiences as equally real without imposing any hierarchy (Ihde, 2012, p. 20). This attitude “prevents one from deciding too quickly that some things are more real or fundamental than other things” (Ihde, 2012, p. 21). This equalisation of experiences refers to the researcher's openness toward the phenomenon (*when reading the transcriptions, are some experiences set aside as unimportant at this moment?*). The

transcriptions were read at least twice to avoid privileging some experiences over others, always with that *wonder* attitude (van Manen, 2016).

The fourth rule is to employ the variational analysis (discussed in section 5.1) to seek the technology's *stabilities* (also named *variations*) (Adams & Turville, 2018; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). This step looks for the various and alternative ways in which social media are used, acquiring certain stabilities, which together compose the technology's multistable character (Ihde, 2012). In this step, the multistability of social media is considered in relation to the experiences of political becomings (*in which ways are social media employed in the participants' political becomings?*). Next, these possibilities are questioned in the search for their *invariants* (Ihde, 2012). This analysis identifies what is *variant* and what is *invariant* in the phenomenon (*what remains stable in the various ways in which social media transform political becomings?*) (Ihde, 2009). This fourth step is further discussed in Section 5.5.2.

When performing the fourth step in the hermeneutic rules, there was an attempt to code the interviews on NVivo. However, this attempt could not reveal the phenomenon as it appears, with all its interconnections. It was the moment of realisation of what van Manen (2016) had already emphatically stated, "codification, conceptual abstractions, or empirical generalizations can never adequately produce phenomenological understandings and insights" (p. 319). Thus, coding was abandoned after going through four transcripts, displaying again the openness attitude cultivated throughout the entire research process (Dahlberg et al., 2011; Gadamer, 2004; Ihde, 2012; Vagle, 2014/2018; van Manen, 2003). What followed were attempts to *see* the phenomenon with the openness required, by learning (while doing) that the analysis of the

meanings of a phenomenon (a lived experience) is a complex and creative process of insightful invention, discovery and disclosure. Grasping and formulating a

thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning driven by the epoché and the reduction.<sup>44</sup> (van Manen, 2016, p. 320)

When relating to the constructed data, a process of search, discovery and invention took place. These practices culminated with designing *Maps of Political Becomings*, or visual representations of the interviews, which are described below.

### **5.5.1 Designing Maps of Political Becomings**

This section addresses the process of conception and designing of the Maps of Political Becomings (MPB). As this investigation is about relations between individuals, social media and political becomings, during the analysis, there was a need to visualise these connections in the search for meanings in the interviews’ transcripts (Vagle, 2014/2018). Hence, the choice of designing maps from the interviews, in which the participants’ experiences of political becomings could be visualised with their interconnections with social media.

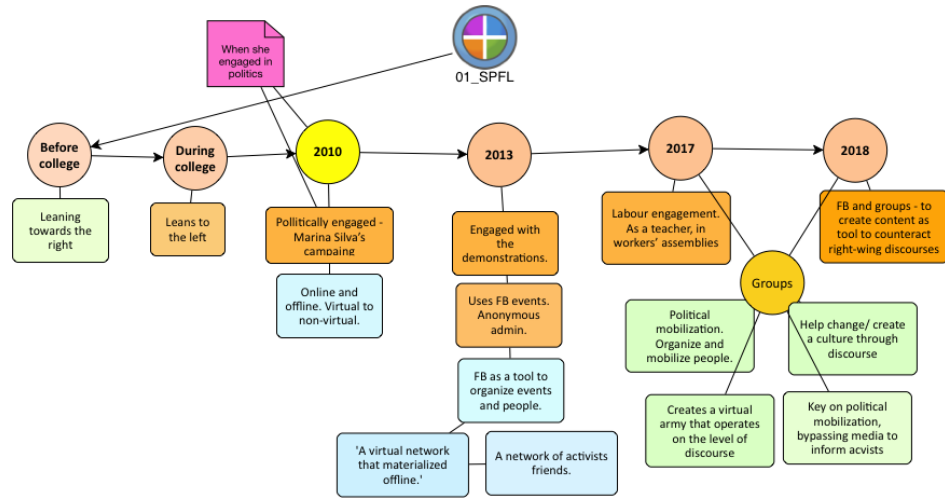
The process of designing the MPBs began with one interview, and then it was replicated with others until reaching a satisfactory result. The first step was to do a “wholistic reading” of an interview transcript to grasp what kind of story it was telling (van Manen, 2016, p. 320). The meaning found was of a *journey*, a process of becoming involved with the political in different ways. After this first understanding, attempts to visualise this journey were made to grasp the notion of a process that evolves with time, is interconnected with the broad context (e.g., elections year, demonstrations), and is diffused across many dimensions of the participants’ life. That is how the notion of a map was employed. This process involved many trials and redesigns, as can be observed in *Figures 5.8* and *5.9*.

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<sup>44</sup> Van Manen talks about *epoché*, the suspension of the researchers’ knowledge, which in this research is addressed by the *researcher reflexivity* (Section 5.2.2) and *reduction*, which in postphenomenology can be equated to *variation analysis* (Section 5.1).

**Figure 5.8**

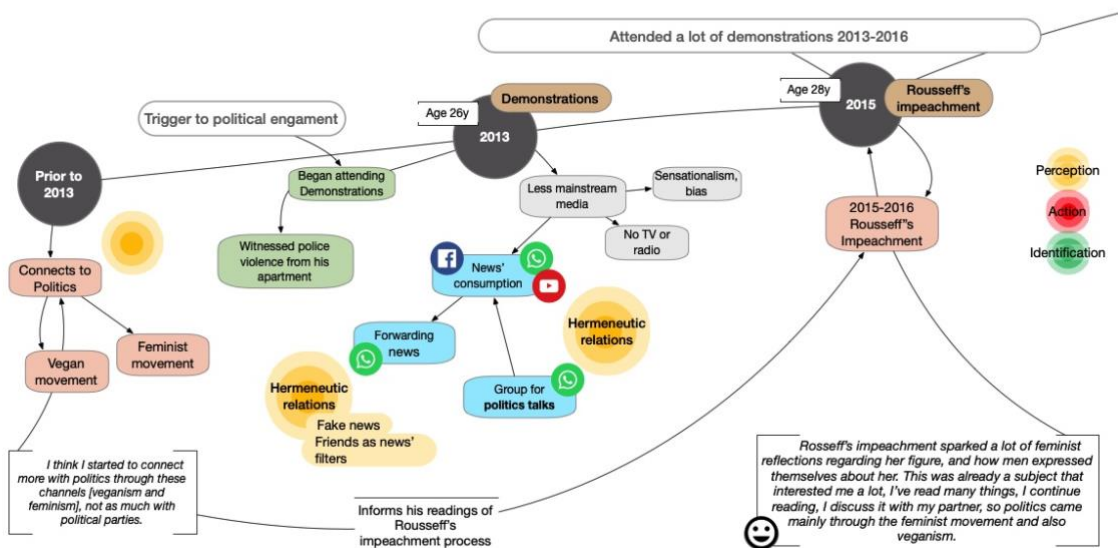
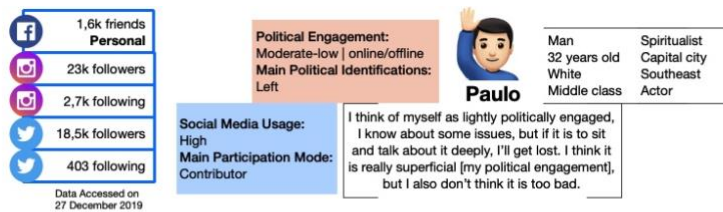
*Initial Tentative of Designing a Map of Political Becomings*



*Note.* This graph was one of the first attempts to design MPBs. It dates from November 2019 and was done using NVivo 12 for Mac. Source: The author.

**Figure 5.9**

*Final Model of the Maps of Political Becomings*



*Note.* This graph was elaborated using OmniGraffle software. Source: The author.

Through a “selective reading” of the interviews’ transcript, the main moments of the participants’ political becomings were highlighted, paying attention to when social media were used (van Manen, 2016, p. 320). Next, these moments were transposed to the MPBs’ graphs, composing a timeline, which helped to address SQR 1 (*How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?*). The graphs provide a visual representation of the interviews and contain key moments of the participants’ political becomings, beginning with what they recall as their first political interests. The designs are supported by the observation of participants’ social media profiles, when available, to assist in placing certain events in time. For example, through observing Aurora’s Facebook timeline, it was possible to find the date of her first post defending the monarchy, which marks a turning moment in her political becomings. These observations enriched the interviews but were only performed on selected participants, who were more open about their social media profiles. The maps also contain participants’ quotes that illustrate a given moment or their relationship with social media and becoming political.

At the top of each MPB, there is some basic information about each participant, including their level of political engagement and social media usage, political identifications, and basic demographics (*Figure 5.9*). An emoji was chosen to bring them to life. Moreover, it makes sense to use them once we are talking about social media usage. Below the emoji, a quote synthesises their political identifications and/or their relationship with social media. Another piece of information available on the top of the MPBs is the participants’ main social media metrics, when available (few participants did not disclose their main social media accounts or did not connect with the researcher through these means).











At this stage, the focus remains on describing the experiences of political becomings and when social media are used in such involvements, practising the second hermeneutic rule (describe it, do not explain) (Ihde, 2012). The same procedure was repeated for other interviews and, as new information emerged from these journeys,



the designs were revisited to incorporate or remove elements to make them more comprehensible, modifying them as they grew. Offline and online moments are brought together as part of the same experience but identified in different colours (green for offline, blue for online). Moreover, icons and colour codes facilitate a more intuitive reading of these processes (*Figure 5.10*). The process is very iterative, and the graphs continued to change as the analysis proceeded, respecting the nature of the phenomenon and how it showed itself (as in the first hermeneutic rule) (Ihde, 2012). The final graphs focus on moments where experiential moments with social media and political becomings can be identified (Aagaard, 2015).

**Figure 5.10**

*Maps of Political Becomings' Legend*

| MPB's Legend  |   |
|---|---|
|  <b>Right-wing</b>           | When the event, social media channel, situation is openly aligned with to the Right.                            |
|  <b>Left-wing</b>            | When the event, social media channel, situation is openly aligned with to the Left.                             |
|  <b>Online</b>               | When the event or interaction happens in or through an online environment, social media or internet in general. |
|  <b>Offline</b>              | When the event or interaction happens face-to-face or in non-digital spaces.                                    |
|  <b>Broad context</b>        | Events related to the broad Brazilian context.  |
|  <b>Personal connections</b> | Indicates the influence of personal connections, friends, family, romantic relationships.                       |
|  <b>Book influence</b>       | Indicates the influence of a book.  |
|  <b>University, School</b>   | Influence connected to events happening during school or university periods.                                    |
|  <b>Podcasts</b>             | Influence or reference to podcasts in varied platforms.   |
|  <b>Preferred</b>            | A preferred social media platform, or the most used ones.   |

*Note.* Social media's icons are also employed.  
Source: The author.

The next section considers how thematic analysis and the search for variations are employed in examining the empirical data to investigate the various ways in which social media transform political becomings.

### ***5.5.2 Thematic Analysis and the Search for Variations***

The next step is the thematic analysis in itself (van Manen, 2016). This section attends to the processes of analysing the empirical material in the search for the variations (or stabilities) of how social media shape political becomings. In this step, the analysis concentrates on moments that can reveal how technological mediation shapes the perception and action of political struggles and how the political subjects themselves are being transformed through these processes.

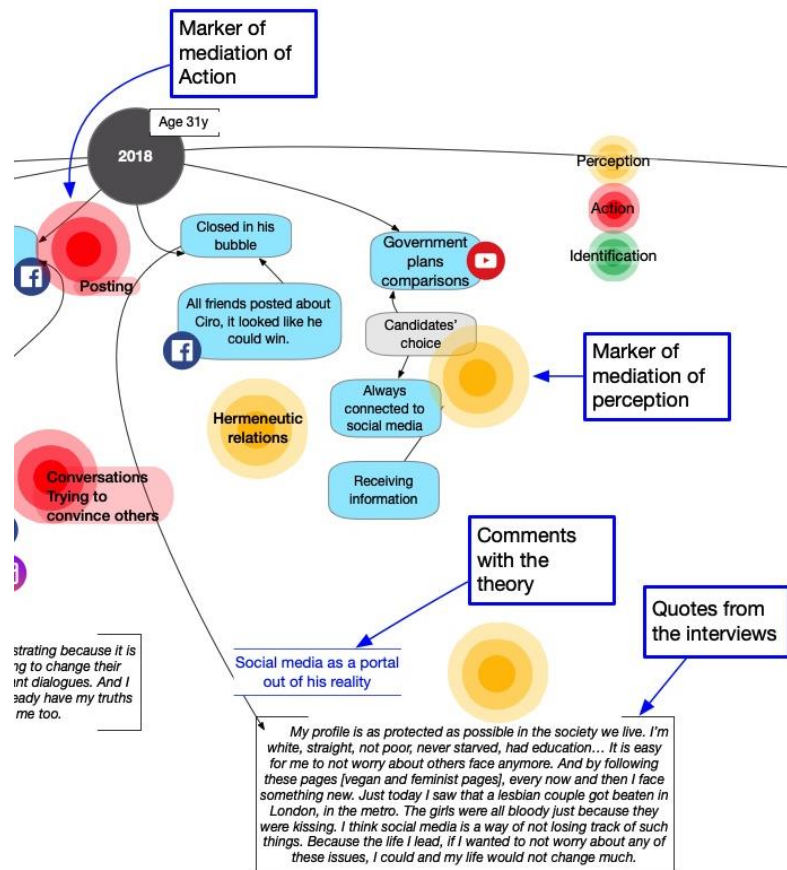
The transcripts and the MPBs are reread to find themes and experiential patterns to answer the research questions, looking for variations of how social media transform political becomings (Aagaard, 2015; Ihde, 2012; van Manen, 2016). Having the experiences in the form of maps aids better visualisation of political becomings, assisting in the analytical process. It is important to note that in searching for themes around a phenomenon, phenomenological studies do not have to rely on what is more common in the participants' lived experiences descriptions, sometimes it is what is singular that catches the researcher's attention, a

theme or notion may only be seen once in experiential data. For example, a phenomenologist does not look for how many times a certain word is used by informants or how often a similar idea is expressed. In contrast, a phenomenologist may actually look for that instant when an insight arises that is totally unique to a certain example (sample) of a lived experience description. (van Manen, 2016, p. 353)

At this point, the empirical material is brought into dialogue with the theories and concepts (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018; Vagle, 2014/2018). The continuum of political participation (Dennis, 2019) is used as a reference to explore the participants' political becomings; at the same time, the theory of mediation (Verbeek, 2011) assists in the identification of variations (Ihde, 2012) of how social media shape perception and action involved in these processes (addressing the SQR 2) (see *Figure 5.11* for an example).

**Figure 5.11**

*Excerpt of a MPB Showing Partial Analysis*



*Note.* Source: The author.

The variations of how social media transform political becomings are brought to life in the text with anecdotes derived from the participants' lived experiences descriptions (van Manen, 2016). Anecdotes are a narrative device that serves to exemplify the phenomenon, preparing "the space for phenomenological reflection" (van Manen, 2016, p. 251). These

stories or anecdotes are so powerful, so effective, and so consequential in that they can explain things that resist straightforward explanation or conceptualization. Anecdotes bring things into nearness by contributing to the vividness and presence of an experience. (van Manen, 2016, p. 251).

Van Manen (2016) recommends that anecdotes should: (1) be "a very short and simple story"; (2) describe "a single incident"; (3) start "close to the central moment of the

experience”; (4) include significant “concrete details”; (5) close shortly “after the climax or when the incident has passed”; (6) have “an effective or ‘punchy’ last line: it creates a punctum” (p. 252, emphasis in original). However, the description obtained through interviews rarely demonstrates the “narrative qualities” of an experiential story (van Manen, 2016, p. 251). For this reason, anecdotes are often edited for clarity, concision and to reach the vividness of the experience. This editing process follows the guidelines proposed by van Manen (2016) to strengthen the lived experiences descriptions without distorting their meaning. When editing anecdotes, irrelevant details can and should be omitted, “retaining theme-relevant material,” with careful consideration to not change the participants’ intended meanings (van Manen, 2016, p. 254). To sharpen anecdotes, one should ask: “does this anecdote show what an aspect of the meaning of this experience is or was like?” (van Manen, 2016, p. 254).

The investigation also uses Heidegger’s (1953/2010) *broken hammer* strategy, often employed by postphenomenologists as an imaginative (or not) exercise to reveal “taken-for-granted, co-constitutive relations with technologies” (Adams & Turville, 2018). In *Being in Time*, Heidegger (1953/2010) observes how, when using a hammer, an experienced carpenter, for instance, is not paying attention to the hammer itself but to what it is intended to do; the hammer is seen as “something in order to” attain an objective, a “useful thing” (p. 68).<sup>45</sup> However, when the hammer breaks down, the experience with the tool changes as it ceases to be a *useful thing* to become something that “just lies there” (Heidegger, 1953/2010, p. 72). At this moment, “what is taken for granted falls temporarily away, and meaning structures that were in play briefly collapse. For a moment, what we take most for granted may be made potently visible through absence” (Adams & Turville, 2018, p. 19). When technology fails us, it is possible to observe features and relations that would have become transparent to our

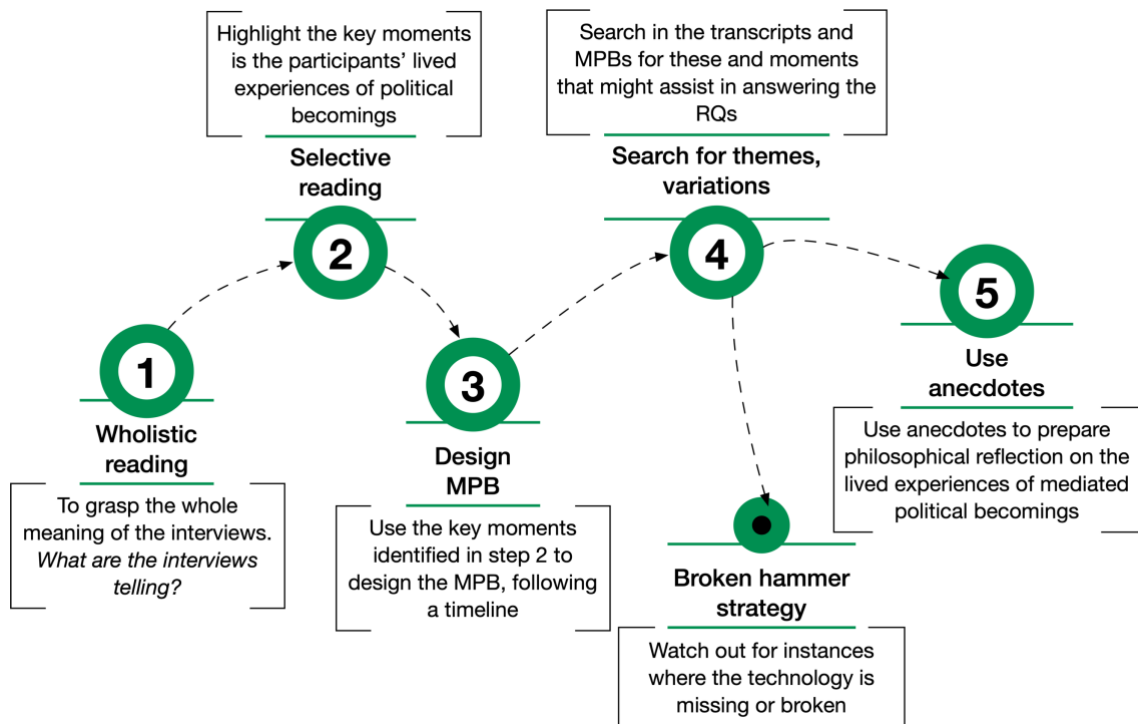
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<sup>45</sup> Heidegger is a significant influence in Ihde’s (1990) conception of human-technology relations and, particularly the hammer example, can be related to the embodiment relations described on Section 2.2.1.

perception, once its lack gets in the way of our dealings with the world (Adams & Turville, 2018; Heidegger, 1953/2010; Rosenberger, 2009). This exercise can also be performed when the technology is “completely missing,” preventing us from “taking care of things” (Heidegger, 1953/2010, p. 73). This type of analysis can *break* social media’s transparency, bringing to the forefront what this technology really does and how they transform experiences of political becomings.

**Figure 5.12**

*Analytical Process*



*Note.* Adapted from Adams and Turville (2018), Ihde (2012) and van Manen (2016).

The analytical process (synthesised in *Figure 5.12*) aims to conceive a postphenomenological text that weaves “both prereflective material and reflective insights intending to (1) emulate human-technology-world entwinements through textual description, and (2) explore and shed light on particular technology-texturings” of a given dimension of human experience (Adams & Turville, 2018, p. 12). In this investigation, the aim is to shed light on how social media texture political becomings.

In the next section, the primary ethical considerations faced during this investigation are considered, focusing on the risks posed to participants, the research and the researcher.

## **5.6 Ethical Considerations**

This research deals with sensitive information: individuals' political experiences in times of an increasing sense of political polarisation (Duque & Smith, 2019; Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019; Miguel, 2019a; Soares et al., 2019). This delicate setting is acknowledged and reflected upon throughout the entire research process to assess and prevent potential risks involved in the investigation for participants and researcher (Brinkmann, 2012; Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Dahlberg et al., 2011; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2001).

A critical ethical consideration in this study was to minimise the risk of inconveniences to the participants, observing the principle of *doing no harm* (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Dahlberg et al., 2011). Potentially, volunteers could feel uncomfortable while talking about their political involvements or past experiences that might be distressing for them. First, to make participants feel more comfortable with the research, a survey was employed as a screening method (Section 5.2.2), so volunteers could have a *feel* of what sort of questions they would be asked, thus, making a more informed decision to take part or not in the interviews. Second, before agreeing on an interview, there was always a conversation about the research, making sure participants understood that it was a safe space and that they could opt out at any point or choose not to speak about an uncomfortable issue (Della Porta, 2014). In these pre-conservations, I also shared a few things about myself as a researcher, offering to answer any questions they might have about me or the research. These conversations were important to set the tone for the interviews, and some participants indeed mentioned that they felt more comfortable after seeing my face, for example, before agreeing on the interview.

Overall, participants showed an eager interest in talking about their political experiences, demonstrating tranquillity with the questions asked. And finally, all data is treated confidentially and anonymously, and this was informed to participants, assuring that the information shared could not be traced back to them (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Chambliss & Schutt, 2019; Della Porta, 2014). All interviews were transcribed and sent to participants, welcoming any observations or changes in the information they had shared (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Della Porta, 2014). Some explicitly voiced not wanting these transcriptions, and none of those who received the texts commented or replied to the emails.

Another important issue considered in this study is the researchers' political views and assumptions (Brinkmann, 2012; van Manen, 2016). As a person with progressive political views, there was a careful consideration of bias, especially when interviewing participants identified as Right-wing (Brinkmann, 2012). As mentioned previously (Section 5.2.2), researcher reflexivity is employed in this investigation as an instrument to assess the researcher's assumptions and positions about the phenomenon and the research experience as a whole (Aagaard, 2017; Dahlberg et al., 2011; Vagle, 2014/2018). Through this constant reflection, it was possible to attain a phenomenological frame of mind, when one looks at things with a state of wonder, aiming to be with the phenomenon and the participants (Dahlberg et al., 2011; Gadamer, 2004; van Manen, 2016). Keeping in mind the aim of exploring how political becomings take shape through social media's mediation, the researcher's or the participants' political affiliations did not pose an obstacle during the interviews or analysis.

#### ***5.6.1 "Watch out for Fake Researchers!": Reflection on the Dangers of Using Personal Profiles to Access Participants on Social Media***

Much is discussed about the risks for participants in social research, but researchers also face risks, especially in politically unstable environments (Lee-Treweek &

Linkogle, 2001). This section offers an anecdote to illustrate the dangers researchers face when employing social media to reach out to participants.

Reaching out to citizens to ask about their relationship with politics in Brazil in 2019 was a difficult task. The air was still tense from the 2018 elections, and most people were suspicious of such research, on the Left and Right. There was an expectation of building some trust through face-to-face interaction during political demonstrations, but, in these moments, people were even more suspicious, afraid of the police, or concerned that their words would be distorted for some evil purpose.

At some point, I decided to use my personal social media profile to publicise the research. I knew that there could be some backlash, as there was (and it is still going on) a demonisation of academia amongst part of Right-wing supporters in the country, and safety issues were common discussions in the academic congresses I attended in Brazil (Coelho, 2019). Balancing the pros and cons however, the evaluation was that this was worth trying: if I asked for individuals' time and valuable information, the least I could do was to provide them with my natural face to build some trust. This action led to the kind of incident that I had been concerned about since the beginning of the fieldwork. However, it ended up being not harmful to me as a researcher or to the research, but it is a good illustration of the tensions around the topic. The following explains the situation.

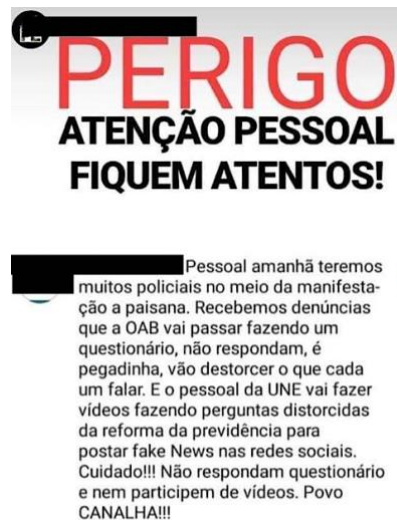
I had sent messages to random individuals who marked a Facebook event as attending a demonstration in support of Bolsonaro's government called for 26 May in São Paulo. One of these individuals answered my message, saying that I was a fake profile trying to get data that would be distorted later and used by the Students Union (UNE) or the Brazil Bar Association (OAB). The person shared with me an image that was circulating online alerting people of fake researchers applying questionnaires that would be used by the two institutions mentioned above in a maligning manner. In the image, individuals were asked to refrain from answering any questionnaire during the demonstration (*Figure 5.13*). After sending the image to me privately, this person



shared my personal profile and picture on their profile, stating that I was an example of a *fake researcher* who would be in the demonstration asking questions. A few days after this, this profile that had contacted me disappeared from Facebook, which can be an indication of being a fake account.

**Figure 5.13**

*Facebook's Post Alerting for the Dangers of Fake Researchers*



*Note:* The post was circulating on Right-wing pages prior to the demonstration on 26 May 2019. Screenshot from author. It reads:

*Danger. Attention people. Be aware!*

*Tomorrow there will be many police officials in plain clothing in the midst of the demonstration. We have received denounces that the OAB (Brazilian Bar Association) will be conducting a questionnaire. Don't answer, it is a trick. They will distort your answers. And the people from the Students' Union will be recording videos asking distorted questions about the Social Security Reform to post fake news on social media. Take care! Don't answer questionnaires and don't participate in videos. SCOUNDREL people!!!*

This incident happened one day before the demonstration in São Paulo and made me feel apprehensive about attending my first Right-wing event in the country. There was general concern amongst researchers and individuals in general in Brazil about going to such demonstrations. Each side was apprehensive about going to the other's lair. I acknowledge that the incident made me more hesitant about talking to people during the demonstration. However, I never felt threatened while there and managed to talk to some individuals towards the end, after feeling more at ease. I also

did not suffer any further attacks on my Facebook personal profile, but things could have turned out differently.

This episode illustrates that conducting studies in socially and politically unstable settings can pose diverse risks to the researcher (and the research) (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2001). This kind of misinformation can prevent individuals from answering questions from the researcher and incite violence towards researchers working in these environments. The risk posed is not only physical, but also digital forms of aggression, common on social media, such as misinformation campaigns and trolling, which could potentially damage the researcher's reputation and the conducting of the study. While I was in Brazil, in March 2019, a master's student was the victim of online harassment, and hate messages and had her car broken into after presenting work about the influence of Bolsonaro in shaping the Brazilian public sphere. A picture of her presentation was widely shared and criticised by Bolsonaro's supporters, demonstrating the dangers surrounding Brazilian researchers dealing with political themes in these polarised times.<sup>46</sup> The following section concludes this chapter before moving the analysis of the empirical data.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

This chapter described the methodological steps taken during this investigation. This study is positioned as an exercise of postphenomenology of practice, which aims to answer how social media are shaping Brazilians' political becomings (Adams & Turville, 2018). The answer to the research questions is pursued through lived experiences descriptions generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which constitute a highly suitable instrument to probe the different ways in which social media are transforming experiences with the political (Adams & Turville, 2018; van Manen,

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<sup>46</sup> For a news report on the masters' student, please refer to:  
<https://www.estadopolitico.com.br/mestranda-da-ufam-exposta-por-filho-de-bolsonaro-tem-carro-arrombado/>

2016). The fieldwork construction is described in terms of the elements of time, spaces and persons which compose this study. The selection of individuals for this investigation followed the purpose of having a diverse pool of participants who could describe experiences of political becomings and its interconnection with social media in multiple settings.

The methods employed to collect the empirical data were presented, addressing how the research questions are operationalised in this process. The semi-structured in-depth interviews and the research process as a whole are supported by a survey, used to select participants and engage with the phenomenon under investigation, and reflexive notes, employed as a space to reflect upon the investigation process, as well as methodological and ethical issues. The examination of the empirical material was discussed, elaborating on the design of Maps of Political Becomings, which assist the analytical process by providing a visualisation of the lived experience descriptions. The analysis of the empirical material follows the hermeneutic rules proposed by Ihde (2012) and thematic analysis (van Manen, 2016). Finally, the chapter considers ethical issues, attending to risks posed to participants, the study itself, and the researcher.

The following empirical chapters present the findings and discussions resulting from the thematic analysis. Chapter 6 focuses on SQR 1: *How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?* Chapter 7 concentrates on the SQR 2: *How do social media transform the perception and action involved in the political becomings of young Brazilians?*

## 6

### **Findings and Discussions 1:**

#### **Social Media as Pieces in a Mosaic of Experiences**

This chapter is the first of two which present and discuss the findings resulting from the analysis of lived experiences of young Brazilians with political becomings and social media. The aim here is to address SRQ 1: *How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?* The main finding of this chapter is the significance of personal relations forged outside social media in how participants recall their first interests in political struggles. The evidence shows that social media are typically used in a second moment, once their interest in political matters has been sparked by a combination of social relations and political contexts, indicating that face-to-face personal networks continue to play a pivotal role in political behaviour (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005). This finding is particularly interesting, once it places social media as pieces in a more extensive complex of experiences that stimulate participants to become invested in certain political views. Political becomings therefore involve a situation where online and offline, public and private hybrid experiences are intertwined in the participants' lives.

The issue of how participants experience social media as part of political becomings is examined from two dimensions: how they initiate their political becomings and their modes of participation (Dennis, 2019). The first one, addressed in Section 6.1, stems from a non-media centric analysis (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013) of how participants first become interested in political struggles in considering the role of social media in this broad experience. This examination identifies three social media's stabilities and different ways through which individuals interact with the technology (Adams & Turville, 2018; Ihde, 2009,

2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a): (1) *early political engagement, late social media's experiences*; (2) *learning tools*; and (3) *sources of provocations*. In all these stabilities, there is a prominent role of personal relationships and contexts lived outside these platforms in how participants see their initial experiences with political participation, revealing the significance of social relations on political processes (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005) and putting into perspective the impact of social media on these experiences. Although the participants currently and primarily engage in political participation, and sometimes exclusively in and through social media, they report having their interest in political issues sparked by experiences lived outside these media. This study finds that social media represent one piece in a larger and more complex mosaic of experiences that brings individuals closer to political struggles and informs their paths towards different political identifications. These experiences are not only physical or digital, public or private; they are a mesh of all these dimensions, best seen from a hybrid perspective (Aagaard, 2021a; Chadwick, 2017; Treré, 2019).

Concerning their actual political participation practices, all participants use social media, and most engage exclusively online most of the time. The second part of this Chapter, Section 6.2, discusses the variations in participants' modes of participation, employing as a guide the categories suggested by Dennis (2019): listener, contributor, and civic instigator. These categories are helpful when exploring the experiences of participation on social media, as long as there is an acknowledgement of their flexibility in the individuals' lived experiences (Dennis, 2019). Due to social media's highly multistable character (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017), citizens can easily experience varying modes of participation by changing how they use these technologies. To better observe this phenomenon, this research associates the three modes of participation with three technological stabilities (Ihde, 2009): *listening tools*, used to maintain the awareness of political issues, *contribution tools*, employed to contribute to others' political learnings, and *mobilisation tools*, used

to promote political mobilisation. Identifying these stabilities moves the attention from an individual's behaviour to the different meanings that social media can acquire when employed in political participation.

Section 6.3 discusses the findings presented in Sections 6.1. and 6.2 aims to answer how social media are experienced in the participants' political becomings. The findings and discussions in this chapter lay the groundwork for Chapter 7, which addresses the SRQ 2: *How do social media transform the perception and action involved in the political becomings of young Brazilians?*

Before discussing the findings, it is worth noting that the voices of the participants provide a partial account of how social media impact political processes, constituting phenomenological evidence that is "ultimately ambiguous and never complete," as they ought to be (van Manen, 2016, p. 351). In this research, the "voices of evidence" stems from the experiences of 16 young Brazilians who have taken quite different routes in their political becomings (Ihde, 2003, pp. 24-25). These young individuals also display varied participation modes, which enrich the analysis of how social media shape political becomings in diverse contexts (Dennis, 2019; Vagle, 2014/2018).

### **6.1 Multiple Paths towards Political Becomings and Three Technological Stabilities**

The participants engage in their political becomings through various paths and entry points. By looking at these experiences from a non-media-centric perspective, focusing on the broad phenomenon and not only on the media themselves (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013), it is possible to appreciate social media as pieces in a big and complex mosaic that constitute political becomings. Political becomings are ongoing processes with no definite beginnings, but when asked when they first became interested in political struggles, the participants identify certain moments or circumstances that brought them close to their current identifications. The

most outstanding aspect of these circumstances is the significance of their personal relations in their processes of becoming interested in certain political views. This study identifies three main stabilities, meaningful ways in which individuals interact with social media (Adams & Turville, 2018; Ihde, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a), and how the participants recall their initial experiences with political struggles.

For some individuals, the interest in political struggles has been part of their lives since their upbringing, within their families and schools. For this group and those who associate the initial political engagement with education, social media are not present or referred to as not significant in their first encounters with political struggles. This is partially because some individuals had no or limited access to social media when they initiated their experiences with political struggles. When social media begin to be part of their lives, these technologies are incorporated into their political practices in diverse ways. This first stability is labelled *early political engagement and late social media experiences*. For other participants, these technologies acquire a more prominent role in the initial experiences with political engagement, being used as *learning tools*. A third stability, observed in the experiences of fewer participants but which seems experientially relevant (van Manen, 2016), is the experience of *social media as sources of provocations*. In this case, social media provide access to content that provokes the search for new meanings through online and offline interactions. This content can be about events in which the participant wants to take part, such as discussions about the elections, or new information that helps individuals make sense of their realities. The provocation is usually associated with their face-to-face relations and can lead to the use of social media as learning tools. Stabilities are not exclusive. The same individual experience more than one stability in different circumstances.

The initial experiences with political becomings expanded in this section are not considered definite beginnings, but moments when participants become aware of their engagement with the political (Holland et al., 2018; Marques & Mendonça, 2018). Political becomings are influenced by a complex amalgamation of social cues and

political events (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Rolfe & Chan, 2016; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005), which can be mediated by social media or not. These stimuli can be subtle, implicit in our relations with the world and, consequently, we are not always aware of them (Verba et al., 2005), As some participants reveal:

PATRICIA: Are you able to tell me how have you begun to consider yourself Right-wing?

CARLOS: By having some participation in it. And I will tell you something. There is also some intuition. You end up putting the pieces together; it is something very intrinsic. It is difficult to explain in a clear and objective way.

CAMILA: It is very subjective. It is as if some information was already inside me. I have always been curious, I've always liked to search for new things and, as I went over these things, they triggered these interests and identifications in me.

Carlos notes how his identification with Right-wing politics is constructed through his engagement with these political projects in the pursuit of making sense of the reality before him (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992). Nevertheless, how he begins this engagement is “difficult to explain,” and it seems to be something that builds up, like “putting the pieces together.” Camila observes how these experiences are “very subjective,” as if the world around her triggered aspects of her personality in the construction of her identifications with Right-wing discourses. There is a negotiation between their intrinsic views and values and the political discussions they encounter (Mouffe, 1992/2013b). These individuals have been influenced by diverse social cues and contexts all their lives, not only in the moments when they become aware of certain political struggles. Their understandings of the world have been building up since they were born, informing how they came to perceive political projects.

The experiences discussed next reflect moments considered significant by the participants in their paths towards becoming aware of themselves as political subjects, when they began to take some actions to support political projects or challenging others, constructing political identifications. These moments or circumstances cannot



be interpreted as a comprehensive account of all possible inspirations in participants' processes of political becomings over the years. Political behaviour is influenced by a variety of stimuli coming from one's social contexts, but as we engage in multiple groups, it is difficult to determine which settings exert more compelling influence (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005). What the literature shows, and this study testifies, is that "people depend on each other, and there is a complex relationship among individuals, primary groups and the broader society," and our political choices are highly influenced by our social networks (Zuckerman, 2005, p. 8). The aim of the discussion of these initial experiences with the political is to assist in understanding how individuals begin to participate in political projects and visualise how social media are present, or not, in these circumstances. In these experiences with the political, social media acquire varying degrees of significance depending on how they are used, and their stabilities, an aspect that is discussed in the following sections.

### ***6.1.1 Early Political Engagement, Late Social Media Experiences***

Some participants had initiated their experiences with political becomings prior to becoming immersed on social media. This situation is observed chiefly among the mature participants (30 to 34 years old) who experienced a politically-informed upbringing (before social media became widely used in Brazil) and those who had access to the internet and smartphones delayed due to economic constraints.

Five participants experienced a politically informed upbringing. All of them are currently identified with the Left, following their family political alignments, despite some deviation lived by one individual who tended to the Right during his adolescence. Politically active parents tend to create home environments that foster political discussions and explicitly or implicitly pass on their political orientations to their children (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba et al., 2005). Moreover, Sidney Verba and colleagues (2005) state:

growing up in a politically stimulating home is an especially powerful predictor of less active forms of political involvement—for example, engaging in political discussion or identifying strongly with one of the parties—that do not require substantial resources. (p. 110).

Growing up in a politically informed environment seems to produce a long-lasting impact on participants. These individuals consider having a certain level of political engagement as the standard behaviour:

I've always liked politics. My parents have always been very politically engaged, so I grew up in this environment. For me, a weekend outing, during elections, was to go to a political committee. I thought it was normal. Only when I got older, I understood that people didn't really attend those things. (Julia, 31 years old, Left)

Julia has maintained an awareness of politics, and a political identification similar to that of her parents, having moments of activism in response to the local context (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba et al., 2005).

Participants who experienced politically informed upbringings also narrate the importance of education in their perception of political struggles. Verba and colleagues (2005) maintain that access to good education is the strongest predictor of political participation, “not only does education have a direct impact on political activity, but it enhances the stockpile of factors that facilitate participation,” like acquiring civic skills and being around other politically active individuals (p. 110). In Lucas' case, these politically active individuals were also family members. Lucas is an Indigenous man whose family members are community leaders. He has witnessed discussions about Indigenous rights from an early age, following his grandfather to Chiefs' meetings and learning through this engagement (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992).

I believe that the orality with some persons from my people helped me a lot. I've always had this curiosity of asking how the previous years were, before I was born. I've always liked listening to the elders because I think it is something very important. (Lucas, 20 years old, Left)

Lucas reveals a strong sense of community and reliance on elders as a source of knowledge and inspiration for political activism, which is quite different from the non-Indigenous' narratives. This connection with the elders reflects the fact that Indigenous education is centred around orality rather than writing. The knowledge, which stems from the observation of the quotidian, is passed from the elders to the younger by relatives and the whole community (Aquino, 2012; Munduruku, 2005). Lucas only started to access social media in 2016, when he was 17 years old. At the time, he began to use social media mainly as a way of expanding the reach of his activism towards a broader audience:

When I began to use Facebook, I saw that it was a more accessible space to expose the situations faced by my people. Whenever there was a problem in the community, we took a picture and published it. (Lucas, 20 years old, Left)

Presently, Lucas is an activist for Indigenous rights, organised with others in a youth association.

Education also impacts participants as they move towards adult life, at universities and colleges. A better understanding of political processes can potentially motivate participation, as observed in Helena's experience:

I'd already had some concerns with ethical issues, the future, but I didn't have conceptual maturity. It was at the university that I learned a little bit more about politics, it was the time when the PSOL<sup>47</sup> was being formed. But a milestone for my political learning was in 2010, with Marina Silva's campaign. Then I found a political personality with whom I identified myself more. Because I already had a certain political engagement, I had been going to demonstrations, but always in the name of specific issues, not a project. (Helena, 34 years old, Left)

Helena associates becoming more aware of political struggles to the knowledge about political processes acquired at university (from 19 years old onwards) and to the national political context, such as the formation of a new political party and the year of

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<sup>47</sup> PSOL, Socialism and Liberty Party is a Left-wing party defined as socialist and democratic, founded in 2005 by former Workers' Party politicians (<https://psol50.org.br>).

general elections. The knowledge gained at the university supported Helena's understanding of national politics and her response to the contexts, such as the presidential campaign (Baker et al., 2020; Verba et al., 2005). Helena's quote also reveals how identification is an integral part of political participation (Laclau & Zac, 1994; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). She sees her political engagement (going to demonstrations) prior to *identifying* with Marina Silva's political project as less significant because they did not involve the *identification* with a project, only the supporting of particular issues (Mouffe, 1992, 1992/2013a). Helena participated intensively in Marina Silva's campaign (2010), which she considers a critical moment in her political formation. Currently, Helena uses these platforms mainly to access political information and mobilise others, expanding her offline participation, as a union member and creating spaces for political discussions.

Those who initiated political engagement prior to their use of social media have incorporated these technologies into their practices as a way of expanding these involvements towards the world (Ihde, 1990, 2012; Irwin, 2010). As they continue this engagement with the use of social media, these technologies shape how they participate in political struggles in a symbiotic relationship of online and offline, digital and physical experiences (Treré, 2019). This stability also demonstrates how political participation begins in public spaces and is then brought into individuals' private spheres, where they choose what aspects of their political engagement to express and how to do it, building connections with other private and public spheres (Papacharissi, 2010). Hence, this stability adds complexity to Papacharissi's (2010) private sphere model, which focuses on political actions emanating from private spheres. Political becomings are private and also public, online and offline (Treré, 2019). As will be discussed below, when social media are employed in the beginnings of political becomings, these technologies seem to gain a more prominent significance in these experiences.

### **6.1.2 Social Media as Learning Tools**

For some participants who began their experiences with political engagement while already using social media, these technologies acquired the stability of *learning tools*. In this mode of use, social media often appear in participants' experiences after their interest in political struggles had been triggered by a combination of personal relationships and political contexts, revealing the primacy of the influence of social networks in shaping our understandings of political struggles (Zuckerman, 2005). These stimuli invite individuals to question their identifications and positions in society, and through this questioning, they begin a search for new meanings that assist them in making sense of their reality (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mendonça et al., 2019; Rancière, 1992). In this moment of the search for meanings, social media are employed as learning tools, assisting their processes of learning about political struggles. Citizens now experience a personalised and private learning path, further discussed in Chapter 7, which considers how social media shape the perception of political struggles.

This section details how social media are experienced as learning tools after participants' interest in politics had been ignited by varied sources of influence. This stability is predominantly found among those on the Right, but it can also be experienced on the Left side of the political spectrum, as detailed next.

#### **6.1.2.1 Politically Informed Upbringings**

In the experiences narrated in this section, participants explore social media with very specific questions. These questions are first triggered by various personal relationships and contexts (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005). For Anne, these questions arose primarily from the influence of her family and teachers at school:

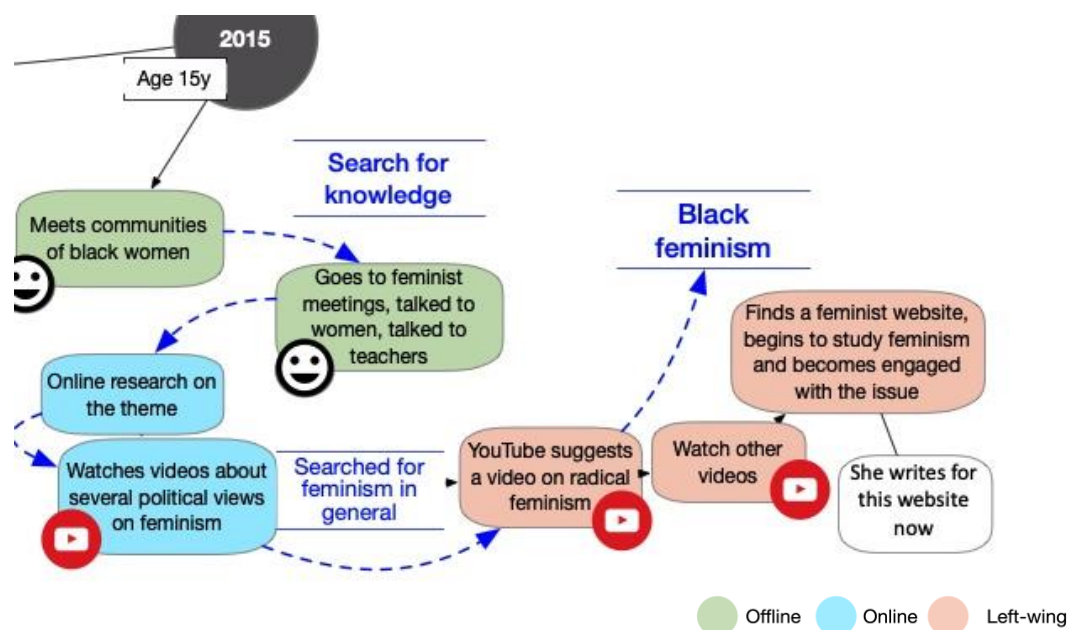
I started this political engagement very early. My father has a Left orientation, related to racial issues and also a little with feminist issues. So, this has always

influenced me. I have this foundation at home, and I think it was essential for my political engagement because I've always had my parents' support. They never forbade me, never cut me off from these relationships. (Anne, 19 years old, Left)

At 15, Anne began to attend feminist meetings whenever she could afford the public transport fare to the events. Despite having experienced a politically informed upbringing, as those narrated in the previous section, social media constitute important learning tools for Anne. It was on YouTube where she first encountered radical feminism, which is now her primary political identification. Informed by her family, teachers and feminist meetings, Anne used YouTube to search about feminism and its various strands (see the path in *Figure 6.1*). Today she has an Instagram profile dedicated to Black radical feminism and engages in online-only activism.

**Figure 6.1**

*Anne's Path towards Black Radical Feminism*



*Note.* Source: The author.

Anne is the only participant who used YouTube as learning tools to access Left-wing politics, maybe as a reflection of these spaces being more associated with Right-wing politics (de Oliveira et al., 2019; Lewis, 2018). Her experience demonstrates that it is impossible to determine a fixed correlation of sources of influence with certain technological stabilities. What the evidence shows are inclinations (Ihde, 2017) of

certain stabilities being more associated with specific political orientations. Thus, despite the use of social media as learning tools being more commonly found among those on the Right, Anne's experience is evidence that this cannot be seen as a deterministic association (Ihde, 1990, 2017).

### **6.1.2.2 Making Sense of Political Struggles with Colleagues**

The process of questioning one's political views can also be triggered by colleagues met through educational institutions. Colleagues or acquaintances can become "regular discussant partners" with significant influence on political involvements (Rolfe & Chan, 2016, p. 360). This kind of relationship has "traditionally been seen as crucial to providing access to new and diverse information," once colleagues can come from diverse backgrounds (Rolfe & Chan, 2016, p. 361).

There were people from the North, Centre-west, Northeast, South and we began to question what the media was showing us. And this built a curiosity in me. (Carlos, 32 years old, Right)

In 2016, I met a colleague, who supported Bolsonaro, and we became friends. He shared his viewpoints with me and explained how things worked, and I found it really cool. I opened my mind to that. It was a lot because of him; he converted me, so to speak. But there was also a disappointment before. (Roberto, 19 years old, Right)

Roberto's disappointment is related to the corruption scandals involving the PT in the *Lava-Jato* investigations (as mentioned in Chapter 4, the *Lava-Jato* investigations had started in 2014). Informed by these influences, Carlos and Roberto engaged in a search for meanings on social media, particularly YouTube, the preferred platform for this kind of stability.

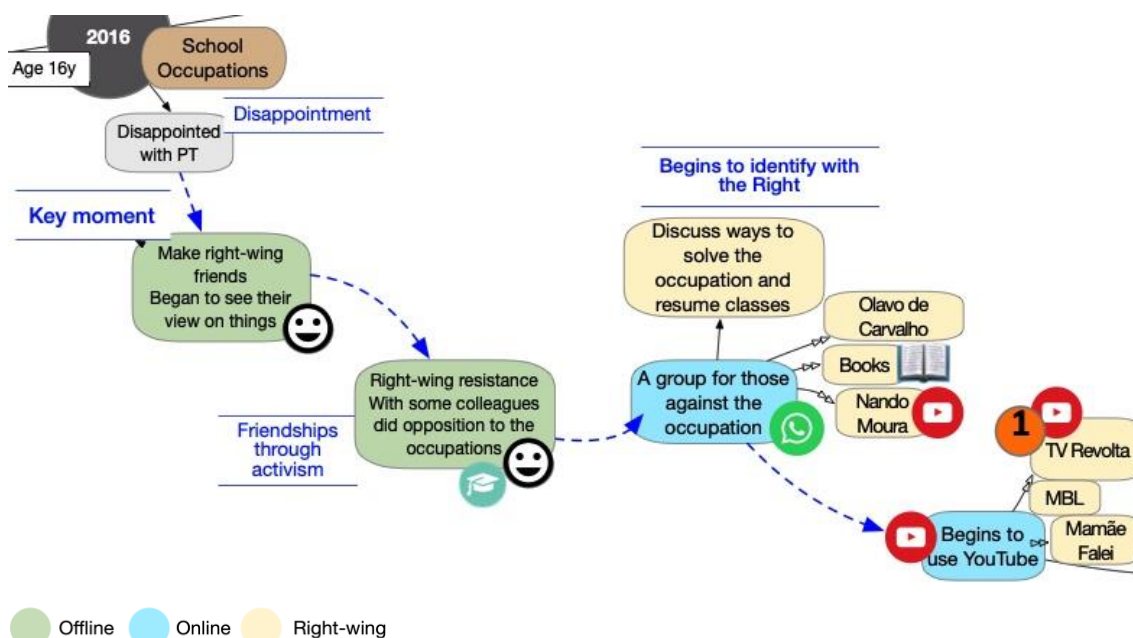
Also in 2016, Roberto took part in a movement in opposition to the school occupations. The school occupations were a series of student protests in Brazil against cuts in the high school public system budget (de Sousa & Canavarro, 2018). Roberto and other students were against these protests and formed a Right-wing opposition to

the occupations in their school. Through the encounters with these colleagues, the participation in the activist group contrary to the occupations and the content accessed on YouTube and books (observed in *Figure 6.2*), Roberto began to identify with Right-wing views:

I gradually began to identify that I was part of the Right. I was very conservative in many things and started to see that this was growing in me. So I realised, since that group and with the YouTube videos, that I was much more aligned to the Right. It was very interesting to see this. (Roberto, 19 years old, Right)

**Figure 6.2**

*Roberto's Path towards Conservatism*



*Note.* Source: The author.

The relationships with colleagues were crucial in Roberto's processes of making sense of the reality around him through the construction of identifications with conservative views (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). Roberto engaged with social media to expand his knowledge about political issues, using them as learning tools, and informed by his discussions with colleagues.



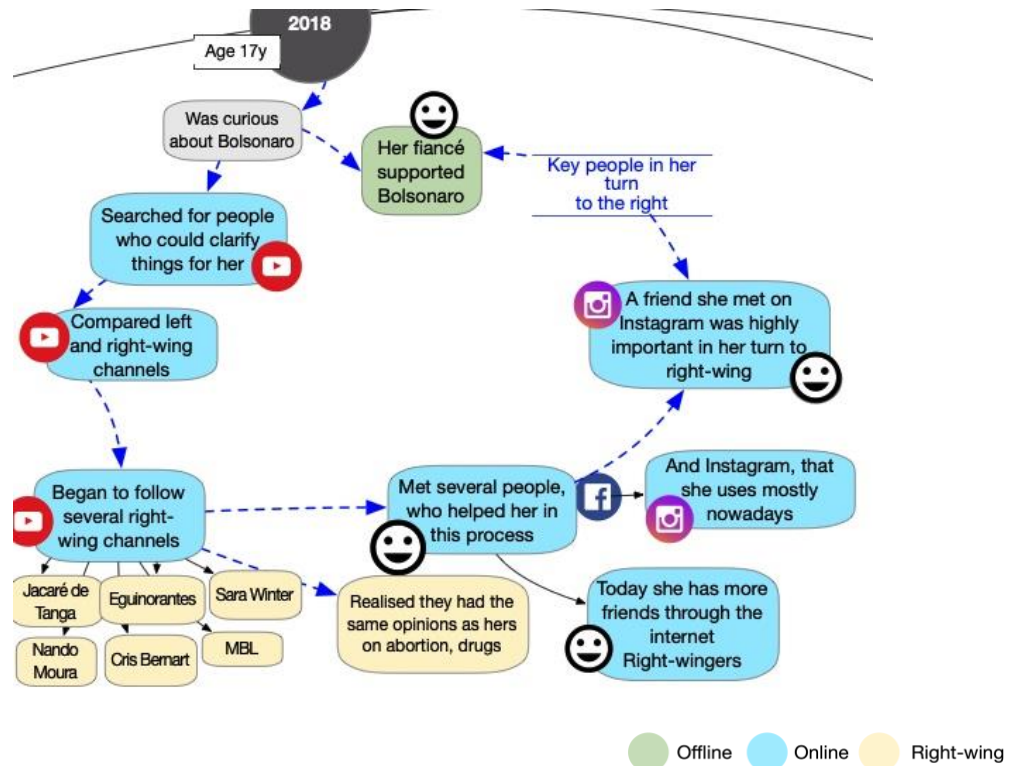
### **6.1.2.3 Driven by Love: The Influence of Close Relationships**

For three women identified with Right-wing politics, their political becomings began due to a response to political events (mostly the 2018 elections) and the influence of their partners (boyfriend or fiancé), who assisted them by providing initial sources of political information. Close relationships, like spouses or a fiancé, are known in the literature as “core political discussants” (Rolfe & Chan, 2016, p. 358). Moreover, Laura Stoker and Kent. M. Jennings (2005) observe that there is a tendency for couples to grow more alike over time, including in their political orientation.

The three women influenced by their partners do not report being interested in politics prior to their relationships. Moreover, the political context had a pivotal role in triggering their curiosity about political issues:

*My fiancé was always teasing me to support Bolsonaro, but he respected me. I had never really paid attention to him, until one day I began to have many doubts. Then I went to YouTube to compare Right and Left-wing channels. It was all because of Bolsonaro, I wanted to know who he was, *why the media were so crazy about him. And if everything the media said was true.* I had many doubts, and the Right-wing channels could clear them. (Agnes, 18 years old, Right)*

As illustrated in *Figure 6.3*, after having her interest in political issues triggered by the news about Bolsonaro and by her fiancé, Agnes went to social media in a search for answers. Through the interaction with YouTube channels and the engagement with an acquaintance met on Instagram, Agnes developed an identification with Right-wing discourses. There is a confluence of influences that inform her YouTube searches, and her fiancé was a central figure in this process.

**Figure 6.3***Agnes' Path towards the Right*

Note. Source: The author.

For Luciana, social media appear as an initial influence by making political discussions visible (Yamamoto et al., 2020), also acquiring the stability of *sources of provocations*, as discussed in Section 6.1.3. However her husband was the first who made her acknowledge the importance of knowing about politics, and he also gave direction to her first online searches:

When we started dating, five years ago, *he tried to talk to me about history and politics*. But I didn't have time for such things. I was a single mother and had to work many hours to provide for my house alone. So, instead, I just followed what I saw on the media. It was only last year [2018], *when I saw everyone having heated discussions on social media, campaigning for their candidates*, that I began to delve deeper and study a little more to make my choice for president. I wanted to make this choice independent of my husband's, because he already had his preference well defined, and I wanted to have my own opinion and better understand what was going on. (Luciana, 30 years old, Right)

Luciana's husband identified with liberalism, and initially, she followed his suggestions. However, through her engagement with political issues, Luciana began to identify more with conservatism<sup>48</sup> due to her values and religion. She in turn influenced her spouse in these areas. Social media are used as places to engage in learning processes, which can direct participants to varied sources of knowledge. Luciana learned about politics mainly through YouTube and books suggested on the channels she followed, demonstrating the convergence of old and new present in these experiences (Bennett, 2012; Dennis, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010; Papacharissi & Trevey, 2018; Treré, 2019).

#### ***6.1.2.4 Responding to Contexts: Political Events as Triggers to Political Becomings***

This study finds that over half of the participants associate their first steps towards political participation with political events, such as the 2013 demonstrations and the 2018 elections. Political contexts tend to ignite citizens' interest in politics and drive them to political conversations with their peers (Baker et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 2005). Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 4, the three major political crises in contemporary Brazil, the June Journeys (2013), Rousseff's impeachment (2015-2016) and the 2018 elections, are viewed through the notion of events, which signifies moments of rupture (Mendonça & Figueiredo, 2019). In these moments, old assumptions are questioned, and individuals can feel compelled to seek new frameworks to make sense of the reality around them (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Mendonça et al., 2019). These three political events have influenced all participants in different ways, even when these moments are not associated with the beginnings of their political becomings. Political events can become visible to participants through

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<sup>48</sup> As discussed in chapter 4, in the Brazilian case, liberalism and conservatism are often associated with Right-wing politicians. <sup>49</sup> My choice is to not disclose her specific identification because it can compromise her anonymity. Moreover, as mentioned before, the focus of this dissertation is not so much the content of participants' political becomings, but the shape they take with social media mediation. This kind of choice is made throughout the dissertation.

social media when these technologies are experienced as sources of provocation, as indicated by Luciana in the previous section, but most participants associate becoming aware of these events through means other than social media, like the mainstream media or attending protests, for instance. For this reason, political events are considered a source of influence on their own.

Camila recalls being interested in politics since a very young age, but this interest faded away as her family was not politically active. In 2013, out of curiosity, she decided to attend some demonstrations of the June Journeys:

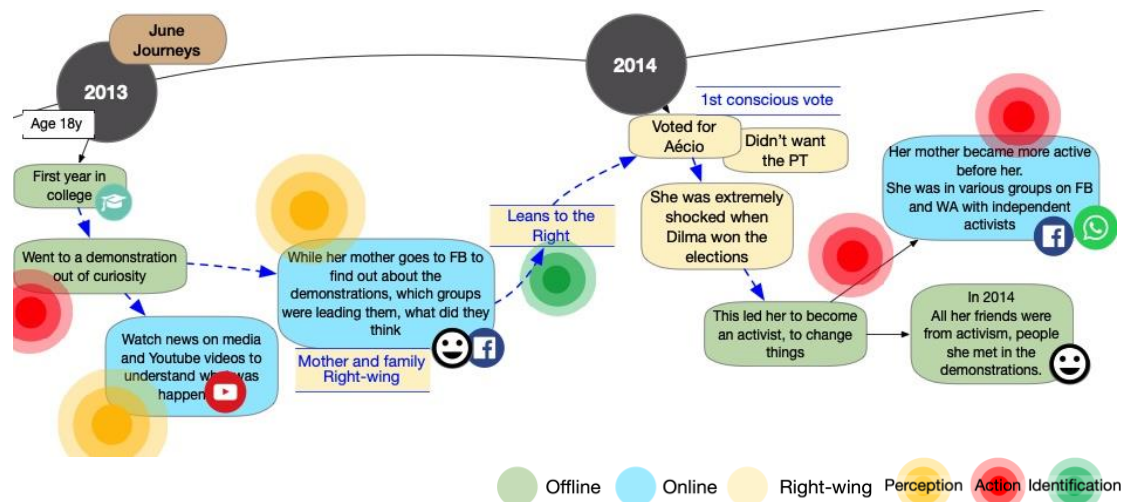
It was my first year in the university, and I heard everyone talking about the demonstrations. Then I said: “Oh, what is happening? Let’s go to a protest to see what it is, how it works.” I didn’t even know what Right and Left were, my friendships and interests had nothing to do with politics. The first demonstration was an adrenaline rush, but without understanding anything that was happening. 2013 is interesting because you could see both sides together. On the one hand, there were the Black Blocs, the guys on the Left, people graffitiing buses, but there were also people just showing posters. What I really felt was a kind of adrenaline, a kind of “wow, I’m part of the change in the world!” (Camila, 24 years old, Right)

For Camila, participation on the streets came first, and social media soon after. She was out there, on the streets; her mother also participated, but through social media, trying to understand the protests and their motivations. Camila’s mother was also using social media as learning tools to learn about the protests and what was behind them. Camila observes that it was through her mother, not the experiences on the streets, that she began to identify with the Right:

It is really interesting because, actually, I was pushed to the Right by my mother. My mom began to study what was happening [on social media] and then I’d come home, and she would explain me. I believe that my mother, understanding the context, began to identify herself with certain contents and filtered what she thought was good and bad and passed it on to me. And I agreed with her. It’s not that I agreed with her because of authority, it was really a matter of identification with those values. Also, looking back, I see that my mom and my family, in general, have always been more aligned to the Right. Today that I understand what Right and Left are, I can say that. (Camila, 24 years old, Right)

In addition to her mother's discussions, Camila also followed news on mainstream media and watched YouTube videos of "people talking about it, giving their opinion, doing analyses and such." Thus, Camila's first experiences with the political involved the participation on protests, the influence of her mother (who used social media as learning tools but also carried Right-wing identifications) and using YouTube as learning tools. All these aspects happened almost concurrently, in a dynamic relation involving social media and asphalt, typical of current political movements (Treré & Gutierrez, 2015), as depicted in *Figure 6.4*.

**Figure 6.4**  
*Camila's Path towards the Right*



*Note.* Perception, Action and Identification are not hierarchical moments in political becomings. The particularities of how social media shape perception and action are addressed in chapter 7. Source: The author.

Through participating in the protests, discussing with her mother, and engaging with political content on YouTube and the media, Camila developed an identification with the Right. After Rousseff's re-election, she decided to take politics more seriously as a way to promote changes in society. She became an activist supporting Right-wing issues, taking part in some far-Right groups, and founding an activist group. The central aim was to remove the PT from the presidency. Camila's political identifications changed over time, and on the occasion of our encounter, she was identified with libertarianism and antifeminism. More recently, she has been expressing

identifications with a strand of conservatism<sup>49</sup> in an illustration of the instability intrinsic to political identifications (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Mouffe, 2005, 2013).

Camila's experience, and those mentioned by other individuals in previous sections, demonstrate that political events are significant drivers of political interest and engagement once they instigate political discussions and provide individuals with concrete spaces for political action (participating in demonstrations, voting in elections or engaging in political discussions) (Baker et al., 2020; Verba et al., 2005). Furthermore, these events involve a dispute over meanings, when there is a rupture with certain interpretations of society and the construction of new ones (Mendonça et al., 2019). These moments can potentially push individuals to position themselves in political struggles, through which a sense of *we* can be constituted (Mouffe, 1992/2013b). Similar to many other non-politically engaged Brazilians, for Camila, 2013 marked the discovery of the streets (Antunes, 2013; Pinto, 2017; Pleyers & Bringel, 2015). To make sense of the disruptions on the streets, she engaged with Right-wing discourses and activisms to fight the *other* (Hall, 1996; Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a; Norval, 1990), materialised chiefly as the Workers' Party (de Freixo & Pinheiro-Machado, 2019; Silva, 2018). Once more, social media appear to support the learning about political struggles in close association with varied sources (family and participation in protests, for instance). The following section examines the experience of social media as sources of provocations, which can potentially ignite political becomings.

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<sup>49</sup> My choice is to not disclose her specific identification because it can compromise her anonymity. Moreover, as mentioned before, the focus of this dissertation is not so much the content of participants' political becomings, but the shape they take with social media mediation. This kind of choice is made throughout the dissertation.

<sup>50</sup> Ysani Kalapalo is an Indigenous woman and YouTuber who became known for her identification with the Right and support to Bolsonaro. In 2019, she was invited by Bolsonaro to attend the United Nations Assembly, where the president defended his environmental policies, while Ysani was seen in the audience. The position of Ysani Kalapalo as an Indigenous leader was highly disputed among various Indigenous' associations, including the one represented by Lucas (<https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49804834>).

### **6.1.3 Social Media as Sources of Provocations**

Social media can also be experienced as providing access to varying information that can provoke reflections and new meaning connections. This section discusses the experience of one participant who associates the beginnings of her turn to conservatism with an experience with the arts. This motivation reveals how unexpected encounters can spark political interests, leading individuals to question their values and views of the world. In this case, the discomfort lived through face-to-face interactions found explanation through an encounter with social media content. This encounter provoked a search for new meanings through online and offline interactions.

Aurora is one of the most politically active participants. She was connected to political struggles during her time at university. However, what drove her to conservatism was a very peculiar experience, detailed below. During her school years as she recalls, Aurora had Left-leanings, mainly due to the influence of colleagues and out of rebellion. When she began to study for an Arts degree, her contact with people aligned with the Left was intensified:

Even the teachers were very leftists. But until then, I hadn't realised it because everyone was thinking the same way. I thought it was because we were smarter. "Wow, look how critical we are," this sort of thing. I also had a feminist connection with the theatre and social sciences' people (Aurora, 25 years old, Right)

What provoked Aurora's change in political views?

It wasn't politics. It was art. The first thing that made me change my opinion was art. I went to a contemporary art exhibition as part of a study program and there was this piece that marked me a lot, featuring some soil with noodles stuffed inside. That shocked me very much, because a few months earlier I had seen Caravaggio's paintings and I was in awe. His art had me transformed. And then there were those noodles. I went back to the university in silence because I wouldn't tell anyone that I had hated it. And I was left with this bad sentiment in relation to arts. (Aurora, 25 years old, Right)

The criticism towards contemporary arts grew inside Aurora until she came across a video, shared by one of her teachers on Facebook in which a famous Brazilian writer was voicing similar discomforts. Her teacher was criticising the writer, saying that he had gone astray with those comments, but Aurora saw it differently:

“Wow! This guy said something that makes sense!” And then, I went on to research about Ferreira Gullar and bought one of his books. It was one of the first arts theory books that I bought that it is with me until nowadays. (Aurora, 25 years old, Right)

On social media, Aurora encountered views divergent from those of her teachers and most people around her at the university (Bakshy et al., 2015; Goyanes et al., 2021) and that provoked her to search for new meanings for her experiences. These views reflected that “bad sentiment” towards contemporary arts she had been nurturing for some time, the fruit of offline interactions. This experience motivated her to question issues beyond the meaning of arts, as she engaged in a pursuit of seeing things with more clarity, in a disidentification process (Ranci ere, 1992):

This disillusion with contemporary arts and this frustration of imagining that the teachers were deceiving me, made me start to think: “What else am I being deceived? What else am I not seeing clearly?” And then, I started to create more opinions about various issues, especially on Facebook. (Aurora, 25 years old, Right)

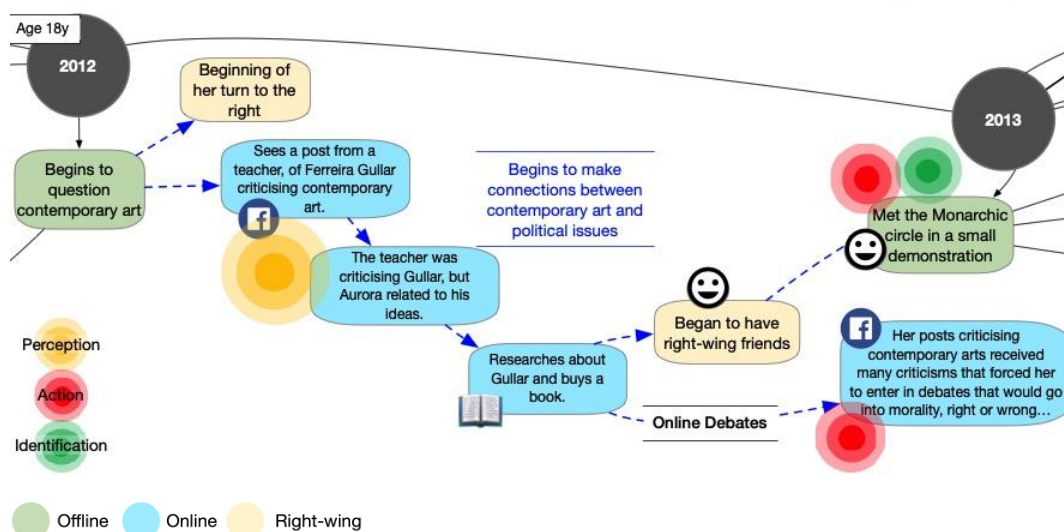
Through a process of questioning, which included discussions with colleagues on social media and offline, (Holland et al., 2018; Marques & Mendon a, 2018; Ranci ere, 1992; Svensson, 2011), Aurora constructed an identification with conservative views on arts and beauty. As noted by Scruton (2019), conservative thinkers have dedicated great attention to arts and their messages. For conservatives, there is a *right* kind of beauty and art, which incite a “right feeling, right experience and right enjoyment” (Scruton, 2011, p. 164). With the practice of these inquiries, conversations with colleagues at the university and readings, Aurora slowly began to make connections with conservative politics (see depicted in *Figure 6.5*). Eventually, she began to engage with a monarchist organisation, which she encountered during a small demonstration at the end of 2013. Through the engagement with this group,



through face-to-face meetings, she deepened her conservative views, becoming an activist for the restoration of the monarchy (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Marques & Mendonça, 2018). However, she stresses that it all started with that piece of contemporary art. This example calls our attention to the importance of small details, which can thrust individuals into new political directions.

**Figure 6.5**

*Aurora's Path towards Conservatism and Monarchism*



*Note.* Source: The author.

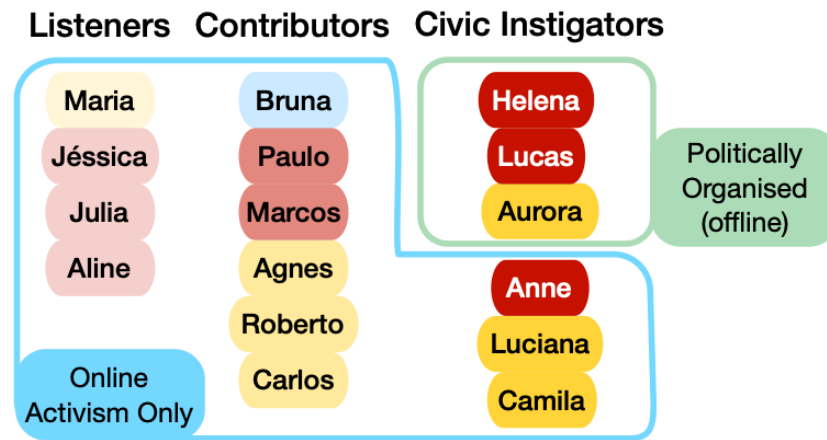
Aurora's narrative illustrates the experience of political becoming as involving a complex amalgamation of stimuli, which can come from the most varied sources, such as the arts, a Facebook post and colleagues, situations in which individuals bring together in the construction of their values and views of the world. It is not possible to confine Aurora's experience as emanating from the private sphere only (Papacharissi, 2010). The encounter with the arts happens in an offline public space, and the encounter with the conservative view on the arts happens in a private sphere; her learning processes then move from online and offline engagements, with the use of social media and the engagement with colleagues; and the engagement with the monarchist organisation begins and is constructed offline, in public spaces. Aurora's experiences, as with others described in this chapter, are better understood from a

hybrid perspective, where offline and online, public and private, and old and new are lived together, mutually impacting each other (Chadwick, 2017; Treré, 2019).

The following section deals with how participants experience political becomings from the perspective of their modes of participation; Section 6.3 then provide a discussion of the findings addressed in this chapter, providing an answer to SQR 1: *How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?*

## **6.2 Multiple Stabilities, Multiple Modes of Participation**

The first part of this chapter considered participants' political becomings in terms of how they first became politically engaged, finding three stabilities in these moments of initial political awareness. In this second part, political becomings are examined through the perspective of modes of participation (Dennis, 2019). This study finds that social media are highly present in how individuals experience participation in political processes. Once their interest has been triggered by the varied sources of influence addressed in the previous section, individuals employ social media to engage in diverse modes of participation. For most participants in this investigation, social media constitute their only means to engage in political participation; only three participants are currently organised in face-to-face political organisations (*Figure 6.6*). In addition, this research finds that social media facilitate the transition from latent forms of participation to more expressive participation, as all these forms of participation can be experienced in the same online environment.

**Figure 6.6***Participants' Main Modes of Participation*

*Note.* Source: The author.










The analysis of participants' modes of participation indicates that the categories listener, contributor, and civic instigator are helpful when investigating political participation on social media, provided they allow some flexibility (Dennis, 2019). Those considered listeners and contributors tend to act to mobilise others in moments of crisis or when propelled to act for varied reasons (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson, 2000). Almost all participants engaged in expressive participation modes in moments of crisis, chiefly in the 2018 elections. The change in behaviour reflects the understanding that even seemingly non-engaged citizens can respond to their contexts when they feel threatened (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson, 2000). Moreover, in contrast to Dennis' (2019) study, conducted in London from 2013 to 2014, in which listeners comprised the majority of participants, in this investigation, listeners constitute the smaller group. This contrast reflects the problems with the generalisations about social media usage; contexts deeply influence how technologies, and political processes, are experienced (Ihde, 2009).

To move to a more postphenomenological view of how individuals experience social media to participate in political struggles, this study proposes the association of the previously identified modes of participation with technological stabilities (Ihde,

2009). Thus, in relation to how citizens experience political participation, social media can be seen as having three initial stabilities: *listening tools*, when social media are used to maintain awareness of political issues, *contribution tools*, when these technologies are employed to contribute to others' learnings, with the publications of political views and interpretations, and *mobilisation tools*, when these platforms are used to promote political mobilisation, calling others to act to support or challenge political projects. These technological stabilities better account for changes in social media uses. For example, individuals who most of the time behave like *listeners* can make use of social media as mobilisation tools on specific occasions while maintaining the standby behaviour. Moreover, as *Figure 6.7* illustrates, the notion of stabilities helps us observe that as citizens move to more expressive modes of participation (e.g., as civic instigators), they do not cease to experience other stabilities but add new ones to their experience.

**Figure 6.7**

*Modes of Participation and Social Media's Stabilities*

| <b>Social Media's Stabilities</b> |  |  |   |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>Modes of Participation</b>     | <br>Listening tools | <br>Contribution tools | <br>Mobilisation tools |
| Listeners                         |                     |  |   |
| Contributors                      |                     |                        |   |
| Civic Instigators                 |                     |                        |                        |

*Note.* Source (Dennis, 2019) and the author.

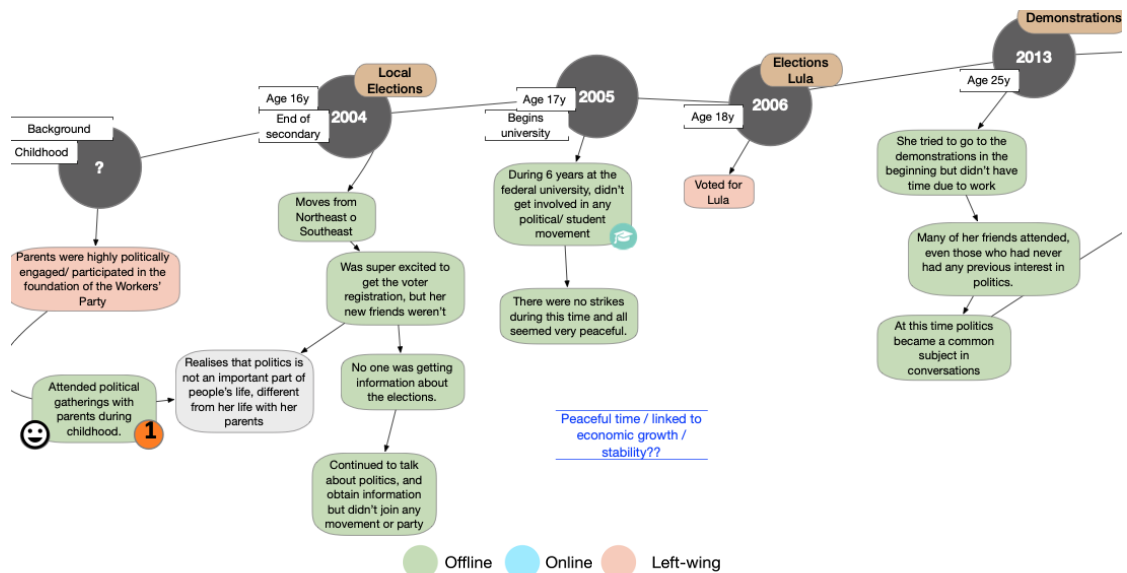
The following sections address these modes of participation and how participants experience different technological stabilities.

**6.2.1 Listening and Ready to Act**

Four participants in this study use social media primarily for cognitive engagement with political issues via access to political content on social media, connecting with associated groups, and refraining from publicly expressing their political identifications (Dennis, 2019). These individuals remain silent on political struggles most of the time but can turn to expressive modes of participation using social media as contribution and provocations tools, as demonstrated next.

Julia had a politically informed upbringing but had never engaged in expressive political participation until 2018. During the election campaign, she felt a strong urge to express her political alignment due to feeling threatened by Bolsonaro’s candidacy and his supporters (Mouffe, 2009/2013). *Figure 6.8* shows the first part of Julia’s map of political becomings, when she did not display interest in political discussions or political action, remaining silent about political struggles such as the 2013 June Journeys.

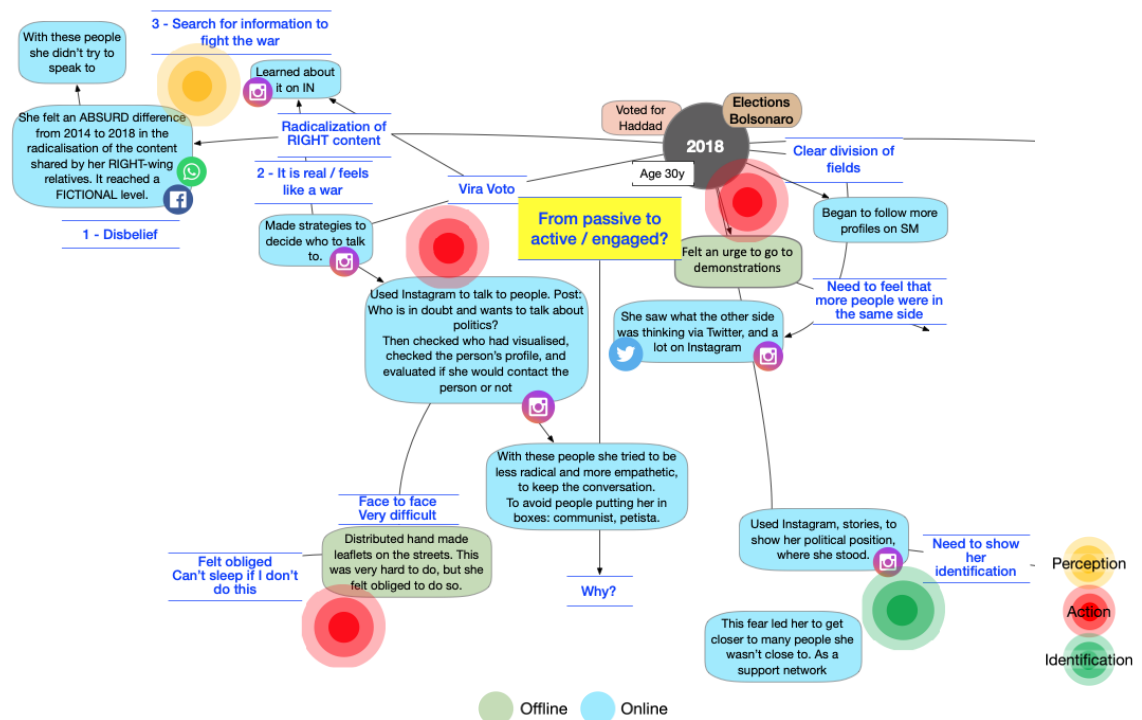
**Figure 6.8**  
*Julia’s MPB – Part 1*



Note. Source: The author.

Figure 6.9

## Julia's MPB – Part 2



Note. Source: The author.

However, *Figure 6.9* above depicts a very different situation. In 2018, Julia felt threatened by the possibility of Bolsonaro winning the elections, recalling having observed “an absurd difference” in the expressions of Right-wing people:

People were becoming more radical. The closest people I know who are Right-wing today, some cousins of mine, started saying things that were more radical. This was on Facebook, on WhatsApp, where I could follow them. (Julia, 31 years old, Left)

Perceiving this threat, Julia engaged in several political actions, online and offline, connecting with other persons and groups that opposed the far-Right candidate, constructing and expressing political identifications in this field, making use of social media also as contribution and mobilisation tools, and as spaces to demarcate her political identifications:

I posted more on Instagram, to demarcate my position. It was something like: “Look, I think this way.” Then, one day a former classmate, who was quite close to me, asked me: “I can’t believe! Are you going to vote for Haddad?” Then, I was confused, like: “What am I doing wrong? Why has she just figured this out now?” I

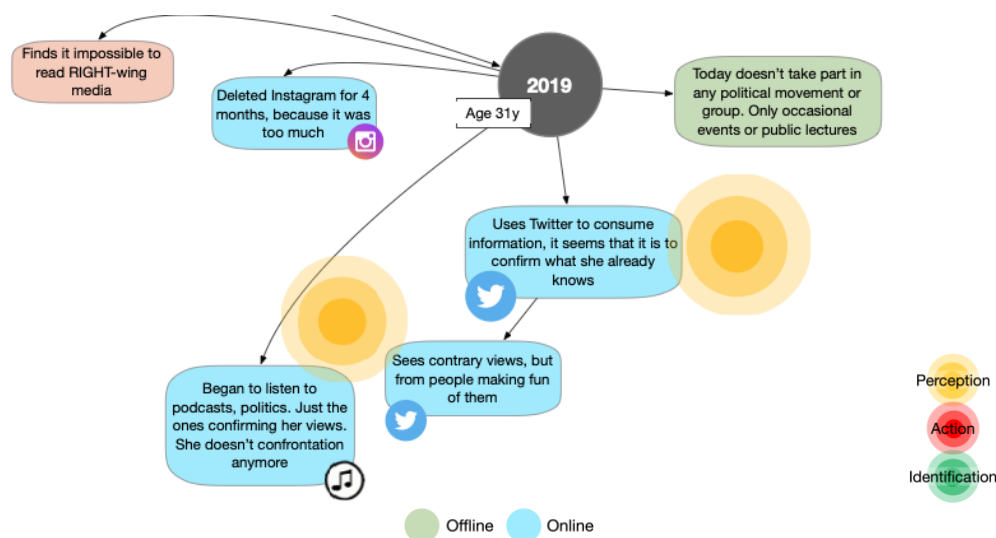
was offended. I am not showing myself right here. What's happening? I thought the other things, the other side, were so rotten that I had to show what I was thinking. I felt this need very much. (Julia, 31 years old, Left)

For Julia, the posts on Instagram functioned as acts of identification (Laclau, 1994), through which she could show her peers her positioning in the 2018's political conflicts.

The feeling of threat was so powerful for Julia that she even challenged herself and went to the streets to distribute leaflets to people outside train stations in a pursuit to influence them to not vote for Bolsonaro:

For me, this was very difficult. I was not used to being in this position, going out and talking to people. I made leaflets by hand and distributed them to people. It was very challenging, I'm very shy, so I wasn't used to it. But I felt obliged, like, "I can't sleep if I don't do it." So, I tried to exhaust all my possibilities. (Julia, 31 years old, Left)

These actions of trying to persuade people on the streets were called for on social media, and there were social media profiles and groups dedicated to teaching citizens how to approach people on the streets and what kind of issues to raise with them. This demonstrates again the interconnections between social media and streets (Treré, 2019; Treré & Gutierrez, 2015). Citizens like Julia might not engage in sustained political action, but they are prepared to act when they feel compelled enough to do it (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson, 2000). After 2018, Julia ceased to engage in expressive political participation and returned to the previously observed silent mode, limiting herself to using social media as listening tools (see *Figure 6.10* below).

**Figure 6.10***Julia's MPB – Part 3*

Note. Source: The author.

This kind of behaviour is observed across the experiences of various participants who do not engage in sustained political action (Dennis, 2019). During 2018, individuals became active, engaging in diverse political actions, online or offline, to support their candidates or prevent the other side from winning. The main reason for this more active engagement is the feeling of being threatened by the other side: those with identifications of the Left, felt their existence threatened by the rise of the Right, which materialised in the candidacy of Bolsonaro; those with identifications on the Right acted to elect a president who could overcome the threats posed by the Left, in the figure of the Workers' Party (Hall, 1996; Mouffe, 2009/2013; Norval, 1990). These experiences demonstrate the power of conflicts to incite political action (Mouffe, 2000, 2002/2013). In Brazil in 2018, the issue was that these conflicts often took the form of antagonistic relations, one between enemies to be destroyed (Mouffe, 2000, 2002/2013). The perception of threats and the opportunities for action were often mediated by social media, as observed in Julia's experience. Due to the highly multistable character of these technologies (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017), citizens could easily swap modes of use from listening tools to



mobilisation tools. as happened with Julia. In addition, these participants also engaged in physical activities in a blend of online and offline expressive participation.

During these moments of expressive participation, these individuals engaged in groups, experienced diverse possibilities of action, and learned about political strategies. Even if they have resumed their latent forms of participation, engaging for example with the political only through accessing political information (the first stage in the continuum of participation), these individuals have experienced expressive participation, building a repertoire of political action (Mendonça & Bustamante, 2020), and possessing the potential to engage in similar acts if needed (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson, 2000). This finding demonstrates the relevance of including latent forms of participation in studies of political participation and the importance of investigating how the perception of political struggles takes place under current media textures, an issue addressed next in Chapter 7.

### ***6.2.2 Contributors: Helping the Cause One Post at a Time***

The six contributors in this study are citizens who engage in political discussions online and frequently express their political identifications in comments or by sharing content on their profiles, but without a sustained goal to mobilise others (Dennis, 2019). Their main goal is to inform others and contribute to their learning processes about political struggles, using social media as contribution tools:

On the family group, we sent some news' links, sometimes to that aunt who didn't have much political engagement. And it was interesting because from then on, people I never imagined would be so engaged today are more engaged. They talk about politics, they discuss, they have information about the issues. In these groups we sent links to opinions, suggestions of journalists, YouTubers, some political statement, somebody who you saw had a more substantiated information. (Carlos, 32 years old, Right)

As Carlos mentions, these contributions can be more public when individuals post something on their profile that can be seen by all visitors, or semi-public when they publish in closed groups (Papacharissi, 2010).

There is also the possibility of employing anonymity as a way of engaging in expressive modes of participation, avoiding the risks involved in political expression (Chayko, 2021), which can be seen as additional technological stability concerning the modes of participation:

I felt enormous freedom with the profile dedicated to my political views. A 100% freedom of not being personally attacked. Because of that, sometimes it is better not to show your face. (Roberto, 19 years old, Right)

Three participants have moved from listeners to contributors by creating secret personas used solely for political expression. Behind the protection of anonymity, these individuals feel that they contribute to the political projects of their choice by expressing their opinions and sharing information without facing the responsibility of assuming a political identification publicly due to the lack of confidence or fear of judgements from their personal network (Chayko, 2021). Thus, anonymity is seen by these individuals as a safe way to step into activism. This particular use of social media for anonymous expression is further analysed in Chapter 7.

### ***6.2.3 Civic Instigators: Sustained Action Online and Offline***

Six participants are considered civic instigators, engaging in more sustained political participation aiming to mobilise others (Dennis, 2019). They consistently use social media as mobilisation tools but also experience the other two stabilities (as illustrated in *Figure 6.6*). Half of these participants are organised with political organisations: Helena, with the teachers' union, Lucas with various Indigenous associations, and Aurora with the Monarchic Circle. They make use of social media as mobilising tools incorporating them in their organised activities, in experiences involving a blend of offline and online activities:

I think that my public life grew nationally with social media. People saw my efforts, my participation and contacted me to participate in some event. And from these contacts my political life grew. I've built my public on Instagram. With these media, we reach people faster. It is easier to share our perspectives. For example, I am acting as national secretary for an association, and recently we published a repudiation note against the participation of Ysani Kalapalo<sup>50</sup> in the United Nations Assembly with Bolsonaro. This note was shared two thousand times and got numerous comments. That is why I believe these media facilitate our reach to the people. (Lucas, 20 years old, Left)

When you have a very strong face-to-face presence, like in the case of the assemblies in our school, WhatsApp helps a lot to disseminate our decisions. If it were not for WhatsApp, our deliberations would stop there, no one else would know. In the school, we create a letter with our position, in the case of strikes, for example. Then, we send this letter in a PDF or image to our friends outside the school. This way, this face-to-face network becomes a network on WhatsApp, and we try to make this letter go viral. (Helena, 34 years old, Left)

In these examples, political action begins in public spheres and is then transformed and reverberated or echoed by social media. These examples offer further evidence of experiences lived in public spaces and travelling through connected private spheres, illustrating a hybrid construction in these modes of participation (Papacharissi, 2010; Treré, 2019). The same individuals can also initiate diverse political actions from their private spheres, mixing individual and collective mobilisation in the same space (Milan, 2015).

The third organised person, Aurora, uses social media primarily to speak as an ambassador for the cause, monarchism, translating this collective identification into her person, as a political influencer (Lewis, 2018; Milan, 2015). In contrast to the other political influencers, she also uses social media to mobilise citizens to face-to-face organisation:

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<sup>50</sup> Ysani Kalapalo is an Indigenous woman and YouTuber who became known for her identification with the Right and support to Bolsonaro. In 2019, she was invited by Bolsonaro to attend the United Nations Assembly, where the president defended his environmental policies, while Ysani was seen in the audience. The position of Ysani Kalapalo as an Indigenous leader was highly disputed among various Indigenous' associations, including the one represented by Lucas (<https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49804834>).

I am adding people to WhatsApp so that out of this virtual group, I can create a face-to-face group. I did the virtual first because it is easier to get them into a WhatsApp group than to get them out on a Sunday to talk. Sometimes the WhatsApp group will make them want to leave home on a Sunday to talk about politics. (Aurora, 25 years old, Right)

Thus, Aurora retains the face-to-face organisation and uses social media to cultivate it, promoting the formation of online groups that can guide citizens to become organised activists. The promotion of monarchism emerges from her private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010), informed by her actions in public spaces, aiming to direct citizens to political organisation and back to public spaces. This behaviour adds another nuance to the notion of the private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). In this case, the private is serving the public to attract citizens from their private spheres to public interactions. This case reveals how actions occurring in online or offline settings are difficult to isolate once they become intertwined with individuals' lived experiences (Treré, 2019).

The other three civic instigators, who are non-organised, currently use social media as their only means of activism. All of them have become engaged in their current political identifications from 2013 onwards, having used social media as learning tools (Section 6.1.2). Presently, they use social media as mobilisation tools, constructing audiences around their political identifications, as political influencers (Lewis, 2018). The actions of political influencers are explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

This section has addressed how participants use social media to engage in different modes of participation, associating technological stabilities to these political behaviours. Social media's various stabilities allow and invite various modes of participating in political struggles, and are not confined to those observed by Dennis (2019) (e.g., anonymous participation). Social media's multistable character (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017) facilitates the transition from latent to more expressive forms of participation, once the same technologies can be used to listen, contribute and mobilise. However, listeners need a good reason for

moving into action, such as the perception of a threat. This section has also demonstrated how offline and online, private and public become intertwined in the participants' lived experiences of political becomings, taking us back to the notion of hybridity (Treré, 2019). Section 6.3 below discusses the findings addressed in Sections 6.1 and 6.2, crafting an answer for the question of how young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings.

### **6.3 The Experience of Social Media and Political Becomings**

This chapter deals with the SQR 1: *How do young Brazilians experience social media as part of their political becomings?* The main finding regarding this question is that most participants emphasise the significance of personal relations, forged outside of social media, in their initial processes of becoming aware of political struggles and constituting themselves as political subjects. Participants report that their processes of political becomings are usually triggered by diverse social relationships, like colleagues, family, and spouses, or by education and other offline contexts. This is consistent with what political scientists have been observing for over 50 years (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2005; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Rolfe & Chan, 2016; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005). When social media are part of the beginnings of their political engagement, these technologies are often used after the interest in political struggles has been sparked by relationships forged outside these platforms, such as family, romantic partners or colleagues, and via various face-to-face interactions. This finding demonstrates the significance of social relations on individuals' political paths (Zuckerman, 2005).

#### **6.3.1 Social Media Matter and so do Personal Interactions**

When observing how participants experience social media in their initial experiences with political engagement, this study finds three main stabilities that are not exclusive and can be experienced by the same individual in diverse moments: (1) *early political engagement, late social media experiences*, (2) *social media as learning tools*, and (3)

social media as *sources of provocations*. They have in common a strong significance of face-to-face social relations, which are associated with the use of social media for political purposes. No participant reports being driven to political becomings alone, from their private spheres only, in an experience dissociated from other face-to-face relations. Hence, although Papacharissi's (2010) private sphere model remains very relevant to the understanding of how individuals participate in political processes, it is necessary to acknowledge and incorporate the significance of physical and public experiences in these processes, particularly in how individuals are first driven to political participation.

Although all participants are highly immersed in social media, for some, the engagement with politics begins first outside these platforms, and eventually social media are incorporated into their political activities. Despite this stability being more commonly found with mature participants (30 to 34 years old), it is interesting that even some of the younger participants describe their political engagement as happening first offline sometimes due to the constraints in the access to the technology. This finding is an indication that the notion of the private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010) should incorporate some nuances. Actions emanating from private spheres are often highly influenced by interactions lived outside these private spaces, and participants often live their political becomings as hybrid experiences (Chadwick, 2017; Treré, 2019), involving a web of offline and online, private and public involvements. These findings puts a new perspective on the actual impact of social media on political behaviour, challenging more deterministic views (e.g., Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017).

Even when social media seem deeply present in the beginnings of participants' political becomings, acquiring the stability of learning tools, the learning processes on social media are firstly influenced by social relations. Participants use social media to deepen their knowledge about the political issues they are already interested in due to the influence of various social relations and contexts (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005). Their views might change through the

engagement on social media, but usually what happens is a refinement of the political views they had initially engaged with before their searches on social media. At this moment, participants experience a deep personalisation of the engagement with political processes, a personalisation that is invited by social media but also desired by individuals (Verbeek, 2008, 2011). These personalised learning paths are addressed in Chapter 7.

Furthermore, although we can observe some associations between certain stabilities and political influences and orientations, it is not possible to talk about determinations: for instance, the use of social media as learning tools being more commonly found among those on the Right, and who did not experience politically informed upbringings. These associations reveal inclinations that are often challenged (Ihde, 2017). YouTube can be seen as an environment dominated by Right-wing politics (de Oliveira et al., 2019; Lewis, 2018), but other political perspectives are also present on the platform, and thus, can influence political becomings involving diverse political views.

Political events are mentioned by more than half of the participants as triggering their political interests or being part of how they first became engaged with certain political identifications. This source of influence is most pronounced among those on the Right, who became interested in political issues as adults or young adults from 2013 onwards. Political events offer opportunities for political discussions and concrete spaces for action (elections and demonstrations, for instance) (Baker et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 2005) and can propel citizens to question their position in society (Mendonça & Figueiredo, 2019). In the experiences of these individuals, political events are often associated with the influences of relationships (family, spouse or colleagues) who assist them in making sense of political crises such as corruption scandals, demonstrations or the heated 2018 elections. For most Right-wing participants, these events were their first contact with political discussions. This finding can be a reflection of the popularisation of the Right-wing discourses in Brazil, which gained strength and

more visibility after the 2013 and the 2015 demonstrations, which coincides with the periods when participants aligned with these views began to pay attention to politics (Avritzer, 2016). This observation points to the importance of the mediation of perception (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011), addressed in Chapter 7, once most Brazilians access news through social media (Newman et al., 2020). Next, the question of how social media are experienced in political becomings is discussed from the perspective of participants' mode of participation.

### **6.3.2 Multistable Participation**

Regarding the modes of participation (Dennis, 2019), social media are highly present in how individuals experience participation in political processes. All but three participants engaged with the political primarily through social media. These technologies are pivotal to how citizens refine their preliminary political views and construct political identifications by participating in political struggles. Social media's multistable character (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017) invites various modes of participation in political struggles, facilitating the transition from latent to more expressive forms of participation once the same technologies can be used to listen, to contribute and to mobilise. Thus, participation also becomes multistable within the experiences of the same individual. Most participants engage in expressive forms of social media participation, contrary to what was found by Dennis (2019) in different contexts. This difference reflects how political behaviour and technology usage vary in multiple settings (Ihde, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a).

Building on Dennis' (2019) classification, with the aim to draw attention to the meanings that social media acquire in diverse modes of participation, this study finds three initial technological stabilities: social media as listening, contribution and mobilisation tools. These stabilities assist in observing that individuals engaged in a primary mode of participation, for instance, a contributor, often make different uses of



social media, mostly as listening and contribution tools in this case. Moreover, citizens can always find new ways of using social media for participation, such as when contributors use anonymity to avoid the risks of political expression or use social media to demarcate political positions to their network (Chayko, 2021).

The analysis of the modes of participation also offers some nuances to the notion of the private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). Actions emanating from a private sphere can be informed by interactions in the public sphere in spaces non-mediated by social media, as when Lucas uses Instagram to publicise a letter constructed by a political organisation, or when Aurora talks about monarchy on a YouTube channel, influenced by her experience in a monarchist group. Political participation on social media is hybrid not only because it involves multiple platforms, and public and private expressions inside these online spaces, but also because it can incorporate non-mediated experiences lived in public and private settings. The participants live in a world where social media are significant pieces but are not everything that constitutes their realities.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

This chapter looked at the experiences of political becomings as a whole to identify how social media appear in these processes (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013). Social media are found to be important pieces in a complex mosaic of experiences that influence participants' political becomings. The individuals listened to in this investigation begin their experiences with political struggles usually due to the influence of personal relations (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005) and then use social media to deepen their knowledge about certain political views. Overall what seems to matter most for the participants in their initial experiences with political engagement are their social relations and contexts (Zuckerman, 2005). This finding puts the overall impact of

social media on political becomings into perspective, challenging technological determinisms.

Concerning the various modes of participation (Dennis, 2019), social media has acquired a more prominent role. For most individuals, social media constitute their only means of participation. This finding is important because it shows that these technologies are the main environments where they refine their preliminary political views and construct political identifications through participating in political struggles (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992; Svensson, 2011).

A recurrent observation in this chapter is that the experiences of political becomings tend to be highly hybrid, incorporating offline and online, public and private, old and new media, and a mix of them (Treré, 2019). These dimensions mutually impact each other, and sometimes it is hard to tell them apart in the participants' lived experiences descriptions (Treré, 2019). Acknowledging these symbiotic relationships (Treré, 2019), Chapter 7 focuses on participants' experiences lived in and through social media (Gertz, 2018) to examine how these technologies shape the perception and action involved in political becomings (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011).

## 7

## Findings and Discussion 2:

### Multistable Political Becomings

Beings do not preexist their relatings.

—Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*

Haraway's quote summarises the core assumption of mediation theory (and postphenomenology) followed in this research: that humans, technologies and experiences acquire their meanings in their relations through the mediation (Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). In our relations with social media, we become specific *mediated beings*, networked selves, who engage with a *mediated world*, which is constituted through the process called *mediation* (Ihde, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Postphenomenological studies are "investigations into co-constitution, into how technological beings, in a technological world, come to have meaning in, and through, and for each other" (Gertz, 2018, p. 45). This study finds multiple variations (Ihde, 2009) of how social media transform the participants' experiences of political becomings by amplifying/reducing aspects of the world and inviting/inhibiting specific actions (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011).

In Chapter 6 we saw that the impact of social media on the overall experiences of the political becomings of the participants is relative. Social media are part of a complex set of experiences that inform how citizens become interested in political discussions and certain political views. Participants' first experiences with political struggles are highly influenced by personal relations and contexts lived outside these media (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005). However, when it comes to the moment of participation, when individuals begin

to engage with the political projects and views of their choice, social media acquire a protagonist position. All but three individuals currently engage with the political primarily on social media, not voicing any consistent offline form of participation. This chapter focuses on the experiences of political becomings lived in and through social media to examine how social media shape these involvements through the mediation of perception and action (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Thereby, this chapter addresses *SRQ 2: How do social media transform the perception and action involved in the political becomings of young Brazilians?*

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the mediation of perception (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011) and is associated with the access stage in the continuum of participation (Dennis, 2019). This section addresses how social media mediate the perception of political struggles by, in conjunction with individuals, constituting specific worlds for them (Verbeek, 2000/2005). The discussions are centred around issues of personalisation and privatisation of the access to the political (Papacharissi, 2010; Pybus, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018), which are amplified by human and technology, while the technological mediation grows in transparency (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011). The second part of this chapter is centred on the mediation of action, that is, how individuals become present to the world (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011), and political struggles, through connection, expression, and action (the other three stages in the continuum of political participation) (Dennis, 2019). In the mediation of action, the focus is on what actions social media invite and inhibit (Verbeek, 2011). Discussions of personalisation and privatisation are also significant in this section (Papacharissi, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018), but from the perspective of how participants act to support or challenge political struggles. Due to the hybrid nature of social media and the political processes themselves (Treré, 2019), these two dimensions, perception and action, are often intertwined, feeding into one another. Thus, references to the mediation of action can also appear in the discussions about the mediation of perception and vice-versa.

## 7.1 Social Media and the Perception of the Political

The focus on the *mediation of perception* directs the analysis to how political views and struggles become present for the participants (Verbeek, 2011). Perception is not passive. It is an active relationship with the reality around us, connected to how we live and inhabit the world (Ihde, 2009). Within the continuum of participation (Section 3.1.2.1), the mediation of perception can be associated with the *access* stage, which refers to cognitive engagement with political issues and the many ways citizens access this type of information (Dennis, 2019; Zukin et al., 2006). It is important to stress that, from a postphenomenological standpoint, the mediation process is one of co-constitution of subject and objectivity (human and world) (Verbeek, 2000/2005). Thus, references such as *access to reality*, *access to the political* or *access to the world* “should be read as relating to how an artifact makes possible the constitution of a world in the very process of perception” (Verbeek, 2000/2005, p. 130). When we say that social media are transforming access to the political, the technology is not just altering how participants access a world that exists *out there*, but it is constituting this very world for them and what they understand by political, in the process of making this reality available (Ihde, 2009; Verbeek, 2000/2005). At the same time, the mediation also transforms how individuals understand themselves as political subjects participating in political processes (Ihde, 2009; Verbeek, 2000/2005).

This section examines the stabilities identified in how social media transform the perception involved in political becomings. The first two parts (Sections 7.1.1 and 7.1.2) look at how participants experience social media as embodied technologies (Aagaard, 2018; Ihde, 1990). As social media are embodied, becoming one with individuals, they function as portals giving access to diverse realities which users can inhabit (Aagaard, 2018). These findings support the view that political interactions on social media should not be considered less significant than face-to-face experiences (Aagaard, 2018; Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010). The following two Sections, 7.1.3

and 7.1.4, draw on the amplification of the personalisation and privatisation of access to the political. The hyper-personalisation is co-constituted with social media and influences everyday access to political issues and how individuals engage in private learning paths (mentioned in Chapter 6), where they deepen their knowledge about certain political views and construct political identifications.

### ***7.1.1 Embodying Social Media #1: Experiencing Mobile Technologies***

As discussed in Section 2.2.1, the fact that social media are carried around enhances their embodiment potential, impacting not only perception but action (Richardson, 2007, 2012; Verbeek, 2015), contributing to the omnipresence of these platforms in everyday life (Miller et al., 2016; Wellner, 2016). Smartphones are a central aspect of the use of social media, as these technologies shape the experience of social media, aggregating mobility and other functionalities to these platforms. As Wellner's (2016) postphenomenological examination of cell phones highlights, these technologies have become part of the human experience, expanding our memories, when they function as "memory prosthesis" that store more than our brain can retain, and greatly impacting our mobility, when they literally tell us how to get where we have to be (p. 142). Furthermore, the fact that we manipulate smartphones with our hands, close to our bodies, in an intimate way, can make "users more affectively" involved in the experiences lived with these technologies (Richardson, 2020, p. 159). Such aspects are aggregated to the experience of social media, enhancing the embodiment of these platforms.

As this section on experiencing mobile technologies illustrates, it is necessary to note how technologies are experienced differently under varied contexts, highlighting the importance of investigating technology uses in different settings. This study finds that for participants coming from less advantaged backgrounds, accessing the internet and social media, is something considerably new, made possible chiefly with the acquisition of smartphones (de Almeida & Guarnieri, 2017; Omena de Melo, 2020),

where access to a smartphone or a tablet signifies a doorway to the internet and social media. In comparison, for those in the middle-class, the contact with online environments seems uncomplicated, as if these spaces have always been within reach. In this context, mobile phones enhance their experiences with social media, increasing their time on these platforms. These findings reflect the socioeconomic divides addressed in Section 4.1.

Helena's experience illustrates the impact of the smartphone on the lives of middle-class individuals who enjoyed uncomplicated access to the internet prior to these technologies. Helena began to use a smartphone in 2014 after resisting the technology "a little." As a middle-class woman, she had no issues accessing the internet before having a mobile phone; what changed for her was how often she used social media. The same goes for Agnes, who is always with her phone engaging in numerous activities:

I started to use social media the whole day, on the bus, at every moment. (Helena, 34 years old, Left)

Most of my time is spent on the internet. I'm always with my cell phone to do my homework, to write. (Agnes, 18 years old, Right)

With the smartphone, social media can be carried around, becoming "in hand," part of individuals' dealings in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 145), allowing them to be in multiple worlds, on the bus or anywhere they go, all the time (Richardson, 2007; Verbeek, 2015). The communicative enhancement provided by social media is "always on" (Carrington, 2015, p. 171) and perception and action possibilities afforded by these platforms are accessible "in each and every moment of life" (Wellner, 2016, p. 78). The attachment of social media to users' bodies impacts the perception and action involved in political becomings, as demonstrated in this section.

For the participants coming from the lower economics class, the smartphone is often referred to as their entry point to the internet and social media. This finding is consistent with other studies on the impact of smartphones on the lower-income

Brazilian working class (e.g., de Almeida & Guarnieri, 2017; Omena de Melo, 2020; Spyer, 2017). This is observed through the example of Jéssica, a student and Black woman who lives in a periphery neighbourhood in the Southeast, and who only gained direct access to the internet (and social media) around 2016 (at 26 years old), with a tablet provided by her employer for working purposes. She had become interested in politics in 2015 while studying to enter college, but accessing information was not so simple at the time. She notes:

Internet? No. Phone? No. It was all very painstaking. I had some difficulties. And even though I was a little slow in understanding how things worked, I had some doubts about society that people could not answer. So, I was obliged to search around. I *searched in books*, sometimes *I saw some news or documentary on TV*, or *I asked some teachers*. Internet... there was the internet café, but it was way too expensive. I didn't have much interest or the money for it. (Jéssica, 29 years old, Left)

Although the above quote does not point to social media usage, it is an important account of how the *lack of access* to the internet can be perceived as a significant obstacle to accessing political information. Jéssica's *missing* technology (Adams & Turville, 2018; Heidegger, 1953/2010) draws our attention to aspects of the access to political information that is facilitated by smartphones. The student highlights activities that, at the time, seemed to require too much from her, such as a search for information in books. These activities could be facilitated if Jéssica had a smartphone: while on the bus to work; for example, she could search for online books, watch a documentary or participate in political discussions on online forums or social media, each of which would not take time from her commitments. Moreover, with social media, she might incidentally encounter political content, through friends' posts, without even having to search for it (Vromen et al., 2015; Yamamoto et al., 2020). The smartphone therefore becomes a portal to varied content sources, allowing users to be in multiple worlds on the go (Aagaard, 2018; Papacharissi, 2010; Richardson, 2007; Verbeek, 2015).



This section points to the centrality of mobile phones to social media access, which impacts the dimensions of perception and action related to these technologies. In the analyses that follow, social media are considered mobile technologies because they tend to be used through smartphones. Moreover, this section also clarifies the digital divide that is still very real in Brazil, although obfuscated by the high numbers on internet access and growth of social media usage (Cetic, 2020; IBGE, 2020b). The conditions of access to social media can be quite different depending on the socioeconomic contexts, which indicates the importance of investigating the use of technologies in varied settings (Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). The following section continues to deal with embodiment relations, examining how social media constitute portals enhancing participants' reach towards the world and giving them access to different realities.

### ***7.1.2 Embodying Social Media #2: Experiencing Portals***

The experience of portals is one of the stabilities (Ihde, 2009) identified when social media are engaged in the perception of political struggles (Aagaard, 2018). This section looks at how social media are experienced as *portals* giving access to different places and realities, which are constituted through the mediation (Aagaard, 2018). Social media experiences as portals to *access* the world involve varying degrees of transparency (Ihde, 1990). The higher the transparency, the lower the awareness of the technological transformation of the perceived reality (Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b).

One way social media transform the perception of the world is by the experience of a doorway to places users can inhabit (Aagaard, 2018). When asked to explain what a typical day concerning her social media habits looks like, Helena narrates a series of *moves* from one platform to another, as if she is just walking through different places, using several material metaphors that denote movement (van den Boomen, 2014):

I keep *jumping* from one to another. For instance, when I get home and have nothing to do, first I use WhatsApp, to begin answering the messages. Sometimes, WhatsApp *throws* me to another platform: many people send things from Twitter. I don't even know how to use Twitter, but I have an account there, and sometimes I *go* to see something they send me. When I don't have messages on WhatsApp anymore, I *go* to Instagram. If I have anything to post, I do. And then, I *go* to Facebook, make a post and check if there were any comments or likes. (Helena, 34 years old, Left)

In contrast, Agnes emphasises a lack of movement but still implies the notion of place.

Lately, I have *stayed* more on YouTube and Instagram (Agnes, 18 years old, Right)

By incorporating social media into their daily dwellings, Helena and Agnes have habituated themselves to the platforms, taking residence in them (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Moores, 2009). They enter a portal from their private spheres (Papacharissi, 2010), and navigate to diverse places (Aagaard, 2018). Sometimes, WhatsApp *throws* Helena to other places, as if she has lost control of her steps. These are links sent by friends who, together with WhatsApp, in a composite relation (Verbeek, 2008), organise what content is made available for Helena and where. Through routine, these platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and many others) are experienced as concrete places where individuals can *go*, *jump from*, *be thrown at*, or simply *stay* (Aagaard, 2018; Moores, 2009).

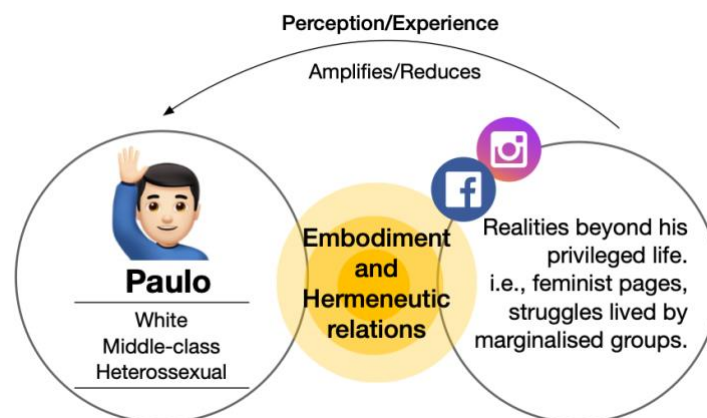
Aagaard's (2018) metaphor of the portal stresses that media technologies afford the transportation of users from one place to another, from one's immediate surroundings to the mediated realm. We can however develop this idea to view social media as allowing different realities to travel to one's surroundings, constituting a specific world for users (Gertz, 2019; Ihde, 1990; Nelson, 2018; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Paulo uses social media as a portal to expand his experience of the world, accessing realities outside his routine, constituting a world beyond his privileges (Aagaard, 2018; Gertz, 2019; Ihde, 1990):

It is like a way of not forgetting, you know? I begin to *follow a page*, a vegan or a feminist page, and now and then, *something comes up*. And it is funny because my profile is the most privileged possible in the society where we live. I am a man, White, heterosexual, I am not poor, I had access to education, so it's easy for me to forget about other realities. It's easy to look and don't care anymore. So, *I follow some pages to remind me of certain issues*. For example, today, when I was coming here, I saw a post on one of those pages, of a couple, two women, being beaten up in London just because they were kissing each other. They were bleeding because some guys hit them. So, this is a way of not losing sight of these issues. Because it is very crazy, the way my life is, I can easily not worry about such things. Nothing would change, I don't suffer from this kind of prejudice. This is a way of keeping myself engaged with these matters, even though they are not part of my routine and do not affect me directly. (Paulo, 32 years old, Left)

Prejudice against lesbians is not unknown to the actor, but he feels that these issues can be forgotten if he does not see them happening. Once these experiences are not accessible *without* the technological mediation of social media, these platforms are embodied and used as means to incorporate these other realities into his routine, so he can see them (see *Figure 7.1*).

### Figure 7.1

*Paulo: Perception beyond Privileges*



*Note.* Source: The author.

From his private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010), Paulo makes very specific choices about which issues he wants to *follow*, picking what world he wishes to be present for

him and how (Ihde, 2009; Verbeek, 2000/2005). By following certain pages in a given social media platform, he is presented with these matters in particular forms, for instance, through texts, pictures, or videos, with notifications or not (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2011). Hence, just as social media amplify the access to the world, making it possible for users to incorporate an array of distant realities and issues, these technologies also reduce the access, once individuals (in conjunction with algorithms) choose what will be included in this constructed world and what is left out (Bakshy et al., 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2008).

Cognitive engagement with the political (Zukin et al., 2006) takes the shape of following issues or social media profiles, which co-constitutes a personalised world experience (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Selecting and following issues on social media is a practice that seems to involve little commitment, initiated and terminated by pressing a button (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). However, as Paulo mentions, by following these pages, there is an authentic feeling of cognitive engagement with the matters they portray, which translates into his actions in the public sphere (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010; Zukin et al., 2006):

I follow a page on Instagram, and I love it. It is a profile that shows videos of women giving birth. And wow! There are incredible births in all sorts of situations. Men usually don't have any notion about childbirth, they think it is simple: "ah, they go and then the baby is out!" And, as I am in close contact with comedians, there are often some bad jokes like: "ah, the child broke my toy," and so on. But the moment of birth is something very significant, it is a rite of passage, which we lost contact with, we lost the contact with this part of our humanity. And it is very crazy that I am using Instagram to give me images that reconnect me with the humanity of birth. Because our society is all full of makeovers. (Paulo, 32 years old, Left)

Paulo is very aware of the mediated character of his engagement with childbirth images and even more with the contradictory purpose of this engagement, which is to reconnect him with "the humanity of birth." These images, through social media, constitute his experience of the world, giving him access to what is beyond his immediate reality (in a hermeneutic relation) (Gertz, 2018; Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger &

Verbeek, 2015a; Verbeek, 2000/2005), providing accounts different from the sexist jokes he is exposed to, which helps him in not reproducing them in his actions. This indicates that cognitive engagement that occurs in one's private sphere matters, as its impact goes beyond these private and individual spaces (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010). Paulo's engagement with the birth images happens in his private sphere and informs his actions in a public arena, for example, when he writes his acts as a comedian or teaches public classes (Papacharissi, 2010).

Similarly, Agnes also experiences social media as a portal to other realities, but in this case the technological transformation afforded her access to what would have remained unknown to her:

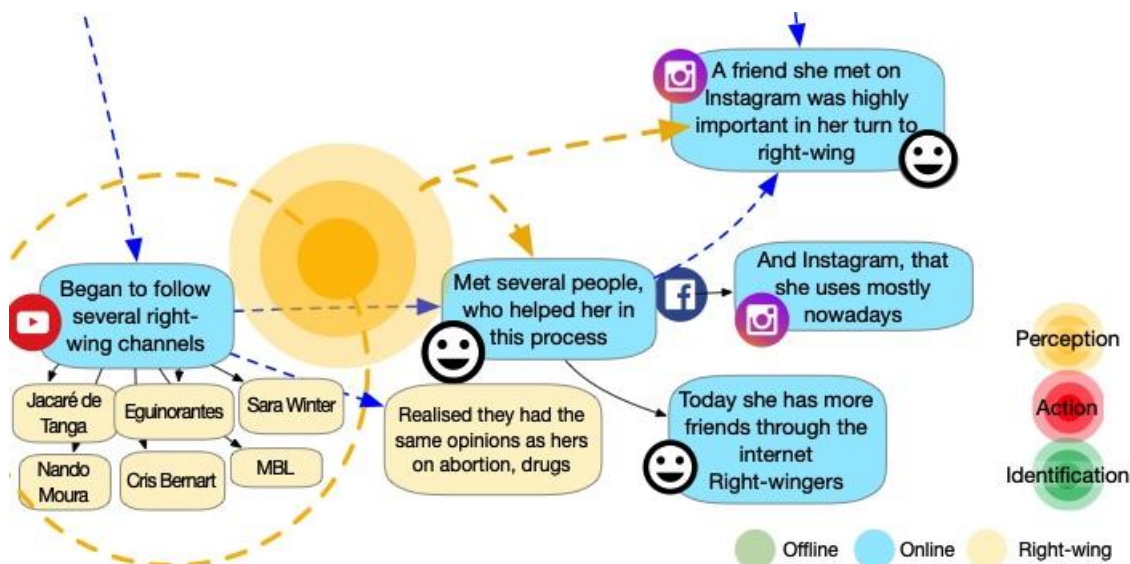
The internet made it possible for me to know a world I didn't know. YouTube, Facebook, the Right-wing pages, the monarchist pages, even though I'm not monarchist, the libertarian pages, even though I'm not libertarian, the Christian pages, despite not being Christian. Social media and the people I've got to know through them, on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram pages. (Agnes, 18 years old, Right)

Social media amplified Agnes' reach to the world well beyond her hometown with a population of 2000 people. The technology transformed her reality not by simply enabling her access to the world as she knew it but by giving her access to an *unknown reality*, co-constituted by her intentionality (wanting to know about Right-wing politics) and those of Facebook, Instagram and YouTube (Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). Although Agnes mentions the influence of her fiancé when she first became interested in political issues through social media (as seen in Chapter 6), she became acquainted with diverse political views that informed her political identifications and with other people who helped her to learn about and engage with Right-wing politics (*Figure 7.2*). This perception informed not only Agnes' voting choice in 2018 but also her decisions, later on, to express her political views and engage in actions to support them, like creating an Instagram profile solely to voice political opinions in support of Bolsonaro and other conservative views (Verbeek,

2020b). Again, we see how private and public, online and offline, become entangled in participants' experiences (Treré, 2019).

**Figure 7.2**

*Fragment of Agnes' MPB – Perception*



Note. Source: The author.

In some of the experiences discussed so far, the realities accessed through social media are perceived as the world in itself, not a transformed reality, which means that social media have acquired high transparency for these individuals (Ihde, 1975, 1990). This observation is particularly noticeable in Roberto's account of the importance of these technologies on his political becomings:

It's all very thanks to social media that I had this notion of the world. I don't even need to *see*, to go out totally, by just being on social media, you can have a certain knowledge of what is happening these days. It's amazing! (Roberto, 19 years old, Right)

For Roberto, the technology has acquired such transparency that *seeing through* social media is perceived as analogous to experiences lived without these technologies, and the experience of the platform is reduced to a minimum. For this reason, engagement with the reality outside social media is not even seen as necessary. He does not need to

“go out” to “see.” In Roberto’s view, the technology allows him to access “what is happening” in the public arena from his private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010).

One issue with technologies acquiring this level of transparency is that we lose sight of the many ways they transform our experiences in the world and ourselves, preventing us from critiquing these transformations (Gertz, 2018; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a; Verbeek, 2000/2005). When we ignore the technological mediation, there is a perception of total control over what we access through social media, when the reality is rather different. The world that Roberto sees through social media is a particular one shaped by him and technologies. While Roberto has control over what he chooses to see on social media, he has little control over the pool of information the technology makes available to him (Gertz, 2018). This way, Roberto overlooks that the mediated perception of political struggles amplifies specific aspects of the world and conceals certain things from him, as do most participants in this study.

Another consequence of the embodiment and the increased transparency of social media is that, as they become part of us, enhancing our abilities, we become dependent on them (Gertz, 2019). For Helena social media’s transparency reveals itself in an almost bodily inability to detached herself from the technology. She has become so accustomed to Facebook, that she cannot imagine living without it anymore:

I can’t leave Facebook. If I leave Facebook, I won’t know when some events happen. I’m talking more about the political events, but sometimes there are some cultural events that I become aware of through Facebook. I have a friend who is not on Facebook because he doesn’t want to be seen. But he gets to know about the events through WhatsApp because other people send him. (Helena, 34 years old, Left).

For Helena, deleting Facebook entails losing some of her ability to access the world and becoming disconnected from a “dynamic public life” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 51). Helena’s perception of the world is so closely associated with the technological mediation of social media that she cannot even imagine detaching herself from these platforms (Gertz, 2019; Wellner, 2016). She feels dependent on social media for her many

political activities and for becoming aware of political events, such as protests and political discussions.

Engaged with very different political contents, participants are partially aware of the technological transformation of their experiences. The transparency that social media acquire in these experiences depend on personal contexts and on the particular experiences themselves. While the participants acknowledge the power of social media to enable access, as a portal, to places or realities beyond their reach without these technologies, they seem to overlook that these realities are transformed in this process (Aagaard, 2018; Gertz, 2019; Ihde, 1990). What is perceived is amplified, and the experience of the technology is reduced to a minimum, signalling the successful embodiment of social media (Gertz, 2018; Ihde, 1975; Verbeek, 2000/2005). The high technological transparency indicates that participants do not make significant distinctions between unmediated and mediated (by social media) experiences. Both have similar impacts on their perception of political struggles and the actions informed by those (Verbeek, 2020b). The successful embodiment of social media also affects what participants understand as political action and how it takes place, as discussed in Section 7.2. The following section addresses how social media are used to construct hyper-personalised learning paths through which participants deepen their knowledge about political views, as mentioned in Chapter 6.

### ***7.1.3 Accessing the Political #1: Private and Hyper-Personalised Learning Paths***

As mentioned in Chapter 6, the use of social media as learning tools is one of the stabilities identified in the participants' initial journeys with political becomings (Ihde, 2009; Wellner, 2020b). Social media are often employed as learning tools after individuals' initial interest in political struggles has been motivated by various contexts and relationships (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005). The participants who use social media as learning tools, engage



primarily with YouTube for the purpose of developing the knowledge about the political views of their interest in a consumer-like mode (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Schudson, 2006). As learning tools, social media provide access to varied sources of political information, particularly in moments of disidentification, when individuals question their place in society and search for frameworks to assist them in the construction of their new identifications (Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Rancière, 1992; Yamamoto et al., 2020). This section describes how this use of social media transforms the perception of political struggles by facilitating participants' engagement in private and hyper-personalised learning paths.

YouTube is the most popular route for learning about political issues, particularly for the participants who became interested in political processes in adult life, as observed in Chapter 6. The video platform is the social media platform with the most users in Brazil, reaching 96% of those with internet access aged 16 to 64 (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020a). The learning path on YouTube often begins by searching for channels recommended by personal relationships, which display a particular political orientation (Rolfe & Chan, 2016), as discussed in Chapter 6. Carlos began the searches on YouTube after discussions with colleagues met through an educational institution:

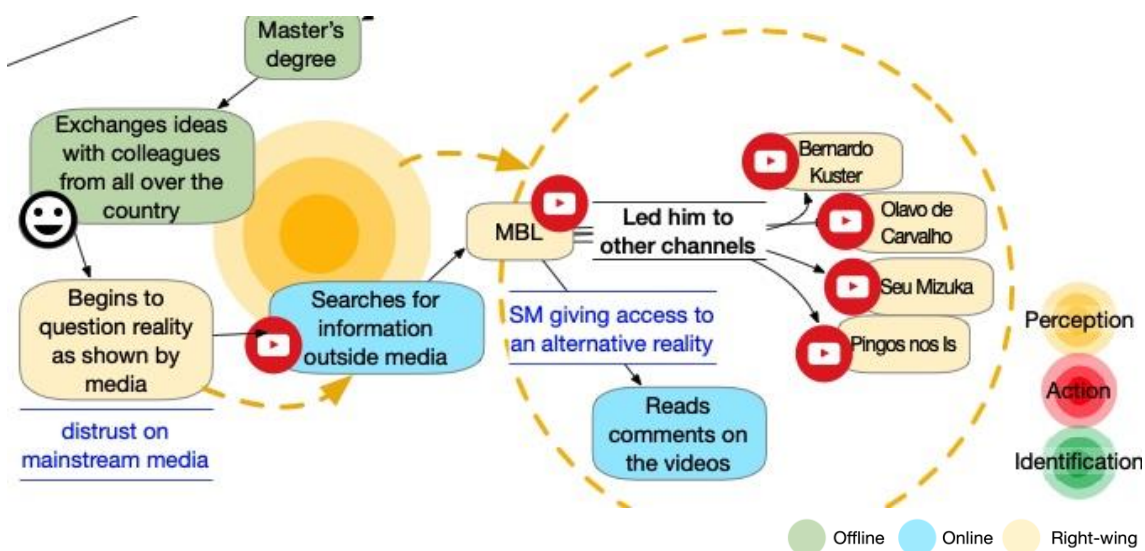
I started by searching which politicians were involved in the *Lava-Jato*. Then I began to listen not only to the videos but also to the people who commented on them, and that sparked my curiosity. In the newspapers, television, information is more superficial, and they end up showing one side and not the other. And on the internet, on YouTube, there is a greater depth, it's a longer time. On YouTube, you get more in-depth information. (Carlos, 32 years old, Right)

*Figure 7.3* illustrates how Carlos, influenced by colleagues, engages in private learning paths on YouTube. Through interaction with the videos, he constructs a personalised media environment resulting from composite relations with YouTube (Verbeek, 2011). The interaction with the videos informs YouTube about his tastes, and the platform sends him similar content. In the case of conservative content, these personalised

media environments are often dissociated from mainstream media (de Oliveira et al., 2019; Hochschild, 2016; Lewis, 2018), and offer alternative views of reality tailored to users' political views.

**Figure 7.3**

*Fragment of Carlos' MPB – Perception*



*Note.* Source: The author.

YouTube is constituted as a personalised media environment constructed around the issues and political projects that interest participants, which can include other social media platforms and older media, like books (Jenkins, 2006; van Dijck et al., 2018). These constructed environments involve composite intentionality: citizens want to see videos on some issues and political projects, YouTube offers more content related to these inputs (and inputs selected by the algorithms), and the YouTubers themselves also point them further resources and channels that can deepen users' knowledge about the desired political view (Just & Latzer, 2017; Lewis, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2011).

The participants who engage with YouTube as learning tools begin their learning paths by looking, on the platform, for specific issues they are interested in, in a consumer-like behaviour (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Schudson, 2006). From these issues, they become engaged in political projects which, in their view, better explain the

realities around them (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Rancière, 1992), as it is noted by Anne:

When I decided to study about the Left and consume material related to the Left and politics, I had a very broad view, I read about everything, about all aspects. I looked for various groups on the internet, watched several videos, and I found a strand that was more in line with my political notion. So, it wasn't me adapting to radical feminism, it was radical feminism fitting within my cosmovision. (Anne, 19 years old, Left)

Anne was looking for a political framework adequate to her views, which could explain her struggles in the world, as a Black woman, which she found in radical feminism, through navigating YouTube's political influencers (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Lewis, 2018; Rancière, 1992). Like those on the Right, Anne maintained her initial political orientation (on the Left), refining her political identification by engaging with political content on YouTube (Mouffe, 1992; Victor et al., 2016).

Political content can often feel tense and intimidating; after all, it revolves around the demarcation of frontiers and arguments around or because of conflicts (Hall, 1996; Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a; Norval, 1990; Schudson, 2007).

However, some of YouTube's characteristics make the access to political content on the platform particularly attractive. Maria observes how easy it is to follow the political content on one of her favourite YouTube channels:

What got me interested in *Brasil Paralelo*<sup>51</sup> was the easy, simple way of explaining what our Brazilian history actually was. They searched for historians, researchers to delve into the history of Brazil from its beginning until the current days, to show what really was our history, completely different from what is in the books and taught by the teachers. (Maria, 26 years old, Right)

This was in 2016, when YouTube had already been known as a space for Right-wing counter-publics (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Duque & Smith, 2019; Fraser, 1990; Rocha, 2018a, 2021). Through *Brasil Paralelo*, Maria had access to views different from what

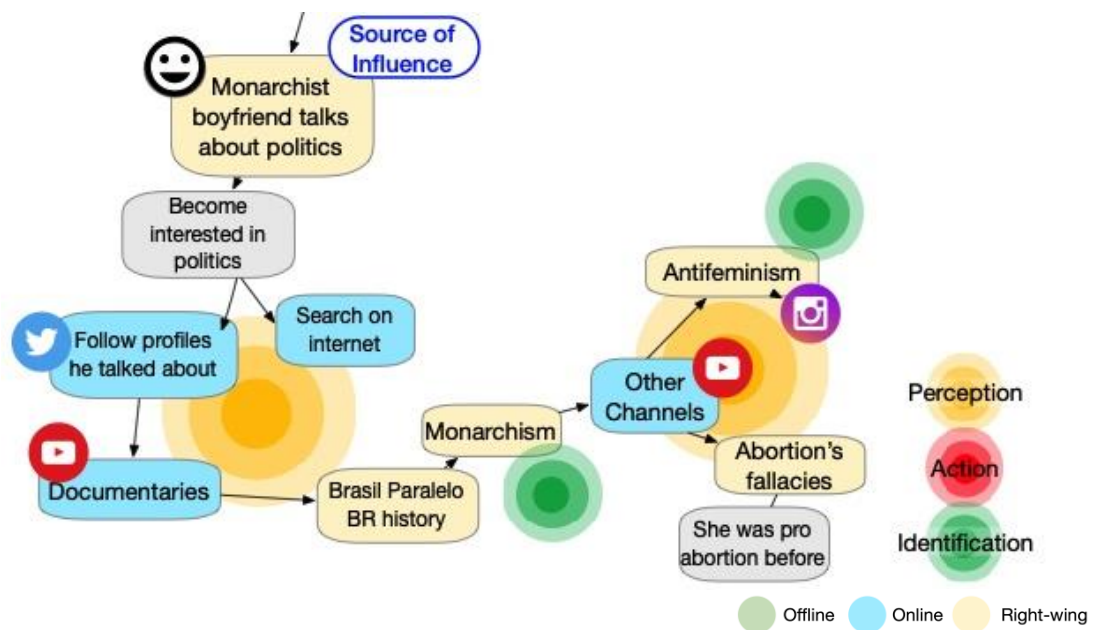
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<sup>51</sup> As of July 2021 the *Brasil Paralelo* channel had 1,800 million subscribers: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKDjeeBmdaiicey2nImISw>

circulated in the mainstream media and educational systems, which were in line with those of her fiancé. This way, she could learn about these political views through content that was easy to follow yet perceived as substantiated (Figure 7.4) (Lewis, 2018). Through this engagement, Maria constructed an identification with monarchism and antifeminism.

**Figure 7.4**

*Fragment of Maria's MPB – Perception*



Note. Source: The author.

*Brasil Paralelo* (Parallel Brazil) is a conservative YouTube channel and video producer created by students in 2016 (Brasil Paralelo, 2021; Zanini, 2021). The channel produces series and documentaries about Brazilian history and contemporary issues from a conservative perspective. Their videos can be considered revisionist, but the aim here is not to discuss their content but the form that this content takes and how individuals engage with it (Zanini, 2021). *Brasil Paralelo* is an example of a YouTube channel that presents itself as a political learning tool, offering an alternative view on historical facts and political theories (Brasil Paralelo, 2021; Zanini, 2021). Their website offers online courses and diverse materials for political education, most on a subscription plan and few for free (Brasil Paralelo, 2020). These political courses are a

common strategy employed by the political influencers observed in this research (Ana Campagnolo, cited later, also offers free and paid online courses on antifeminism), who make a living out of the dissemination of political information (Lewis, 2018).

As voiced by Maria, especially for those participants on the Right, YouTube's influencers are perceived as providing a better account of reality (Lewis, 2018). These participants share a belief that the media, educational and governmental institutions act in consort in the construction of an information *bubble*, preventing them from seeing the *actual* reality (Hochschild, 2016; Kreiss, 2018; Lewis, 2018; Rocha, 2021), as observed by Carlos:

I used to see something on the media, and their views were different. So, I exchanged ideas with my colleagues in the master's course, and we saw that what the media portrayed as reality was not entirely real. It was when I began to search for information, to see *beyond the bubble*. Today I believe that I am starting to see out of that bubble that was passed onto us. (Carlos, 32 years old, Right)

This understanding is found in counter-publics formed by citizens who believe that their ideas do not have space in the public domain, which is characteristic of groups in the Brazilian new Right and similar movements elsewhere, for instance, in the US (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Fraser, 1990; Lewis, 2018, 2020; Rocha, 2018b, 2021). As a portal, social media assist in the constitution of realities alternative to those made available by mainstream media and the public domain, contributing to the hyper-personalisation of the perception of political issues (Aagaard, 2018; Dennis, 2019; Lewis, 2018, 2020; Pybus, 2019; Reis et al., 2020; Rocha, 2018b, 2021). As *Figures 7.2, 7.3 and 7.4* demonstrate, for these participants, these alternative realities involve political influencers who use YouTube primarily to propagate their ideologies (Lewis, 2018, 2020).

Although YouTube is more prominent in disidentification and identification processes (Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a; Rancière, 1992), among those participants influenced by Right-wing discourses (e.g., Maria, Luciana, Carlos and Agnes), it can also be an important influence for those with a leftist orientation. Anne had been

influenced by her family and teachers in school, and had also attended a few Black women's meetings, but it was on YouTube where she began her identification path with radical feminism:

It was through YouTube's algorithms that I found radical feminism [laughs]. I watched a video from Carol about the sociobiological basis of the female oppression. I didn't quite understand it at that time. I had seen things about Black feminism and liberal feminism, but never radical feminism. So, when I saw her speaking about those things, it made me have an insight, you know? And I thought, "I want to study about it, maybe I believe in that." And from there, I watched other videos, started consuming books about it. (Anne, 19 years old, Left)

Anne was searching on YouTube for videos about feminism, and this particular video was suggested to her by the platform, in another illustration of composite intentionality (Verbeek, 2011): Anne wanted to see videos about feminism and YouTube constructed, with her input, a list of suggestions of what she might like, which included that on radical feminism.

Another of YouTube's characteristics highlighted is the format of the content (in video and audio), which seems to reduce efforts involved in the activity of information consumption, especially for those who do not have the habit of reading. Carlos observes how watching a video seems more attractive than reading:

I think that we Brazilians don't have the habit of reading,<sup>52</sup> so the audio fills this gap. It becomes much easier to consume information. Instead of getting a political book and read it, you type in there, and it all comes broken down for you. So, I believe that this feature came to fill a gap. (Carlos, 32 years old, Right)

The information is simplified and made more digestible, as opposed to a "political book." The content is "broken down for you," "easy," explained in a "simple way," as Maria said earlier. This perception reflects the strategies political influencers employ, following YouTube's codes and micro-celebrities' strategies to gain more attention (Marwick, 2016), combine entertainment and political ideologies to make political

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<sup>52</sup> Almost half of Brazilians (48%) do not have the habit of reading books (Failla, 2020).

information more attractive (Lewis, 2018, 2020). Content on YouTube is created “to be short and simple, to be watched quickly, easily, on any device, at any time, one video after another, after another,” different from older media’s logics (Gertz, 2018, p. 72). However, in the case of *Brasil Paralelo* and many political influencers, the videos can reach two hours, and the productions use dramatic soundtracks and effects, which make the content more relatable to entertainment (Lewis, 2018). Content on YouTube (as it happens with other social media) is designed to keep users on the screen for as long as possible, and successful political influencers know how to use the strategies that best suit algorithmic selection to increase their visibility in this competitive environment, such as emotion-driven content (Lewis, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Additionally, with YouTube’s search engine, it is possible to find information about specific terms and issues faster (Reis et al., 2020). Access to political content appears to be more direct: you “type in” (Carlos), and the technology compiles options for you (Reis et al., 2020). Individuals do not have to go anywhere to search for answers to their doubts about political issues. It is right there, most probably in their pockets (Papacharissi, 2010; Richardson, 2007; Verbeek, 2015). This observation points to two dimensions of the amplification of the personalisation of the access to political content: access is performed from the private sphere, individually, and the search outputs provided by YouTube (or Google, for instance) are tailored to the individual’s tastes, not only by algorithmic selection but also as an individual choice (Davidson et al., 2010; Gillespie, 2014; Just & Latzer, 2017; Papacharissi, 2010; Pybus, 2019; Reis et al., 2020; van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2008, 2011). The personalisation of political content is something that participants desire, which is strongly invited and reinforced by YouTube’s mode of operation (van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2011). YouTube invites users to engage in a personalised experience of the world, where they can watch political content specific to their tastes. By accepting this invitation, individuals assist in the constitution of a personalised media environment and become used to consuming only content that supports their political views.

Another dimension of the personalisation of the perception of political struggles is the materialisation of ideologies in the person of political influencers (Lewis, 2018, 2020; Reis et al., 2020). By acting as ambassadors for certain political views and identifications, political influencers translate the collective in the individual (Milan, 2015), by embodying political ideologies (Lewis, 2018, 2020). The participants who use YouTube as learning tools often mention political influencers as their core inspirations, like Maria, whose main influence was Débora Settim,<sup>53</sup> a monarchist YouTuber:

In the beginning, on YouTube, I watched videos com the *TV Imperial*,<sup>54</sup> Débora Settim, who is also a journalist and talks a lot about Imperial Brazil. So, I began to watch more didactic videos to begin to engage with these issues. I have a lot to study, but I began this way. (Maria, 26 years old, Right)

Political influencers are particularly prevalent among right-wingers but not confined to these participants. Anne, for example, was driven to YouTube attracted to political influencers promoting discussions about feminism:

I wanted to watch, to *see* these views. Reading is fantastic, but when you watch it, it seems that there is a bigger personification when you see how another person structures their views. And that was what I was looking for at that moment, I wanted to see how people interact with those political views. So, I went to YouTube in a short phase. (Anne, 19 years old, Left)

Anne describes the feeling of identification with political influencers embodying feminist views (Lewis, 2018, 2020). Anne likes reading, so it is not a matter of not being used to books. Watching a person talking and interacting with political views, embodying them, was more attractive at that time (Lewis, 2018, 2020; Milan, 2015).

Political influencers are not just *selling* their ideologies, “the creator is selling the creator” (Gertz, 2018, p. 123). Political influencers show how a given political

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<sup>53</sup> Débora Settim has a YouTube channel dedicated to the restoration of the monarchy in Brazil, with 26 thousand subscribers:

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoPoV8KHVhf1EY5xJw17e\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoPoV8KHVhf1EY5xJw17e_w)

<sup>54</sup> *TV Imperial* is a channel focused on content about the Brazilian monarchy and its promotion, with 143,000 subscribers: <https://www.youtube.com/c/TVImperial>



identification looks like. In this case, how a radical feminist looks like and interacts with her own ideas, providing viewers with a materialisation of political identifications, in a translation of the collective in the individual (Milan, 2015).

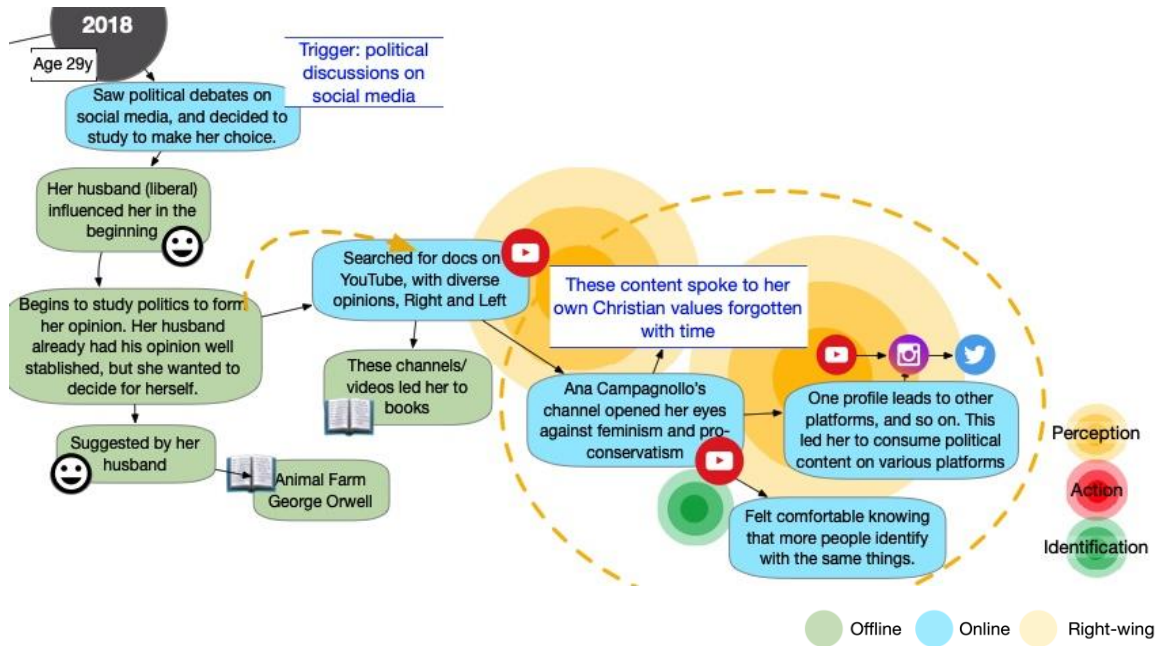
Participants want to see political views embodied in the individual (political influencers), with whom they can feel connected, like a family, who can validate their identifications (Hochschild, 2016; Kreiss, 2018; Lewis, 2018, 2020; Milan, 2015). This feeling of validation is observed in Luciana's comments on how YouTube channels helped her resume her Christian values (closely associated with Brazilian political conservatism) and feel comfortable with her conservative views (*Figure 7.5*):

It was a change and also a process of going back to my own values, which I had lost for some time. As a woman, I was frequently accused of being retrograde because of my Christian views, which goes back to my childhood. Then, the videos of Ana Campagnolo, and some books, opened my eyes to the issue of feminism. And like that, I began to see that not only I was Right-wing, but I was also conservative.  
(Luciana, 30 years old, Right)

By engaging with conservative political influencers (Lewis, 2018), such as Ana Campagnolo,<sup>55</sup> an antifeminist politician and author, Luciana found (and constructed) an environment where she felt comfortable with her conservative views, building an identification with conservatism and antifeminism (Hochschild, 2016; Kreiss, 2018).

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<sup>55</sup> Ana Campagnolo's YouTube channel, with 344,000 subscribers (in September 2021), is dedicated mostly to antifeminist content: <https://www.youtube.com/user/AnaCampagnoloBellei><sup>56</sup> *Folha de S.Paulo* is one of the most important Brazilian newspapers.

**Figure 7.5***Fragment of Luciana's MPB - Perception*

Note. Source: The author.

The significance of a personal relationship with political information is also noted by Carlos, who does not read newspapers or watch the news on the television but follows few journalists with whom he identifies:

CARLOS: The *Folha de S.Paulo*,<sup>56</sup> for instance. Although I disagree with much of the newspapers' content, there are few things that I follow. Augusto Nunes is a journalist whom I like very much because he is a person who demonstrates good sense.

PATRICIA: So, do you prefer to follow persons, journalists, over the newspaper itself?

CARLOS: Yes, certainly. There are some people with whom we have more affinity, and we search for affinity. And this changes. As you become more mature, these preferences change. Today I consume more Felipe Moura, Augusto Nunes, Alexandre Barros... on YouTube and Facebook. On Facebook, when I want to see opinions, hints, the written part. On YouTube, it is when I want more in-depth information in a way that is diligent. This way, you end up being aware of what is happening.

<sup>56</sup> *Folha de S.Paulo* is one of the most important Brazilian newspapers.

Carlos nurtures an affective relationship with certain political influencers and journalists but not media institutions (Lewis, 2018). He feels “affinity” with some people because of the way they communicate. As Hochschild (2016) and Kreiss (2018), access to political information involves a sense of identification with who is communicating and the media themselves. Participants seem to feel more engaged with political matters and ideologies when these are embodied by individuals, political influencers, whom they *watch* performing their political identifications and develop a certain relationship with, like a family (Bennett, 2012; Gertz, 2018; Hochschild, 2016; Kreiss, 2018; Lewis, 2018; Milan, 2015). Individuals are searching for affinity, a certain feeling of belonging, which is facilitated by social media when they allow users to follow communicators (Hochschild, 2016; Kreiss, 2018).

The relationship between social media and the personalisation of realities is further discussed from the perspective of individuals’ regular habits of political information consumption.

#### ***7.1.4 Accessing the Political #2: Experiencing Comfort Bubbles***

This section addresses another stability observed in how social media impact the perception of political struggles, their use to construct and experience what is termed in this investigation as *comfort bubbles*. In conjunction with social media, individuals create media environments where they mostly encounter views that agree with or reinforce their opinions. As demonstrated next, these experiences are changing participants, who tend to be less tolerant of encountering disagreeing views.

Social media are highly present in participants’ day-to-day engagement with political information. These platforms are the preferred and, for some, the only means utilised for news consumption (Newman et al., 2020; Yamamoto et al., 2020). Participants often associate this preference for information consumption on social media with a certain distrust of mainstream media, reflecting what was found by the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019, in which less than a half of respondents

(48%) indicated trusting in news overall (Newman et al., 2019).<sup>57</sup> Among the participants in this study, there is a common perception of the mainstream media as biased, although this sentiment is more acute among those on the Right (Lewis, 2018, 2020; Miguel, 2019b):

The mainstream media, to be honest, I think I follow a lot less. I haven't watched TV for quite a long time, and I don't listen to the radio. In general, the mainstream media is very sensationalist. (Paulo, 32 years old, Left)

Today I've become very sceptical of the traditional media, all of them, *Cultura*, *SBT*. It is very rare for me to watch any of them. I have perceived that they distort reality too much. (Carlos, 32 years old, Right)

From the shared view of reality offered by mainstream media, participants move to personalised media environments constructed by them in consort with social media (Just & Latzer, 2017; Lewis, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2011). This personalised media environment is composed of political influencers, chosen media outlets, specific content within these outlets, and content received through egocentric publics (Just & Latzer, 2017; Moores, 2009; Rojas, 2015; Sunstein, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018; Vromen et al., 2015):

What I watch from the mainstream media is on YouTube. There, I watch specifically what I want. If the minister of Economy gave an interview to *Globo News*, I go to YouTube and watch it there. (Aurora, 25 years old, Right)

The news I read is kind of pre-selected by my friends. What my friends post is what I read. I also follow pages that have a journalism that interests me, like *El País*, *BBC*, *Estadão*. Beyond that, trying to skip the mediation of the media, I also follow some government websites and few politicians. (Helena, 34 years old, Left)

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<sup>57</sup> There was an increase in trust in the news in the subsequent years, to 51% in 2020 and 54% in 2021 (Newman et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021). The results of 2019 are preferred here due the proximity with time of the interviews conducted for this study. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 is based on questionnaires applied in January and February 2019 and the interviews for this study were conducted between May and October of the same year (Newman et al., 2019).

The use of social media to follow certain persons or institutions is often associated with a desire for more direct information, not susceptible to the bias of media institutions, and thus perceived as more truthful.

With social media, the autonomy in information consumption is amplified, and individuals seek and exercise a higher personalisation of what they want to come across in their daily dwellings in these spaces (Papacharissi, 2010). Moreover, even within social media, some platforms seem to provide a higher personalisation, as observed by Paulo:

On Instagram, I chose what I am following, what I want to see. On Facebook, no, there are a lot of people there, many people I don't even know, so I come across many posts in which I have zero interest. Then, I have to block the person's posts, so I don't see them anymore. And on Instagram, if something appears there, it is because I have chosen to see it. (Paulo, 32 years old, Left)

Accustomed to this hyper-personalisation, participants become irritated by coming across information that does not interest them. As Paulo says, it makes him waste time, blocking the unwanted content/person from appearing again on his screen. Blocking or deleting those with contrasting views is a common experience lived by participants, impacting close relations, such as family, particularly in moments of sharp affective polarisation (Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019):

I deleted everyone on the Right. It was a strategy of mine. People say: "oh, you better have these people, because whom are you going to speak to if you delete everyone who thinks differently?" But seeing their posts made me sick and angry. And I thought that these feelings hindered my activism. So, I simply deleted everyone from my family who was aligned to the Right. (Helena, 34 years old, Left)

I unfollowed my godfather, whom I have always loved. But today I can't stand seeing what he writes. (Aline, 34 years old, Left)

Aline and Helena cannot tolerate seeing their family expressing Right-wing political views. It hurts them, makes them angry. Their choice is to block the sight of these divergent views.

These examples corroborate Bakshy et al. (2015) findings that individuals, more than algorithms, are responsible for narrowing down the information they are exposed to, illustrating the distribution of actions between human and technologies (Just & Latzer, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2008, 2011). Social media do not make these individuals avoid, block, delete or unfollow contrasting views, but these technologies facilitate and invite these actions, offering these options, and shape how they engage with information, including politics (Ihde, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018; Verbeek, 2011). If we can avoid challenging information, why should we waste our time with views that do not interest us? All we need do is to tap *unfollow*, *block*, *mute*, or any of the many ways that social media allow us to avoid information; then the irritating content disappears. The technology allows us to silence these annoyances and invites us to connect with things and people we love, as pictured on Instagram's slogan (*Figure 7.6*), not to people and issues we loathe or simply disagree with (Gillespie, 2014; Ihde, 2017; Rojas, 2015; Silveira, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). In doing so, we therefore become used to these *comfort bubbles* we create and choose to inhabit. These are not Pariser's (2011) filter bubbles, made *for us by* technologies, without our awareness. Comfort bubbles,<sup>58</sup> as conceptualised in this study, are spaces we craft and nurture with our own hands, with the assistance and invitations of technologies, seeking the comfort of being "close to the people and things" we love (Instagram, n.d.).

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<sup>58</sup> In a different engagement with the notion of comfort, Treré (2019) uses the term *digital comfort zones* to signify social media environments where activists feel safe and comfortable to speak about intimate issues, building a strong connection with their peer.<sup>59</sup> *Nação Real* is a monarchist movement organised to promote the restoration of the monarchy in Brazil. The organisation promotes educational initiatives to discuss the Brazilian history from the monarchist perspective: <https://www.facebook.com/nacaorealnews/>

**Figure 7.6***Instagram's slogan*

Bringing you closer to  
the people and things  
you love

*Note.* Screenshot by the author, taken on 4 July 2021 (Instagram, n.d.).

This is not to say that we do not seek the same comfort in our face-to-face interactions. Face-to-face interactions tend to revolve around clusters of shared interests, as Helena notices:

At the school where I work, everyone is Left-wing. In fact, in person, it's much more bubble than online. Online, I come out of this bubble because I see the comments on the news, and I'm like: "Oh, I didn't even know that this existed, that someone would say something like this." So, actually, my life is a bubble. (Helena, 34 years old, Left)

Potentially, social media would be places where we have more chances to encounter diverse political views, going beyond our lived bubbles (Bakshy et al., 2015; Bruns, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Paulo does this when he mentions, in Section 7.1.2, that he uses these platforms to access different realities (e.g., the lived experiences of lesbians or women giving birth). However, as we choose which realities constitute our media environments, the diversity we encounter makes us comfortable. It is a personalised diversity, one that we want. This diversity is a reduction of the already reduced algorithmic reading of the world (Just & Latzer, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018).

For Helena, seeing the political views of family members who voted for Bolsonaro, hurt her, made her angry, and even disturbed her political activism. With social media, she can block the sources of these negative sentiments, exercising the autonomy to enter in contact with the "opposing side" on her terms, when and if she feels like it:

HELENA: I go to these spaces out of the bubble when I think I can contribute with something. When I start to feel affected, I go back to my little bubble.

PATRICIA: Affected, how?

HELENA: Basically, with hatred and willingness to speak out this hate [*laughs*], when I lose control and start acting in a way that I disapprove. I know that hate is neither productive nor ethical, but I feel it often. So, the best I can do is to move away from what causes me this hate. I'm more productive in the bubble because there I'm protected from negative emotions. Then, I can strengthen my equals, multiply feelings of courage and hope.

Helena is conscious of her comfort bubble and that she deliberately contributes to its construction. That is what she wants. She knows how to burst the bubble or how to come out of it and do it sparingly, but this is a painful experience, as it elicits negative sentiments in her.

One issue with these comfort bubbles is that once they are narrowed down to our tastes (Silveira, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018), they usually limit our perception of the reality around us considerably. This distorted reality can have significant implications for democratic processes when this perception is about political issues. For instance, during the 2018 elections campaign, Paulo recalls that on his Facebook timeline, the candidate Ciro Gomes appeared the most, providing an illusion far from the reality of the polls:

It was all like: "Let's vote with Ciro, the PT is over, let's go with Ciro." Seeing our Facebooks, it looked like Ciro would win. There was only Ciro everywhere. Then, when the elections came, Ciro had no chance at all. And you think: "Bubble, bubble! Wow, how we are in our bubble, what a despair!" It is not that I thought that he would win, but I thought that the results would be much better. (Paulo, 32 years old, Left)

Ciro Gomes, who was considered by some as the best rival to Bolsonaro in the 2018 runoff, received 12% of the total votes in the first round of the 2018 elections, and the second and first candidates received 30% and 46%, respectively (TSE, 2018b). These comfort bubbles might feel comfortable and invigorating, but by nurturing them, we



face the dangers of ignoring significant changes around us and only finding out about them when it is too late, as happened with Paulo.

This section considered how social media's mediation amplifies the personalisation of the access to the political through five main interconnected dimensions. (1) First, access to political information is pursued through private mobile technologies, which enhance the embodiment of social media (Papacharissi, 2010, 2019a; Richardson, 2007, 2012; Verbeek, 2015). (2) Second, the experience of social media as portals (Aagaard, 2018) gives access to political struggles, which are chosen by individuals and technologies through composite relations (Verbeek, 2011). Social media acquire a high degree of transparency, preventing participants from acknowledging the technological transformation of these experiences. (3) Third, the experience of social media as learning tools through which individuals engage in personalised and private learning paths. This is driven by the previous two dimensions. (4) Fourth, the significance of political influencers in the learning paths they offer and the overall perception of the political struggles (Lewis, 2018, 2020). Political influencers embody political ideologies and projects, constituting themselves as a persona their audience can identify with. This way, the perception of political struggles is experienced through the individual (Milan, 2015), a political influencer who also functions as a model of political identification (Kreiss, 2018; Laclau, 1994; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). (5) And finally, there is the experience of comfort bubbles, the result of composite relations between individuals and social media (Verbeek, 2011). By offering mechanisms to quickly sort through and select political information and people who best align with one's political inclinations, social media assist and invite the constitution of a personalised *political world* that feels comfortable, offering little frustration or challenges to individuals (Verbeek, 2011). This experience can change individuals into political subjects who are less tolerant towards divergent views and people. The section that follows addresses how social media impact political becomings from the perspective of action.

## **7.2 Social Media: Spaces for Connection, Expression and Political Action**

The mediation of action guides the inquiry into how individuals act to support or challenge political struggles (Verbeek, 2011). Concerning the continuum of participation, the mediation of action is associated with the stages of connection, expression and action (Dennis, 2019). This section considers the mediation of action on political becomings by addressing four aspects of the impact of social media on how participants become present in political struggles. (1) The first addresses how activities inherent to social media, such as the acts of following and liking profiles, change what individuals understand by political participation. (2) Another significant social media invitation is the possibility of expression under different levels of publicity. Some participants prefer to remain anonymous in their political expression, enjoying a sense of enhanced freedom and a lack of responsibility afforded by the disconnection of their actions from their personal profiles (Chayko, 2021). (3) While most individuals prefer to make their political identifications visible in their personal profiles, by doing so, their political views become open to confrontations. These encourage the construction of substantiated arguments in their defence, an interesting contrast with the comfort bubbles discussed earlier. This process contributes to the strengthening of their political identifications. (4) The last part of this section examines political influencers as a mode of action (Lewis, 2018, 2020). Four participants have been inspired by political influencers and turned into political influencers who impact others' political processes and the broader political context.

### ***7.2.1 The Meanings of Following: Connection, Expression and Participation***

One of the most significant ways social media transform political becomings is by offering new possibilities of action and changing what participation in political projects actually means. For most participants in this study, following political pages and being part of online groups are considered forms of participating in the projects these profiles

represent (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). This is especially significant when looking at the experiences of individuals considered listeners, those who arguably engage in latent forms of participation (Dennis, 2019; Waeterloos et al., 2021) or are not even considered politically active by narrower definitions of political participation (e. g., Theocharis & Deth, 2018).

Maria is one of the participants considered in the category of a listener, which means that she usually does not engage in expressive forms of participation, such as posting political content or trying to mobilise others to political action. Nevertheless, this is not to say that she considers herself politically disengaged. For Maria, political participation is performed through the act of joining groups or following pages:

MARIA: I consider myself a monarchist. I participate in the *Nação Real*,<sup>59</sup> which is the monarchist circle.

PATRICIA: And how do you participate?

MARIA: I participate on WhatsApp, we attend events. But I'm not going to events now. There are pages, groups, Instagram. So, I'm always there wanting to know, not only about the news but also about Brazilian historical matters. I follow them mainly on Instagram, and on YouTube, there is also the *TV Imperial*.

Through these acts of following profiles on Instagram and YouTube and joining WhatsApp groups, Maria feels part of the monarchist organisation due to the successful embodiment of social media discussed earlier (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011). She might not express her political identifications publicly, with videos or texts, like civic instigators do (Dennis, 2019), but engages with the political organisation's content. Moreover, she can engage in expressive actions if she feels compelled to, in moments of crisis, as noted in Chapter 6 (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson, 2000).

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<sup>59</sup> *Nação Real* is a monarchist movement organised to promote the restoration of the monarchy in Brazil. The organisation promotes educational initiatives to discuss the Brazilian history from the monarchist perspective: <https://www.facebook.com/nacaorealnews/>

Furthermore, the acts of *liking* or *following* social media profiles are not invisible. They leave traces that others can view, becoming part of individuals' self-presentation, signalling possible political identifications to their peers and to those who engage with the same political projects (Papacharissi, 2011; van Dijck, 2013). Hence, following political profiles can foster sentiments of connection not only with the political projects they publicise but also with other followers who share similar views of the world (van Dijck, 2013). This connection can strengthen one's political identification once individuals find that their views of the world are shared by many others (Mouffe, 1992). Carlos notices how the connection with others impacts his political identification:

When you realise that what you are thinking is not something different, that it is something that others can relate to, you begin to see that what you are thinking has a direction. You feel stronger once you note that you are not hallucinating. Because there are other people who have other types of relationships, other lives, who turn out to think the same way, so your vision is not so distorted from reality. This certainly gives you more strength. (Carlos, 32 years old, Right)

Therefore, these actions invited by social media, to like or follow profiles, can do much more than influence the perception of political struggles. These actions can be experienced as ways to connect with others who share the same values (Dennis, 2019), express one's political identifications (Laclau, 1994), and participate in political organisations. The act of following acquires the meaning of participation. The next section deals with how the anonymity possible on social media invites a sense of freedom while inhibiting commitment and responsibility in political expressions.

### ***7.2.2 Anonymous Expressions: More Freedom, Less Responsibility***

Social media are constantly inviting users to express their thoughts through pictures, video, texts, and badges in a logic of visibility that contributes to the blending of personal and political expressions in the same online environment (Milan, 2015). The participants often feel the need to express their political identifications beyond the acts

of following described earlier, especially in moments of crisis, such as those events identified in Chapter 4. They accept social media's invitations to express themselves by exploring diverse degrees of publicity in their actions (Papacharissi, 2010). Some of the younger participants (18 to 19 years old) prefer to express their political views under the protection of anonymous profiles, due to a combination of lack of confidence in their own views and fear of threats (Chayko, 2021).

To openly express one's political identification on social media requires individuals to be prepared to engage in a relentless negotiation of meanings (Milan, 2015) and face some unwanted consequences, especially in times of heightened political polarisation when political views create tension and animosity among social relations, as observed in Brazil in 2018 (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019). Some participants voice concerns about losing friendships over political views and suffering from online hate. Due to this kind of fear, Maria preferred to remain neutral on her social media in 2018:

When people were discussing the elections in 2018, I showed myself as more exempt. I did not say whom I voted for. I said I did not vote for anyone because I am a monarchist. I was really afraid that my best friends, from 15 years, would get into arguments with me because of that. So, I preferred not to say it. (Maria, 26 years old, Right)

Fear can prevent individuals from engaging in more expressive forms of participation on social media, as in the case of Maria. Some participants create anonymous profiles dedicated to political expressions to bypass the apprehension of judgments and online aggressions and still engage in political discussions and actions to support the political projects of their choice (Chayko, 2021).

Unidentified profiles are also used due to a feeling of not having space to discuss their genuine opinions during their face-to-face interactions. Agnes, who is very shy and whose closest personal relations do not share her Right-wing views, found in anonymity a feeling of freedom that she could not find with her face-to-face interactions:

I felt a bit like a shrunken spring, I had no freedom to speak what I thought about politics at school and home. I was very afraid because it's not easy. So, I decided to create the page to be able to express myself without suffering threats. It is not personal. It is a page that does not have my name, does not have a photo, it is just a page. Nobody sees who is running it, not many people know. Until today no one has ever threatened me to know who I am. So, with the page, I felt freer. As I am shy, I would not use my personal profile to talk about politics, knowing that I would face threats. I feel better this way. I decided to do the page without my name, so I could talk about politics in peace. (Agnes, 18 years old, Right)

Anonymity becomes a way of experimenting with political expression with a safety net, guarding against online aggressions, unwanted confrontations with peers, and responsibilities for what is expressed (Chayko, 2021; Papacharissi, 2011).

Another way to engage in political discussions and avoid commitments, is by commenting on pages and profiles instead of posting on their own profiles. Bruna has an anonymous Instagram account, but she does not post anything there. The account is used solely for following profiles and commenting on them. This way, she feels liberated to emit opinions and make mistakes:

I almost always comment on the political pages I follow, and in the comments, I express my opinion. Because there I am the common public, I do not have the responsibility to actually know what I am talking about, I am not a person that people consider reliable, a serious person, a person who must be imitated. So, I have more freedom to say what I think without taking responsibility for it. (Bruna, 19 years old, Centre)

The above quote indicates that participants who engage in anonymous profiles are concerned with what they post and the traces they leave online, visible to others (Milan, 2015; van Dijck, 2013). One of the motivations for using secret personas is to be able to *like* or *follow* whomever they want without being judged by their peers. As discussed earlier, liking and following pages are considered significant acts of political participation, part of how participants become present to their peers (Papacharissi, 2011; van Dijck, 2013). Roberto remarks how the anonymous profile also gives him the

freedom to show his support for political profiles by liking pages, avoiding his friends' judgment:

I usually share news, memes, and some opinions about political issues, fighting some lies from the Left. I do that very much. *I also share and like content a lot. I show a lot of support there by liking posts.* I do everything that I couldn't do in my personal profile. There I would be heavily attacked. (Roberto, 19 years old, Right)

By using secret profiles, individuals detach their political expressions from their interactions with friends and family, who could potentially confront their views and even put their relationships into question. The unidentified profiles allow the construction of an audience around their political views and the interactions related to them, as opposed to the profiles centred on personal relationships, as happens with egocentric publics (Rojas, 2015). The result is an environment less susceptible to confrontations, although this is still present, where individuals feel more freedom to express themselves and experience a connection with others who share similar views of the world, as noted by Roberto:

It's amazing! I thought that my opinions were just mine, but there are a lot of people who think the same, who are on the same path. On social media, I saw that there are a lot of people who share the same ideas, which is fantastic. (Roberto, 19 years old, Right)

Anonymity gives these participants a feeling of participating in political discussions, and supporting the projects they identify with through posts, likes, and follows, without the conflicts or responsibilities that these actions would cause if performed under their personal accounts. Some participants, for instance, voice the view that one of the reasons for the anonymous profiles is to avoid legal actions, such as accusations of defamation.<sup>60</sup> There is still a sense of connection and participation, but

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<sup>60</sup> Lawsuits due to claims of defamation involving political issues seem to have become common in Brazil, as reported by some news outlets. However, no study demonstrating the rise of such actions could be found. A news report on the rise of this type of crime can be seen on: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/07/polarizacao-politica-e-fake-news-levam-onda-de-aco-es-por-calunia-e-difamacao.shtml>

with a lower commitment once their political expressions are not publicly associated with themselves. One of the participants, for instance, abandoned their initial political account months after our interview and created another one to start over from scratch, where the political identification was changed from *Right* to *no labels*. Another had just deleted their first account due to a fear of being sued for something posted on the profile. After that, they also began a new anonymous page. Hence, anonymity makes it easier for these individuals to experiment, make mistakes, connect and disconnect from political projects while also inviting a lower sense of commitment and responsibility for their actions (Chayko, 2021; Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2011).

### **7.2.3 Social Media as Potential Agonistic Arenas**

Social media are also experienced as agonistic or antagonistic arenas (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013). When individuals accept social media's invitation (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011) to make their political identifications public (Laclau, 1994), even if it is through anonymous profiles, these identifications become available to be challenged by a broader public. Citizens then, can experience clashes of "political positions" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 16), which activates them to engage in constructing well-founded arguments to support their views, contributing to the strengthening of their political identifications. From an interrelational ontology perspective (Ihde, 2009), we can say that social media can be experienced as spaces for agonist or antagonistic relations (Mouffe, 2000/2013), depending on how citizens construct these relations and which content informs them. This stability seems to directly oppose the comfort bubbles addressed earlier, illustrating the high multistability of these technologies, which can acquire very diverse meanings in participants' lived experiences (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017).

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<sup>61</sup> Aurora is a teacher, and Luciana and Anne were students at the time of our interview and did not speak about their political channels and profiles as an occupation.



In contrast to the experiences discussed in the previous section, most participants use their personal profiles on social media to demarcate their position during political crises, which often result in the confrontation of their views. These experiences of divergence open spaces for debates and encourage individuals to construct well-founded arguments to support their views, contributing to the strengthening of their political identifications (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2012; Mendonça & Ercan, 2015). Some participants are very aware of this process. Aurora purposely uses social media to display and defend her views, as a way to sharpen her political thought:

When you are in your circle of friends, inevitably, you all have the same opinion. The variations and disagreements are minimal. But when you go to social media and begin to broadcast your opinion, you're automatically open to someone coming to confront you in a way that you wouldn't experience in your circle of friends. So, in a way, the fact that I had a physical experience with my friends made me create an opinion, which I decided to express on social media. And, suddenly, some people confronted my views. In this confrontation, I had to defend my opinion, and consequently, I had to engage on the subject to build a strong argument. So, I started using social media to form my political thinking in this way, exposing my opinions and letting them be confronted. (Aurora, 25 years old, Right)

As Aurora observes, social media can be spaces to face divergence if we are willing (Bakshy et al., 2015). For her, the debates constituted exercises for improving arguments and polishing her political views (Mendonça & Ercan, 2015).

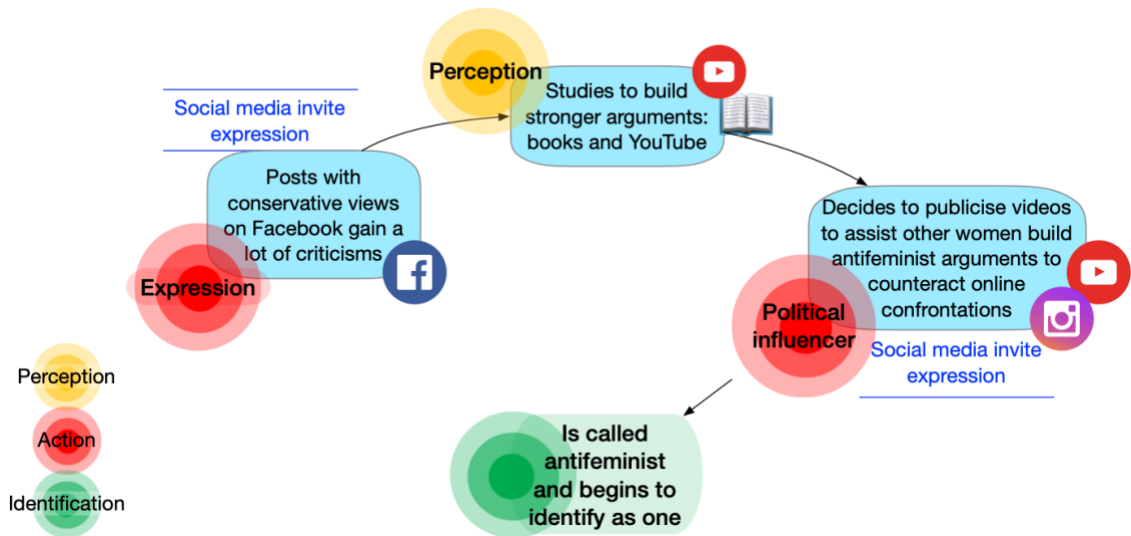
These confrontations are primarily observed in the experiences of Right-wing participants who decided to make their identifications public. Luciana recalls that whenever she expressed antifeminist views, she faced counterarguments and even swearing, which signals that these debates often turned into antagonistic encounters (Mouffe, 2000/2013). The adverse reactions inspired her not only to construct arguments to refute criticisms but also to engage in actions to publicise these arguments to help other women holding antifeminist views:

At first, the idea was not to position myself as antifeminist but just to have arguments to use whenever I was cursed for no reason. When someone comes and

says things like: “You owe your life and the air you breathe to feminists,” I just wished I could have arguments to respond: “I defend it because such book says it, because history says it.” But other women began to approach me, saying that they had faced the same kind of insults online. So, I began to feel the need to share these reasonings with other people. Because I understand that, just as a while ago I did not have much time to read a book, not one, several, to understand these views, many people do not have this time, or will, either. So I started sharing short excerpts of books, explaining why things are not quite the way they say. And then, automatically, this issue of antifeminism, it wasn't even me who called myself antifeminist, but they called me antifeminist and then I started to see myself like this. (Luciana, 30 years old, Right)

Luciana reveals how the strong disapproval of her views motivated the formulation of more substantiated arguments to counteract her antagonists and inspired her to act as a political influencer to assist other women facing similar issues (Lewis, 2018).

Through these actions, she constructed an identification with antifeminism (Laclau, 1994; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Mouffe, 1992) (*Figure 7.7*). Online confrontations can incite individuals to refine arguments (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2012), which is often pursued through the personalised private learning paths mentioned earlier. In the process of constructing well-founded reasonings, they practice and strengthen their political identifications (Mendonça & Ercan, 2015). Aurora also turned into a political influencer, with a focus on explaining monarchy, conservatism and antifeminism, partially due to the many questions she received online.

**Figure 7.7***Online Confrontations Inciting Action and Strengthening of Political Identifications*

Note. Source: The author.

Online debates are also part of the political becomings of those on the Left, but in their case the debates occurred primarily in 2018, in the months leading up to the elections. Citizens used social media to express their vote intentions, which were challenged by their audiences, inviting debates around political projects. Some participants took the defence of their political projects seriously, engaging in extensive conversations online, as narrated by Paulo:

There were hours of online dialogues, writing on Instagram, on Facebook, huge conversations. Always focusing on the idea, not being aggressive, not talking directly about the person, showing data, but 99% of the time nobody changed their mind. But it was nice because *it forced me to become more informed to enter the debates* and try to convince someone to vote differently. I engaged in a search for arguments because all the time there was some political debate, and I thought: "I need to read to know about these things." In the end, I think I didn't change anyone's mind through social media, but the experience functioned to enlighten myself and affirm my beliefs. There was an illusion that we could change people through Facebook, but it is very difficult. (Paulo, 32 years, Left)

Paulo's experience is quite similar to those narrated by Right-wing participants: the debates instigated a search for information to construct strong arguments, contributing

to strengthening his views (Mendonça & Ercan, 2015). Moreover, Paulo observes how these discussions often took the shape of one-to-one conversations, like micro-combats.

One characteristic of political discussions on social media is the availability of resources and the time to build arguments. On social media, one can build an argument by posting a link, watching a video and then coming back to the discussion, whereas, in face-to-face interactions, the resources are limited, and the discussions tend to be less heated, as Paulo notes:

It's funny because face-to-face is always tenser, emotionally, but it's always calmer. Like, the rudeness that usually happens online never happened face-to-face, you know? It was much calmer. I think it's more restrained, it's quite different. Because, also, on the internet you have that thing of getting information rapidly elsewhere, sending a link to the person and: "Look, do you see? I'm right." Face-to-face, you deal only with what you have, and then you perceive your knowledge limitations: "I don't know how to answer such thing." I think that face-to-face is more honest.  
(Paulo, 32 years old, Left)

Most participants did not experience offline discussions with their antagonists, and those who did, like Paulo, often voice similar encounters: less heated debates or avoidance of the discussion by one of the parts, dismissing the issue of politics. It is noteworthy that here, Paulo is thinking of social media in a non-transparent way, acknowledging the differences between interactions with other people lived face-to-face and those mediated by the technology. But at other instances, like when he talks about being present to certain social issues, like when narrating the beating of lesbians in London (Section 7.1.2), he has an experience of double presence, incorporating these issues into his life. This shows that social media's transparency acquires varying levels in the experiences of the same individual.

These experiences reveal that we are, in fact, usually exposed to divergent views on social media, as found by Bakshy et al. (2015). Or, at least, we can be if we allow for it to happen, as discussed in Section 7.1. The encounter with divergences seems to foster political participation, instigating individuals to read more about political

projects and engage in actions, such as publicising their views or turning them into political influencers (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2012). However, these participation processes tend to be highly private and personal. In their private spheres (Papacharissi, 2010), each individual engages in their own quest to construct better arguments through personalised learning paths and then publicises their best ideas to win the debates over their antagonists or support others doing the same.

Mouffe (2002/2013) contends that “a well-functioning democracy needs vibrant clashes of democratic political positions” (p. 187). Social media invite public expressions (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011), which can potentially foster clashes of political positions, but the battles experienced by the participants are not necessarily as democratic as those endorsed by Mouffe (2002/2013). This depends on their content and whether it involves an agonistic relation (between adversaries) or antagonistic (between enemies) (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013). Participants’ experiences with conflicts on social media are mixed on both sides of the political spectrum. Some of the clashes seem to involve an agonist relation whereas in others, such as between antifeminists and feminists, the relations are more relatable to one between enemies, where the opposing sides see each other as enemies (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013). According to Mouffe (2002/2013), to achieve an agonistic public space, necessary for democracy, it is necessary to move from the field of morality, because “when the opponent is defined not in political but in moral terms, he can be envisaged only as an enemy, not an adversary: no agonistic debate is possible with the ‘evil them’; they must be eradicated” (p. 189). This seems particularly complicated to achieve in the contemporary Brazilian political arena, once morality appears to be at the centre of most political discussions and identifications observed in this study. The following section examines the experiences of political influencers, important actors in the perception of political struggles and as a mode of political participation.

#### ***7.2.4 Political Influencers: From Private and Hyper-Personalised Perception to Private and Hyper-Personalised Action***

This section connects back to the private and hyper-personalised learning paths addressed in Section 7.1.3, which can be part of the beginnings of the participants' political engagement. However, this time we look at these processes from the perspective of the mediation of action. Political influencers are significant in the perception of political struggles and as a mode of political action invited by the logics of visibility of social media (Lewis, 2018; Milan, 2015). The analysis of political influencers from the perspective of action reveals another dimension of this hyper-personalised and private phenomenon: how individuals act like political influencers embodying political ideologies and expressing their political identifications to mobilise others (Lewis, 2018). These experiences are personal because they are centred on individuals, political influencers, and private due to the fact that these actions emanate from their private spheres (Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010). These dynamics are detailed below.

Political influencers are often associated with Right-wing ideologies, maybe because those on this side of the political spectrum have been employing these strategies for a more extended period of time and seem to be the majority on the Brazilian YouTube, as observed by de Oliveira et al. (2019). Nevertheless, political influencers are found across the whole political spectrum (Lewis, 2018). Most participants reveal having been inspired by political influencers at some point, and four have turned into political influencers themselves using social media as mobilisation tools to express and support political identifications while mobilising others. The political influencers are three Right-wing and antifeminist women, who all run YouTube channels, and one woman on the Left, who is not on YouTube and runs a profile on Instagram dedicated to Black radical feminism. These individuals accept social media's invitation to broadcast themselves, focusing on their political identifications (Milan, 2015). Their expressions are distinct in terms of content but very

similar in their goal of informing about political ideologies and influencing others to engage in the political identifications they represent:

A while ago, I realised that there was not much representation of Black women in the feminist strand I follow, which is radical feminism. This was utterly problematic for me because we live in Brazil, a country made of mostly mixed-race and Black people. For me, this was unacceptable. I said: “If I want to build a feminism with more Black women, I will build it.” So, because of that, I founded the page because I felt this need, I felt that no one was doing it, so I put myself in that place. (Anne, 19 years old, Left)

My channel is basically a self-criticism of the conservative Right. And I am seeing an audience who is more libertarian, but I also criticise, obviously, the Left. My idea is to provide them with another point of view, I present a libertarian ethics to them. (Camila, 24 years old, Right)

What I try to do on YouTube today is to rescue this conservative essence that I believe is in the hearts of all Brazilians [laughs]. (Luciana, 30 years old, Right)

I use social media for two purposes. One is to inform, and the other is to train people. My channel aims to inform people about monarchy, but also to train militants, on YouTube. That's my goal. (Aurora, 25 years old, Right)

Social media invite and reward the sharing of personal experiences, which these individuals accept by expressing their lived experiences with political identifications (Milan, 2015). By doing so, political influencers construct a community around them and the ideas they publicise (Lewis, 2018, 2020). The political influencers report receiving messages of how their public expressions help other people to live and construct their political identifications:

One positive aspect of the page is my contact with women. Every day, I receive many messages from young women, older women, adult women, talking about their experience and how knowing about social causes, feminism, and anti-racist issues, end up changing their lives. I think that's the most rewarding part because you realise it is a community service. Even though you are not there, physically, what you do influence and help people somewhat (Anne, 19 years old, Left)

I have a secret page where I post only antifeminist issues. I wanted to delete it, but I receive many testimonies of people thanking me for what I post, so I leave it there. (Luciana, 30 years old, Right)

Through the embodiment of political identifications, political influencers provide their community with a persona they can identify with and construct affinity with, as observed in the messages they receive (Kreiss, 2018; Lewis, 2018, 2020; Marwick, 2016; Milan, 2015). This process is seen as a service to other individuals, who begin their political becomings through interactions with political influencers. The activities of political influencers are usually highly personal, chiefly the three on the Right, who make extensive use of micro-celebrities strategies, such as ideological testimonials, live broadcasting and several forms of interaction with their audience (Lewis, 2018; Marwick, 2016).

One of the main actions performed by the political influencers is the translation of complex concepts and books into videos for their audience. Camila's YouTube channel is primarily focused on book reviews and discussions, often from a conservative or libertarian perspective. Luciana also extensively uses book reviews in her channel, highlighting concepts that help her antifeminist audience build arguments to counteract confrontations on social media. Aurora has introductory short courses about the monarchy and answers questions on Instagram about conservatism and Christianity. Anne discusses various academic concepts, authors and contemporary issues affecting Black women in videos and texts. By doing so, they constitute themselves as ambassadors or portals to certain political ideologies, replicating their own initial experiences with political becomings, as discussed in Section 7.1.3. The aim is to assist individuals in their journeys with certain political ideologies, facilitating their learning processes, as Luciana mentions:

I understand that, just as a while ago I did not have much time to read a book, not one, several, to understand these views, many people do not have this time, or will, either. So I started sharing short excerpts of books, explaining why things are not quite the way they say. (Luciana, 30 years old, Right)



By engaging with political views and explaining them to their audience, political influencers continue to construct and strengthen their own political identifications. After our encounters, Luciana has become more attuned to antifeminism, Camila has moved from libertarianism to a political identification associated with conservatism, and Aurora has become more engaged with conservatism from a Christian perspective.

An important consideration regarding political influencers is that it is often an occupation involving potentially relevant financial gains (de Oliveira et al., 2019; Lewis, 2018). When they reach a certain level of visibility (a high number of subscribers or followers), these individuals can earn financial compensation for their videos on YouTube (Lewis, 2018), form partnerships with publishers and other businesses, and ask for payments from their public or sell courses which support them economically. Thus, citizens also have an economic incentive to engage in this sort of political action. Of the four women involved with this political action, Camila is the only one who affirms that her occupation is to produce content for YouTube:<sup>61</sup>

I went to work on a TV, and one day they told me that I was going to take part in a TV program. And after having recorded it, I saw that I could do that for a living. There were people making money out of it, so why not try? I have always liked to write, and YouTube was already in ascension, so I thought I could make videos instead of writing. (Camila, 24 years old, Right)





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<sup>61</sup> Aurora is a teacher, and Luciana and Anne were students at the time of our interview and did not speak about their political channels and profiles as an occupation.

The earnings from political influencers can come from the YouTube Partner Program, open to creators with more than one thousand subscribers and over four thousand watch hours in the past year (Lewis, 2018). *Figure 7.8* shows the estimated revenue for the three political influencers with channels on the video platform. The revenue related to their activities can also derive from partnerships with publishers or affiliated links. For instance, Camila and Luciana use links to Amazon when suggesting a discussion of a specific book or in their reviews. Luciana has spoken in her channel about books received by publishers.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Camila also uses a streaming website, through which the audience can pay for her content, which is a common way for influencers to fund their work, as also found by Lewis (2018) in the US context. Another common source of income for the political influencers is paid courses on diverse political themes and paid study groups.

### Figure 7.8

*Estimated YouTube Revenue of Political Influencers in this Study*

|             | Subscribers Set/2021 | Estimated Revenue per Year |
|--|----------------------|----------------------------|
| <br>Aurora  | 10.000               | AU\$26 - AU\$429           |
| <br>Luciana | 21.000               | AU\$94 - AU\$1,517         |
| <br>Camila  | 70.000               | AU\$45 - AU\$734           |

*Note.* Source: Socialblade (<https://socialblade.com>)

Original values in US dollars. Exchange rate used: \$1 = AU\$1,38

<sup>62</sup> Amazon affiliate program pays up to 12% in commission to purchases made through their customized links. <https://affiliate-program.amazon.com.au/>

The fact that their possibilities of revenue are associated with the visibility on social media and the number of views their content receives invites political influencers to produce content that makes their audiences and algorithms happy (Gertz, 2018; Lewis, 2018). For instance, Luciana's YouTube channel used to concentrate on environmental issues, but it was not her initial idea.

In the beginning, the YouTube channel was not supposed to be about environmental matters, but it was what people liked more, so I went on posting more about what people liked to see. (Luciana, 30 years old, Right)

Moreover, the business model of social media (particularly YouTube) is known to respond better to controversial and shocking content, which could constitute an appealing invitation to political influencers to engage with such approaches to drive more viewers to their channels (Lewis, 2018). Other strategies include using drama, humour and very short videos, which could be consumed easily and faster (Lewis, 2018). This way, the expressions of political influencers, chiefly on YouTube, tend to be shaped by the platforms' business model, which invites changes not only to the content of what they communicate (addressing issues that gain more attention, as narrated by Luciana) but also to the form of communication: short videos, sensationalist headlines, and complex political discussions turned into light-hearted content (Lewis, 2018). What sells more is produced more. The following section discusses how these findings help us understand how social media shape the perception and action involved in political becomings, transforming the political subjects in this process.

### **7.3. Multistable Technologies, Multistable Political Becomings**

The analysis of how social media transform the perception and action involved in political becomings performed in this chapter draws attention to the highly multistable character of these technologies (Ihde, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). Most of the time, the political becomings on social media involve the private and hyper-personalised experiences, but they can also afford the engagement with divergent views

and the experience of agonistic or antagonistic arenas. This section discusses the implications of these dimensions for understanding how social media transform the perception and action part of political becomings.

### ***7.3.1 The Social Media Experience: Embodied, Transparent and Meaningful***

The comprehension of how social media transform political becomings begins with the understanding that these platforms are experienced as embodied technologies, acquiring high levels of transparency in the lived experiences of the individuals part of this study (Gertz, 2018; Ihde, 1975; Verbeek, 2000/2005). For this reason, this research argues that online political engagement should not be understood as less significant than face-to-face interactions. By embodying social media, participants experience what the technologies make possible for them in a meaningful way as part of their lived experiences with political struggles.

A clear illustration of the successful embodiment of social media is understanding the actions of *following* profiles or pages as more than a form of cognitive engagement with the political issues or ideologies (Dennis, 2019; Zukin et al., 2006). These activities, inherent to social media, are experienced as a form of participation in political projects. Participants feel part of political projects by following or liking political profiles and pages, constructing political identifications through this engagement (Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b). These acts of following pages or profiles can be individuals' primary or only means of political engagement, which does not make this engagement less significant in their overall political experience. The experience of political engagement is real; what is different is the shape they take through the mediation of social media (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011).

Moreover, the impact of this form of political engagement goes beyond the private and individual spaces, where they often happen once it informs participants' actions in public spaces (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010). Some might not express

their identifications, but these individuals can become quite expressive when feeling threatened, engaging in online and offline political action, such as joining online campaigns or attending diverse forms of protests (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson, 2000). What the evidence tells us is that following matters.

For this reason, this research argues that in the contexts observed in this research, the notion of *listener* employed by Dennis (2019) to identify those who display cognitive engagement with the political would be better expressed through the idea of *silent engagement*. The four participants who fall into the category of listener are not *just listening* to political matters; they are engaged with political projects on their own terms. By following or liking profiles and joining online groups, these individuals feel part of political projects, engaging silently with them. Moreover, following and liking political profiles or being part of online groups leave traces visible to others (to varying degrees, depending on the individual and the profiles' privacy settings) (Milan, 2015), constituting these acts as silent forms of expression. This finding leads us back to how the act of following Bolsonaro on Facebook prompted users to delete friends on the platform (Section 3.2.2.1). Bolsonaro's followers did not have to say anything; their traces revealed to their audiences their engagement with the politician, even if it was not the case for some.

### **7.3.2 Amplified Autonomy, Reduced Diversity**

The fact that individuals interact with political struggles from their private technologies (Papacharissi, 2010), accessing social media through a smartphone gives them a higher degree of autonomy to choose how and when to engage with these matters (Papacharissi, 2021). Individuals can include in their daily experiences realities far from their immediate surroundings, maintaining an engagement with the political struggles of their choice. This perception can be turned on and off whenever they wish. There are many aspects of this involvement that individuals can control, including becoming silently engaged or employing anonymity to detach political interactions

from personal profiles. Some chose to broadcast their political identifications, aiming to mobilise others, using their bodies to personify political struggles, and acting as political influencers (Lewis, 2018, 2020). There are many possibilities of interaction with political struggles; this gives the impression of a significant expansion of one's political world (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011), when, in fact, what is being experienced is the hyper-personalisation of micropolitical processes. Participation tends to focus on the individual and their needs. Even when participants enter some sort of political deliberation, these are not sustained over time, once they tend to lean towards antagonistic relations (Mouffe, 2002/2013); this is in great part because these discussions revolve around moral discussions, which are highly present in the Brazilian New Right (Rocha, 2021), the debates during the 2018 elections (Rennó, 2020), and contemporary Brazilian politics as a whole.

Although autonomy is seemingly enhanced, diversity is reduced (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011). Once individuals choose what, when and how to engage with political struggles, these technologically mediated political interactions leave little room for unexpected or challenging encounters. With social media, participants create environments with viewpoints and with people similar to them who do not defy their political identifications. Even when they search for diversity, it is a chosen diversity, crafted (and personalised) in conjunction with algorithms (Just & Latzer, 2017; Verbeek, 2000/2005). The construction and the experience of these personalised, mediated realities are leading us to become accustomed to comfort bubbles. Comfort bubbles are happy environments where we are not challenged, and annoyances can go away with the click of a button. This setting is changing political subjects into becoming less tolerant of contrasting views and debates.

Nonetheless, the highly multistable character of social media (Ihde, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a) also allows these technologies to be experienced as agonistic and antagonistic arenas (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013). These findings demonstrate that the meanings these technologies acquire depend highly on the

relations individuals establish with them (Ihde, 2009). These meanings also depend on the broader social and political contexts where these experiences are inserted. Once political discussions frequently revolve around moral issues in the Brazilian current political context (Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018; Tatagiba, 2018), when participants open themselves for debates allowing an encounter with divergent views, the debates frequently turn into antagonistic, rather than agonistic clashes, reducing the democratic potentials of these discussions (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013).

### **7.3.3 *We Still Need Identifications, But They Look Different***

The analysis of the phenomenon of political influencers (Lewis, 2018) from the perspective of perception and action reveals a cycle of personalisation: individuals increasingly rely on political influencers to perceive political struggles (Section 7.1.3), and some engage in such practices as a mode of political participation, to inspire others in their political becomings (Section 7.2.4). This dynamic testifies to the significance of the individual and political identifications on political processes lived chiefly in and through social media (Milan, 2015).

Although some argue that identities are losing importance in political activism on social media (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), this study shows the contrary: participants experience a sense of belonging and identification with political projects, and this identification provokes them to engage in meaningful actions. The evidence in this investigation is in agreement with scholars who argue that the construction of a *we* remains central to contemporary political processes happening in and through social media (e.g., Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2019). The political becomings lived by the participants revolve around the identification with political ideologies or groups (Hall, 1996; Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a). These individuals are in the process of constructing their identifications with certain ideologies, or they act to defend their *group* from the *other*, or to mobilise

others to support their political identifications. The notion of *we* is always present in the perception and action dimensions of their political becomings:

Today I consider myself a citizen who has more affinity with the Right. I believe that today I am more conservative. (Carlos, 32 years old, Right)

I found the *other side* so rotten that I had to demarcate my position. I felt this need very much. (Julia, 32 years old, Left)

I gradually began to identify that I was part of the Right. I was very conservative in many things and started to see that this was growing in me. (Roberto, 19 years old, Right)

I was able to see that not only I was Right-wing, but I was a conservative. (Luciana, 30 years old, Left)

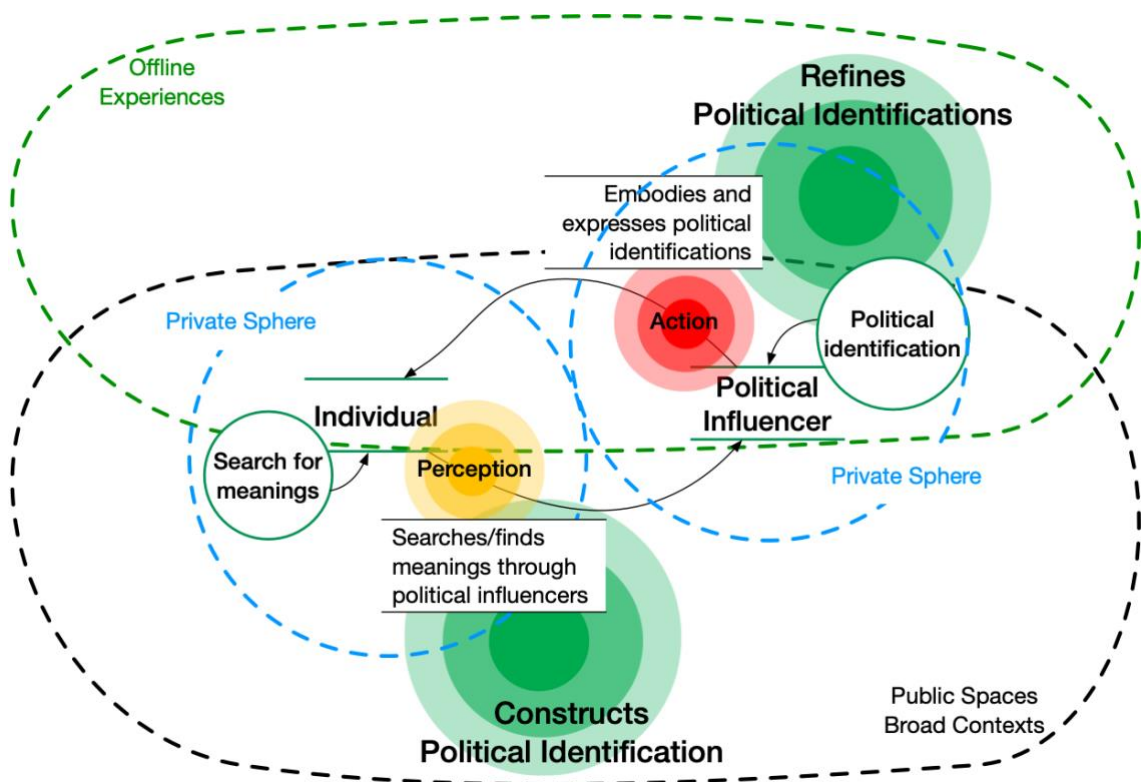
As Milan (2015) rightly observes, what changes is their shape. Under current media textures, the shared meanings that constitute political identifications are experienced through self-representations of individuals made visible on social media. In the political identifications lived through the logics of social media, “the group becomes the means of collective action, rather than an end in itself because the politics of visibility creates individuals-in-the-group rather than full-fledged groups” (Milan, 2015, p. 896). Individuals do not need to integrate *real-life* groups to experience the identification with political struggles; the interactions on social media contribute to “making meanings tangible” (Milan, 2015, p. 895).

The centrality of political identifications is visible in the cycle of personalisation experienced by the political influencers. Individuals search and find identification through the personas of political influencers who embody and express political ideologies and projects, as with the experiences of the four women discussed in Section 7.2.4. As illustrated in *Figure 7.9*, on the one side is the individual who embodies political ideologies and expresses their political identifications by acting as a political influencer (Lewis, 2018). As a result of performing the activities of a political influencer, these political subjects refine their political identifications (Dennis, 2019;



Laclau, 1994). On the other side is the individual searching for meanings to make sense of their contexts (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Mouffe, 1992/2013b; Rancière, 1992), which they find through the engagement with political influencers, which enables individuals to construct and validate their political identifications (Kreiss, 2018; Lewis, 2018).

**Figure 7.9**  
*Political Influencers' Cycle of Personalisation*



*Note.* Source: The author.

These experiences can be highly personalised and private. They are private because both sides (perception and action) often emanate from individuals' private spheres (Papacharissi, 2010). Personalisation involves two aspects. First, the search for meaning follows personalised learning paths (Section 7.1.3), and second the identification with political projects is experienced through political influencers, persons who embody political struggles and discourses (Lewis, 2018; Milan, 2015). Through political influencers, political struggles gain a body and a face via which individuals can develop a sense of affinity while constructing their political identifications (Kreiss, 2018; Lewis, 2020; Marwick, 2016). If following matters, then identifications matter even more. Additionally, it is important to note that these experiences are not only private, but also encompass public, offline and online involvements blended into individuals' lived experiences. As noted on various occasions in this chapter and Chapter 6, micropolitical processes involving social media are characteristically hybrid (Treré, 2019).

#### **7.4 Conclusions**

This chapter provided answers to the question of *How social media transform the perception and action involved in the political becomings of young Brazilians?* Social media is seen to shape the ways through which individuals participate in political projects in significant ways and acquire multiple meanings depending on users' contexts and objectives. First, social media have acquired a high transparency in most participants' experiences in this study. This finding indicates that for these individuals the experiences on these platforms have similar meanings to those lived outside these technologies. The high transparency has implications for perception and action (Ihde, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015b), transforming what it means to participate in political processes. Under this setting, following social media profiles helps individuals construct their worlds in such a way that issues far from their immediately available realities are experienced as part of their routines (Ihde, 1975, 1990), favouring a

meaningful engagement with political projects. The acts of following or liking mean not only cognitive engagement but are experienced as expressive forms of participation once these activities are visible to others, creating a sense of connection with other followers (Milan, 2015).

Another central finding in this chapter is the high multistability of social media regarding their uses in political becomings. Social media can be experienced to nurture comfort bubbles, protect oneself from divergent views, and engage in agonistic and antagonist arenas (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013), where political debates motivate participants to build strong arguments and refine their political identifications. Social media are also experienced as private learning tools, through which participants engage in personalised paths to learn about political projects, and also mobilisations tools through which individuals can act as political influencers (Lewis, 2018) who facilitate others' learning processes. These findings demonstrate that not only social media are highly multistable, but so are political becomings lived in and through these technologies (Ihde, 2012; Rosenberger, 2021; Van Den Eede et al., 2017). Political becomings can take varying forms when individuals engage with social media's multiple stabilities. The next chapter provides the conclusions for this dissertation and addresses the limitations of this investigation and possibilities for future research.

## 8

### Conclusions:

# Political Becomings: Multistable and Hybrid Experiences

This thesis has addressed a central research question and associated sub-questions which focussed on specific aims, including: to provide detailed descriptions of the uses of social media in experiences of political becomings; theorising how micropolitical processes are taking shape through social media's mediation exploring how postphenomenology can be utilised to investigate the implications of media technologies on political processes. These aims have been achieved by bringing together lived experiences descriptions (van Manen, 2016) of how the participants in use social media as part of their political becomings. The lived experiences descriptions constitute the foundational data from which this study theorises about the shape of micropolitical processes in the processes evident in the technological mediation of social media. The philosophical discussions constructed in Chapters 6 and 7 stem from postphenomenology assumptions, particularly interrelational ontology, which is the understanding that humans, the world and technologies mutually shape each other (Ihde, 2009; Ihde & Malafouris, 2019; Verbeek, 2000/2005).

This concluding chapter highlights the contributions of this investigation to the main fields brought together in this dissertation: postphenomenology, media studies, and political participation studies in the recent Brazilian political contexts. Before discussing these contributions, this chapter revisits the main conclusions derived from analysis of the empirical material, offering a synthesised answer to the main research question of this study: *How do social media shape young Brazilians' political*

*becomings*? This will be followed by a summary of the overall contributions and then a discussion on the study limitations, indicating paths for future research.

### **8.1 Multistable Political Becomings: A Mosaic of Human, Technologies, and World Relations**

One of the definitions of the term *mosaic* found in the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) is: “a pattern or picture made using many small pieces of coloured stone or glass.” This image helps to understand not only the data gathered as a mosaic of ideas brought together to answer the research question, but also the notion of political becomings as explored in this research. This section brings together the various pieces that comprise this dissertation, contemplating how this investigation has evolved from its main starting points and assumptions to the analyses that constructed the answers to the main research question: *How do social media shape young Brazilians’ political becomings?*

#### **8.1.1 The Becomings of this Study**

This study began as a quest to explore how a type of technology highly present in our daily lives, social media, is transforming the ways we engage with political struggles. This project began in 2018 when social media were at the centre of discussions about the rise of the far-Right to power in Brazil. Many asked then and now: would these technologies be the culprits behind this phenomenon? This dissertation originates from the wish to listen to the voices of individuals making use of social media in their daily lives to observe the impact of these technologies in their processes of becoming aware of certain political struggles and acting to support or challenge them, as many Brazilians did in 2018.

The desire to listen to individuals and examine their intimate relations with social media and the political realm directed this investigation’s theoretical focus to postphenomenology as an informing perspective to address the research question(s)

(Ihde, 1993a, 1993b, 2009; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). This focus on postphenomenology constitutes the point of departure and the main theme or thread that holds this study together. Coming from the field of media studies, this was an unexpected encounter full of discoveries (it is hard to find media and communication scholars engaging with postphenomenology). What drove this research to postphenomenology was the idea of understanding that technologies acquire their meaning in the relations we establish with them. From a postphenomenological standpoint, technologies, humans and the world find their meanings in their relations (Ihde, 2009). This relational ontology permits an openness towards the meanings emerging from the fieldwork, and underlying aim for this research. Secondly, from this tenet emerges another key aspect that makes postphenomenology fit nicely with this study, the notion of multistability. Multistability is the principle that technologies acquire different meanings depending on their contexts of use or purpose (Ihde, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). And thirdly, mediation theory (Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011), addressed in Chapter 2, offers a framework that directs the inquiries into technological uses from the dimensions of perception and action, which seems quite appropriate for an investigation of how social media impact experiences with political struggles. These main characteristics pointed to a fruitful relationship between media studies and postphenomenology, and the potential for it to be employed in this study. This thesis is the result of the experimentation with these two fields, which seem close but hardly speak to each other.

Another layer to this study is the specific human experience this research examines: an investigation of how social media transform the complex experiences of *political becomings*. To construct this notion, this research engaged with political theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Mouffe, 2000, 2002/2013) and political participation studies, chiefly from a social media perspective (Dennis, 2019; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010, 2021; Treré, 2019). The term political becomings was developed in Chapter 3 as involving political identification when individuals identify

with political projects constructing a sense of *we* (Laclau, 1994; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Mouffe, 1992/2013b; Rancière, 1992), and political participation, the processes through which individuals engage with political projects, supporting or challenging them, which can be mediated by social media (Dennis, 2019; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010, 2021; Treré, 2019). It is important to note that political identifications are constructed through participation in iterative processes of acting and becoming (Holland et al., 2018; Laclau, 1994; Marques & Mendonça, 2018). Consequently, this investigation also explored the operationalisation of this concept through the participants' lived experiences.

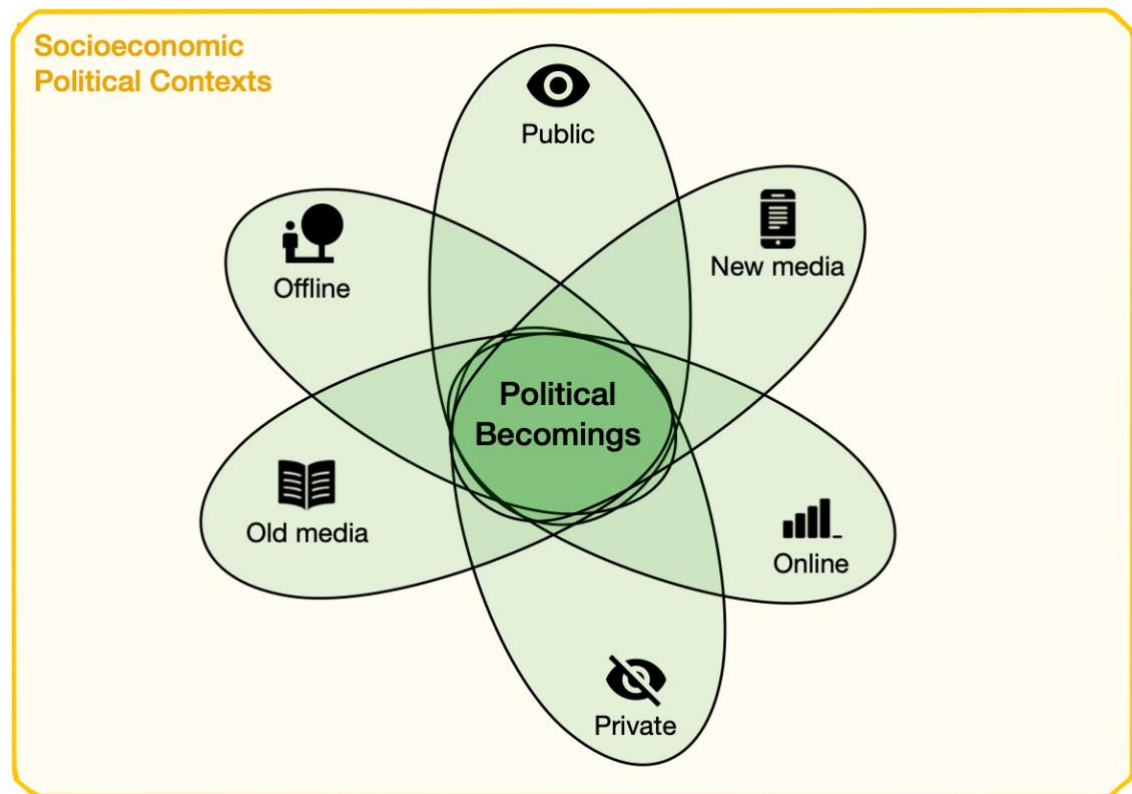
The concepts and theories mentioned above were examined through the experiences of young Brazilians, who have lived through the contexts detailed in Chapter 4. Brazil is an interesting case to study the implication of social media in political processes. First, the Latin American nation is the third in the world in time spent on these technologies (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020b). Second, from 2013 onwards, Brazil experienced a series of political crises, which coincided with the rise of social media usage in the country (Kingstone & Power, 2017b; Mendonça et al., 2019; Rocha, 2021; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). At the start of this research project in 2018, the levels of affective polarisation surged, as testified by the participants in this study, and much of the political conflict was experienced on social media platforms (Chagas et al., 2019; Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018b). The individuals listened to in this study provided accounts of intimate relations with social media and the political, assisting this research in the construction of a situated understanding of how these technologies are shaping political processes, aiming to gain insights into the broad picture (Haraway, 1988). As Haraway (1988) expresses, “the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (p. 590). This research is situated in Brazil in 2019 and, more precisely, in the personal experiences of 16 youth who share their stories in this study.

### **8.1.2 Situated Conclusions**

The examination of how social media shape young Brazilian's political becomings begins in Chapter 6, which considers how these technologies are experienced as part of these processes (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013). The political becomings observed reveal themselves as a mosaic in which the participants' experiences with other humans, technologies and the world come together in colourful and complex pictures. Social media are important pieces in this mosaic, once they shape how we interact through them and contribute to the construction of shared meanings, as when we begin to see the act of following a politician as an expression of political support. Nevertheless, we live many experiences outside these media, with our families, friends at school, and romantic partners, who assist us in making sense of our contexts, including our position in society and in connection to political struggles (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 2005; Zuckerman, 2005).

Personal relations, forged outside social media, are crucial to how the participants in this study are driven to certain political ideologies. None of the participants said they were compelled to participate in political projects from their private spheres only (Papacharissi, 2010); there was always a strong influence on their personal relationships forged outside these media (Section 6.1). All these pieces, offline and online interactions, in public and private spaces, with old and new media, are intertwined in the participants' political becomings, which are better understood as hybrid experiences (*Figure 8.1*) (Treré, 2019). We should of course be careful with technological determinisms that tend to ignore other influences, thus blaming social media for most problems of current political processes (Bruns, 2019). Hence, the first conclusion of this investigation is that the impact of social media on political becomings should be put into perspective, considering other sources and circumstances that can influence individuals' political behaviour.



**Figure 8.1***Political Becomings Lived as Hybrid Experiences*

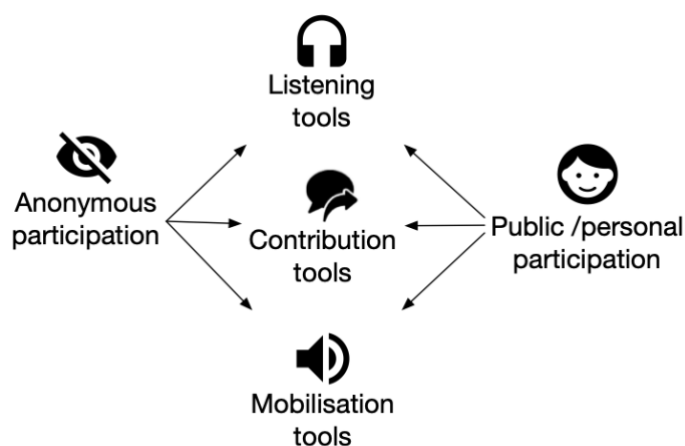
*Note.* Source: The author.

When social media are experienced as part of someone's political becomings, they acquire high transparency. They embody these technologies, immersing themselves in the experiences that social media make possible while overlooking the technological mediation (Gertz, 2018; Ihde, 1975; Verbeek, 2000/2005). The successful embodiment of social media has significant consequences for how we understand experiences with the political in and through these technologies. The main implication is that political participation in these technologies should not be understood as less significant than offline participation (Section 7.1.2). Acts sometimes considered insignificant, such as following political pages, acquire the meaning of substantial political participation and collective identification (Section 7.2.1). Political participation on social media is meaningful once they have significant impacts on participants' political identifications and behaviour.

Another aspect that permeates the findings of this research is the high multistability of social media (Ihde, 2009, 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015a). These technologies acquire diverse meanings, which confer political becomings with a multistable character, impacting various dimensions of these experiences. First, social media's multistability invites many modes of political participation (Section 6.2). Social media can be used as (1) *listening tools*, facilitating the silent participation in political projects; (2) *contribution tools*, inviting political participation focused on the contribution to others' knowledge; and (3) *mobilisation tools*, when they are used to mobilise others to act on certain projects, identifications or issues, and variations of these uses. For instance, there is the possibility of employing anonymity to use social media as listening and the contribution of mobilising tools, which changes these experiences by detaching personal profiles and networks from political participation (Figure 8.2). Once all these uses are available to individuals within the same technology, switching between them becomes easier, which can therefore contribute to individuals experimenting with diverse modes of participation. In this way, political becomings acquire a multistable character.

**Figure 8.2**

*Social Media's Stabilities: Modes of Participation*

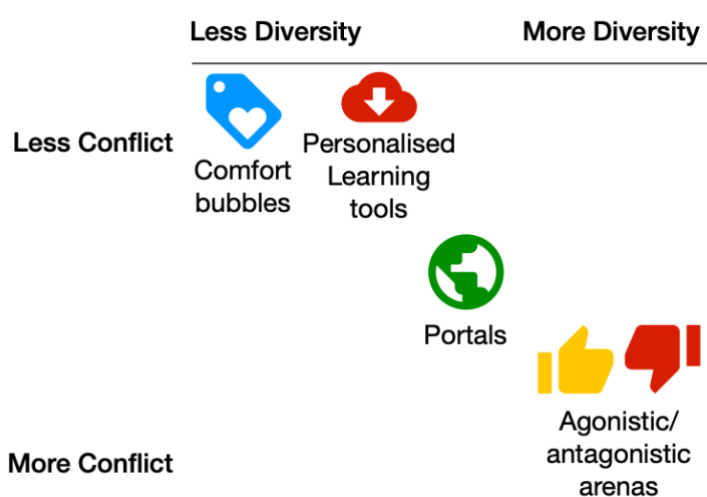


Note. Source: The author.

Social media's multistabilities often invite and facilitate opposing types of experience with political struggles (*Figure 8.3*). These stabilities can be experienced by the same individual, in different circumstances, depending on what they want. Social media can be experienced as *portals* (Aagaard, 2018), giving access to realities far from participants' surroundings and expanding their perception of political struggles (Section 7.1.2). This is a chosen diversity, limited by a combination of human and technological intentionalities (Just & Latzer, 2017; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2008), but it usually permits the contact with contrasting views.

### Figure 8.3

*Social Media's Stabilities: More or Less Exposure to Conflict*



*Note.* Source: The author.

Moving to more personalised and private involvements, social media can also be experienced as *personalised learning tools*, when participants engage in private learning paths to deepen their knowledge of the political views of their choices (Section 7.1.3); and *comfort bubbles*, where users choose to interact mostly with people and ideas they love while blocking divergent interactions (Section 7.1.4). These comfort bubbles are invited by social media but created and nurtured by their users, who feel better protected from views that cause them to feel hurt or hatred. These stabilities demonstrate how social media can facilitate the co-constitution of a world that suits

individuals' political views, where the chances of confrontations can be diminished by users as they wish.

In contrast, social media can also be experienced as *agonistic/antagonistic arenas*, serving as spaces for clashes of ideas and identifications (Section 7.2.3). When individuals publicise their political identifications on social media, these expressions often invite debates, which can happen between people with contrasting views, provided that these divergent persons have not been blocked from one's profile. Some participants use these debates to build well-rounded arguments, refining their political identifications. The discussions can involve an agonistic relation (between adversaries) or an antagonistic relation (between enemies) (Mouffe, 2000, 2000/2013).

The stabilities mentioned above demonstrate that social media can be experienced as comfortable environments where individuals encounter mostly similar views or arenas for political clashes. The key is that these behaviours are not determined by the technology but invited and facilitated by social media (Verbeek, 2011). What drives participants to certain uses of social media is their particular circumstances, the context, the content of the interactions, or the ability to face (or not) divergences and enter into debates. Due to the current Brazilian political environment, where many political discussions and identifications revolve around moral issues (Kalil, Kalil, et al., 2018; Tatagiba, 2018), there is a tendency toward antagonistic discussions (Mouffe, 2002/2013). Antagonism, the perception of the other as an enemy or threat, is one of the reasons for participants to turn to the comfort bubbles mentioned earlier. As Mouffe (2002/2013) affirms, when political opponents are defined in moral terms, as the evil, there is no room for agonist debates. The evil must be destroyed or, at least, blocked from one's timeline. Hence, the issue seems more about how we deal with the political as a whole (Bruns, 2019).

A further aspect of the impact of social media on political becomings is the significance of the individual. Collective meanings and identifications tend to be expressed and lived through individuals and individual acts (Milan, 2015; Papacharissi,

2010). This is particularly observable in the phenomenon of political influencers, individuals who act as political ideologies ambassadors, embodying political identifications (Lewis, 2018, 2020). Political influencers function as points of identification for individuals who, from their private spheres (Papacharissi, 2010), can observe how certain political identifications *look like* when embodied by other persons. Political influencers construct a sense of affinity with their public, mixing personal and political in their performances, contributing to the personalisation of political struggles (Lewis, 2018, 2020).

In conclusion, *How do social media shape young Brazilians' political becomings?* Social media transform political becomings into multistable experiences, allowing individuals to get involved with the political in multiple non-exclusive ways, some more expressive, others more silent, some more public, others more private. Moreover, social media tend to amplify the significance of the individual (Milan, 2015), who enjoys increased autonomy in the engagement with the political (Papacharissi, 2021): the individual searching for meanings, the individual who chooses to engage in political clashes of comfort bubbles, the individual expressing collective identifications and projects, the individual who constructs collective identifications from their private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). At the same time, political becomings are experienced as a search for becoming a *we* (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Hall, 1996; Marques & Mendonça, 2018; Milan, 2015; Mouffe, 1993/2005, 1992/2013a; Treré, 2019). There is a yearning for belonging and perceiving oneself as part of a group with a shared understanding of the world, even if this feeling of belonging emerges from private screens. Although, as the result of a phenomenological investigation, this answer cannot be generalised to the Brazilian population (van Manen, 2016), it illuminates some of the complexities involved in political becomings assisting in understanding how these experiences might be lived.

## **8.2 Contributions of this Research**

This section details how this research contributes to the fields it dialogues with: political participation studies and the recent Brazilian political contexts, postphenomenology and social media studies. Although these discussions are grouped by subjects, some contributions can be valuable for more than one field.

### ***8.2.1 Contributions for Political Participation Studies and Understandings of the Recent Brazilian Political Contexts***

This dissertation contributes to political participation studies by providing an analysis of social media as co-constitutive (Gertz, 2018; Verbeek, 2000/2005, 2011) of political behaviour. Incorporating postphenomenology into political participation studies demonstrates how technologies contribute to the transformation of political behaviour, comprising a shared accountability in the shaping of political participation. In this sense, social media are not merely tools used by citizens to achieve some goals. These technologies, and others that might arise in the future, transform what it means to participate in political processes. This is observed when, for example, following political profiles acquire the meaning of political support, or in the emergence of political influencers (Lewis, 2018, 2020) who mobilise others through their private spheres (Papacharissi, 2010) on YouTube or Instagram, constituting themselves into powerful sources of inspiration for political identifications and actions.

A further contribution is the reinforcement of the significance of latent forms of participation in current political processes (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson, 2000; Waeterloos et al., 2021). By disregarding these participation modes, we close our eyes to important processes happening in society, which sooner or later become apparent. Given that social media are experienced as embodied and highly transparent technologies, acts like following political pages and profiles and joining online groups can be experienced by individuals as meaningful acts of participation in political projects. For this reason, this research suggests that the

notion of *listener* employed by Dennis (2019) to identify those who display latent engagement would be better expressed through the idea of *silent engagement*. This is because individuals who demonstrate this behaviour feel part of political projects, engaging silently with them. Moreover, following or liking political profiles leaves traces visible to others (Milan, 2015), which can be seen as silent forms of expression.

Another contribution of this study is the conception of political becomings, which can be operationalised to demonstrate the significance of political identification in political participation. A current debate in political participation research involving social media is the arguable decline of the importance of collective identification in these processes (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). The notion of political becomings developed in this study demonstrates, theoretically and empirically, that identification with political projects is at the centre of experiences with political participation. This contribution is consistent with what has been argued, for instance, by Gerbaudo and Treré (2015); Marques and Mendonça (2018); Milan (2015); and Treré (2019).

Additionally, this study contributes to a partial understanding of citizens' experiences with political identification and participation in the recent Brazilian context. There is a growing body of research trying to comprehend the *Brazilian turn to the Right* (e.g., Dias et al., 2021; Duque & Smith, 2019; Miguel, 2018; Nicolau, 2020; Rocha, 2018a; Solano Gallego, 2018; von Bülow, 2018) and the role of social media in this process (e.g., Mendonça et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2019; Soares et al., 2019; Vieira-Magalhães, 2019). This study provides accounts that reveal some of the nuances of the political becomings lived by young Brazilians in recent years, focusing on how social media shape these experiences. A distinctive contribution of this research is the discussion of the experiences of citizens identified with the Left and Right poles of the political spectrum in the same investigation, providing insights into their similarities and contrasts.

### **8.2.2 Contributions for Social Media Studies**

This research contributes to social media studies by demonstrating that postphenomenology can be a valuable framework to study interactions with these technologies. Postphenomenology opens avenues to explore the significance that these media acquire in daily experiences when, for instance, we consider social media as embodied technologies, which change how we understand the actions lived in and through these platforms (Ihde, 1990, 2012; Verbeek, 2020a, 2020b; Warfield, 2021). Postphenomenological frameworks can be particularly valuable in the analysis of new media, once these technologies are becoming increasingly closer to human bodies; see, for instance, the smart glasses launched recently by Facebook. Furthermore, the mediation theory, as theorised by Verbeek (2000/2005, 2011), supports a detailed examination of how social media transform perception and action.

This thesis has argued against deterministic views on how social media impact political processes, demonstrating that studies about these technologies should consider the contexts and circumstances of individuals involved in the observed experiences (Bruns, 2019). Experiences on social media are not detached from other involvements, which can significantly affect why and how individuals behave in a given way and make certain choices on these platforms.

### **8.2.3 Contributions for Postphenomenology**

This study employed postphenomenology in investigating a complex dimension of human experience (political becomings) lived in and through a multifaceted, highly multistable and multi-layered technology: social media. By doing that, this dissertation tests postphenomenology, making connections with media and political studies, contributing to the diversity of applications of this philosophy of technology in investigations of social media (Warfield, 2021). This is significant because the practice of postphenomenology for the study of social media, with the use of empirical data, is not very common, as has been observed, for instance, by Adams and Turville (2018)



and Aagaard (2015). This investigation contributes to postphenomenology by demonstrating new possible applications of this framework, and by employing postphenomenology in a study of the use of social media for political purposes, it demonstrates its applicability for revealing the significance of technologies on political processes, dialoguing with Verbeek's (2020b) political hermeneutics of technology.

In addition, as an exercise of the postphenomenology of practice proposed by Adams and Turville (2018), this research demonstrates that postphenomenological studies can benefit from employing in-depth interviews to construct lived experience descriptions with technologies. This method provided this investigation with diverse accounts of the use of social media as part of political becomings, revealing multiple and unexpected technological stabilities (Aagaard, 2015).

An interesting and revealing aspect is the experiment with a method to visualise the interviews, and the associations participants make between technologies and their experiences with political becomings: the maps of political becomings. This method has the potential of being further developed for applications to postphenomenological studies; but it does need a framework for the visualisation of where the technology stands in the participant's experience in terms of perception and action, and what it makes possible, amplifies, constrains, invites, or inhibits, for example. It needs some refinement, but this method could be a starting point for future work. Additionally, this method can also be helpful for media studies employing a non-media-centric approach (Markham & Rodgers, 2017; Moores, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013), once it makes it possible to visualise involvements with media as part of broader experiences.

### **8.3 Limitations and Future Research**

This section addresses the limitations of this investigation and suggests paths for future research. A limitation, which posed a challenge but also opened doors for other contributions, was the lack of empirical research associating postphenomenology with the study of social media, particularly their uses for political interaction. This limitation

stimulated a need to explore unknown avenues and associations, which slowed the research process substantially and resulted in an explorative work rather than a more focused, philosophical analysis. This outcome has ambiguous implications. On the one hand, the wide scope means that the philosophical analyses are not as deep as they could be, as in for example providing a more detailed analysis of the stabilities and exploring their many implications. On the other hand, broad-based research can function as a map of possibilities to be utilised for future research.

Another limitation refers to the complexity of the experience of political becomings. It took considerable time in the interviews to grasp the meanings of these experiences in their entirety and reach discussions that would lead to experiential accounts of the technological mediation. Consequently, sometimes the interviews did not focus enough on the mediation of perception and action involved in the political becomings. To address this limitation, some participants were contacted after the interviews with follow-up questions, but this is not always ideal. This type of research would benefit from at least two encounters with participants. This way, the second encounter could be used to focus on more detailed aspects of the experiences narrated in the first interview. However, this strategy could pose other challenges, such as finding participants willing to commit to more than one encounter. Additionally, the focus on a more specific dimension of political behaviour, such as how individuals use social media to express political identifications or to mobilise others, could facilitate the whole research process.

A further methodological limitation of this study is the restricted use of social media observation as part of the construction of the empirical data. A combination of in-depth interviews and observation of the social media behaviours of the participants would have provided more details for the postphenomenological analysis. The interviews could be conducted after a preliminary observation of the participant's main social media. This observation would potentially reveal moments that could be expanded by the participant during the interviews. In this case, the number of

participants should be limited to about ten individuals to allow a more detailed analysis of their behaviours through social media's observations and multiple encounters, as previously noted.

Future research could continue to explore postphenomenology as a framework to study social media in varied dimensions of human experience (Van Den Eede et al., 2017; Warfield, 2021). As mentioned earlier, it is rare to find media scholars engaging with postphenomenology, and many possibilities could be explored, or questions raised in association with media theories. For instance, could postphenomenology and media practice theory (Couldry, 2004) be associated with exploring media experiences? Once both understand technologies/media acquiring meanings through their uses, could they enrich each other?

For postphenomenologists, social media and political interactions constitute a rich field for investigation. More research could be done on political influencers, who are highly influential in citizens becoming aware of political ideologies and constructing political identifications. Political influencers are also a mode of political participation inherent to social media. By using these technologies as mobilisation tools, political influencers shape their content to fit algorithms, aiming to reach the maximum number of people. This transformation affects not only the shape of their messages (e.g., the choice for short videos, images showing their faces) but also the content itself, once the instantaneous feedback on what viewers most like directs them to talk about issues that get more attention. This means that a small number of large global corporations significantly influence the political discussions facilitated by political influencers. This research taps into this phenomenon, but a detailed analysis of the work of political influencers and their impact on how the younger generation is becoming engaged with the political would be an important contribution to understanding the contemporary political process. This research path can also be interesting for political participation scholars.

## **8.4 Conclusion**

This study set out to unpack and understand the role of social media in the complex experience of political becomings in a turbulent time in Brazil, when the political scenario changed quite dramatically, and many scholars and citizens were and still are searching for answers. This research contributes to these discussions with a situated account of experiences of political becomings lived in and through social media.

The concluding message that this dissertation offers is that we need to observe and constantly reflect on how newer technologies are transforming how we experience the world, while also changing ourselves. However, while doing this, we must not overlook human accountability. As guns and people, together, kill people, citizens and social media are responsible for the phenomena we see flourishing in and through these platforms. At the same time, as social media become increasingly transparent, the tendency is for people to overlook how they transform the experience of the world, grounding their choices on misleading perceptions. For this reason, we need to invest in critical digital literacy, especially for the younger generations growing with and on these platforms, shedding light on the ways that social media transform human experience as a way of learning to live well with these technologies.

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# Appendices

## Recruitment Strategies

### Appendix A

#### Research's Publicising Strategies

##### Figure A1

##### Research's Blog on WordPress



Note. From *Pesquisa Política e Internet* (<https://pesquisapoliticadigital.wordpress.com/>). (Ferreira-Alves, 2019). Screenshot by author.

##### Figure A2

##### Research's Facebook Page



Note. From @[pesquisapoliticaeinternet](https://www.facebook.com/pesquisapoliticaeinternet) (<https://www.facebook.com/pesquisapoliticaeinternet>). (Pesquisa Política e Internet, 2019). Screenshot by the author.

**Figure A3***Research's Instagram's page*

*Note.* From @pesquisa\_internetpolitica. (Pesquisa Internet e Política, 2019).  
Screenshot by the author.

**Figure A4***Leaflet: Research Political Formation and Social Media*


*Note.* Translation to English:  
What is the role of social media in your political formation?  
PhD research in Communication  
Researcher WhatsApp  
Research's Instagram and Facebook pages  
Researcher's UTS email  
QR code for the survey.

## Appendix B

### *Paid Ads on Instagram and Facebook*

**Table B1**

#### *General Report of Instagram and Facebook Paid Ads*

|  Facebook and Instagram Ads Report |  |                   |                           |                    |           |           |
|---|--|-------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Ad ID   | Campaign name  | Reach             | Amount spent (BRL)        | Unique link clicks | Starts    | Ends      |
| 6122405812943   | Post: "Você sabia que o Brasil é o SEGUNDO país no mundo..." | 0                 | 0.00                      |                    | 20-May-19 | 26-May-19 |
| 6122404699743   | Post: "Como os jovens estão usando as novas mídias para..."  | 14,164            | 100.00                    | 144                | 20-May-19 | 25-May-19 |
| 6126375848543   | Instagram Post   | 9,086             | 100.00                    |                    | 27-Jun-19 | 01-Jul-19 |
| 6131468396143   | Publicação do Instagram: A Internet é parte do...            | 14,888            | 18.61                     | 24                 | 17-Aug-19 | 22-Aug-19 |
| 6131536098543   | Publicação do Instagram: Como você usou as redes...          | 0                 | 0.00                      |                    | 18-Aug-19 | 21-Aug-19 |
| 6138307200543   | Instagram post: Ainda da tempo de participar....             | 0                 | 0.00                      |                    | 18-Oct-19 | 20-Oct-19 |
| 6138307201943   | Instagram post: Ainda da tempo de participar....             | 0                 | 0.00                      |                    | 18-Oct-19 | 20-Oct-19 |
| 6138306959143   | Instagram post: Coleta dos dados chegando ao fim....         | 2,494             | 5.57                      | 6                  | 18-Oct-19 | 21-Oct-19 |
| 6138306958143   | Instagram post: Coleta dos dados chegando ao fim....         | 48                | 0.96                      |                    | 18-Oct-19 | 21-Oct-19 |
| 6138806490943   | Instagram post: Quer participar desse estudo?...             | 8,480             | 26.00                     | 58                 | 21-Oct-19 | 23-Oct-19 |
| 6138806489943   | Instagram post: Quer participar desse estudo?...             | 90                | 2.00                      | 1                  | 21-Oct-19 | 23-Oct-19 |
| Total: 11 Ads   |  | 401,288<br>People | R\$ 851.84<br>Total Spent | 934<br>Total       |           |           |

*Note:* According to Facebook metrics, *Reach* refers to the number of people who entered in contact with the adverts, according to Facebook metrics and *Unique link clicks* refers to the estimated number of people who performed a link click on the advert (Facebook, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).



## Examples of Paid Ads on Instagram

### Figure B1

Post Published on 14 May 2019 on Instagram



Note. Translation to English:

How are we using the Internet and social media to inform our political choices?  
Screenshot by the author.

### Figure B2

Post Published on 5 June 2019 on Instagram



Note. Translation to English:

What is the role of social media in our political formation? Doctorate research, confidential and anonymous. Join in!  
Screenshot by the author.

### Figure B3

Post Published on 13 July 2019 on Instagram



Note. Translation to English:

Social Media and political formation. How do you use? Join here!  
Screenshot by the author.

**Table B2***Examples of Audience Targeting of Paid Adverts on Instagram and Facebook*

| Ad Platform             | Dates                    | Target Audience   |  |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---|--|
|                         |                          | Location  | Interests  |
| 1 Instagram             | 20/05/2019<br>25/05/2019 | Brazil  | Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, Igreja Católica OR Empowerment  |
| 2 Facebook              | 20/05/2019<br>25/05/2019 | São Paulo   | Voting, Left-wing politics, Fernando Haddad, Education, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Government, Politics, Politician, Jair Bolsonaro OR Eduardo Bolsonaro   |
| 3 Instagram<br>Facebook | 27/06/2019<br>01/07/2019 | Brazil  | God, Lula, Politics, Olavo de Carvalho, Feminism, MBL OR Jair Bolsonaro  |
| 4 Instagram             | 12/07/2019<br>16/07/2019 | Brazil  | Voting, Activism, Education, Anti-racism, student, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Social change, Government, Feminism, Politics and social Issues OR Jair Bolsonaro  |
| 5 Instagram             | 21/07/2019<br>25/07/2019 | Bahia   | Morality, Libertarian conservatism, Evangélica Community issues, Evangelicalism, Marxism, Social movement, Voting, Social equality, Activism, Conscience, Monarchy, Liberalism, Danilo Gentili, Education, Traditional Values, Lula, Ethics, Social change, Government, Politics, Olavo de Carvalho, Politician, Feminism, Politics, and social issues OR Jair Bolsonaro |
| 6 Instagram             | 04/08/2019<br>07/08/2019 | Distrito Federal / Brasília   | Community issues, University, social movement, Antagonist, Voting, social equality, Activism, Ecology, Fernando Haddad, Danilo Gentili, Education, Student, Natural environment, United Left, Lula, Social change, Government, Olavo de Carvalho, Politician, Feminism, Social media, Politics and social issues, Jair Bolsonaro OR Eduardo Bolsonaro                    |
| 7 Instagram             | 23/08/2019<br>25/08/2019 | Amazon, Bahia, Distrito Federal, Mato Grosso, Minas Gerais, Rondônia, | Social movement, Facebook, Voting, New media, Activism, Danilo Gentili, National congress of Brazil, Google, Social change, WhatsApp, Politics, Instagram, Olavo de Carvalho, Politician, Amazon rainforest, Social media, YouTube, Jair Bolsonaro OR Eduardo Bolsonaro  |
| 8 Instagram             | 18/09/2019<br>21/09/2019 | Brazil  | Volunteering, Voting, Activism, Political party, Danilo Gentili, Revolutionary socialism, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Religion, National Congress of Brazil, Bible, Family, Veganism, Politics, Politician, Feminism, Amazon rainforest OR Jair Bolsonaro   |

*Note:* Only 8 out of 13 ads are described here or due to duplicate information. Interests are shown here in English, as translated by Facebook, but were applied in Brazilian

## Research Instruments

### Appendix C

#### *Survey*

#### **Table C1**

#### *Survey Questions in Order of Appearance*

---

#### Demographics

---

1. What is your age?
  2. In which state and city do you live?
  3. With which gender do you identify yourself?
- 

#### Internet and Politics

---

4. How often do you ACCESS social media?
5. I READ posts about politics on social media. How often?
6. I FOLLOW pages and profiles that discuss political themes. How much do you agree with this statement?
7. HOW MANY pages or profiles that discuss political themes do you follow? \*Approximately.
8. WHICH MEANS do you use most to get information about politics?
- \* 9. WHICH platforms do you use most to get information about politics? List the main ones, beginning with the ones you most use. E.g.: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter, among others.
10. I PARTICIPATE actively in online political activities, I post on social media and online groups, forward messages, make comments on political posts. How much do you agree with the statement?
11. Regarding your political alignment, do you consider yourself more aligned to the Left or to the Right? Choose what is closer to your general political views.
12. Have you participated in political demonstrations/protests in the last two years? \*Consider also online protests.
13. Do you participate in groups that discuss politics?
14. Did you vote for president in 2018?
15. In which candidate did you vote for president in the second round of elections in 2018?
16. Did you campaign for a candidate or tried to convince people to vote for a presidential candidate in 2018? On the internet or offline.
17. Thinking of your choice for president in 2018, which were your main sources of political information? Begin with the most important one. \*In case you choose OTHER, you will be able to specify it in the next question.
- \* 18. In case you believe OTHER source of information was more important for your choice for president in 2018, answer here.
19. In case you wish to participate on the second phase, interviews, please leave a contact option or contact me. Your information will be treated CONFIDENTIALLY and ANONYMOUSLY. It won't be possible to trace your answers back to yourself. In case you match the profile, I will enter in contact to explain the research and schedule the interview, online or face-to-face.  
Even if you leave your name and contact in this survey, you will receive a code, so that YOU WILL NOT BE IDENTIFIED after the data are processed.  
If you prefer, you can contact me on WhatsApp, email, Instagram or the blog.

Thank you!

#### PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS FOR INTERVIEWS:

- \* Age: between 18 and 34 years-old.
  - \* Amongst volunteers there should a balance between male and female respondents.
  - \* Similar quantity of persons identified with the Right and Left.
  - \* Individuals who use social media actively.
- 

*Note.* Questions applied in Brazilian Portuguese.

\* Indicates open questions.

## Appendix D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Processes of political identification in digital spaces. An exploratory study of politics and social media in contemporary Brazilian society.

UTS HREC ETH19-3385

**Researcher:** Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this interview. I would just like to confirm your permission to record the audio this interview. (Interviewee responds.) Again, all information obtained during this interview will remain confidential and your chosen pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. The interview should take approximately one hour. If you want to stop at any time, let me know. So, here is the participation information and consent sheet, that I have already sent you via email. Do you have any questions about this? So, if you could sign here. And this is a copy for you.

- **Explain the research briefly.** (always asks if any clarification is needed).
- **Explain the procedures of the interview:** The aim of this research is to explore how individuals are using the digital spaces, social media, for building their political identities. So, at some point in the interview I will ask you to show me how you navigate through these digital spaces, giving me a tour on your navigation processes. Do you have your phone or laptop with you?

#### 1. Introduction

- a. **Who are you?** A very open question, to let the participant talk about any identity marker they prefer. The aim is to give total freedom to individuals to present themselves as they wish to be seen, some might focus on their profession, some might focus on their social roles.

#### 2. Political behaviour. General, not only online, participated in demonstrations, relationship with others, how did she/he feel regarding the elections and political campaign.

- a. *When did you first become interested in politics? Do you remember?*  
Interviews always begin like this and from there the conversations start to flow, following the participants' memories.
- b. *When did you become more active in politics? What made you become more active?*
- c. *How did you identify with the political discourse you identify now (Right or Left)? Have you changed along the years? How? Why?*
- d. *Were any social media present in these involvements?*

This will permeate the interview. The individual will be asked whether the main events in her/his political engagement activities are registered on social media or if it had some influence of social media, like “I heard about the demonstration on this WhatsApp group...”

*e. How did you experience the elections campaign, in 2018?*

Again the aim is to let the individual focus on what was most important to them, using questions to make them remember moments where their perception or actions were transformed by social media.

*f. How are social media present in your political engagement? Do you think they are important for your political engagement?*

*g. How do you use social media regarding politics overall?*

### **3. Thank you:**

Thank you again for agreeing to be a part of my study and the time you have given up in order to answer my questions. I will show you what I have written to check if it is what you meant. If there is anything that you want to tell me, my email and phone number are in your participation sheet. Be assured you can call me at any time, if you have any questions or issues regarding the research. (in case I still need participants) If you know of anybody who would be interesting to hear, please feel free to give them my contacts as well. Again, thank you very much and until next time.

## Composition of Participants

### Appendix E

**Table E1**

*Participants' Demographic and Political and Social Media Behaviour*

| Name*                | Gender | Age** | Main Political Identifications              | Level of Political Engagement | Level of Social Media Usage |
|----------------------|--------|-------|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Helena <sup>^</sup>  | Female | 34    | Left / Progressist / Organised via Union    | High                          | High                        |
| Paulo <sup>^</sup>   | Male   | 32    | None (voted Left)                           | Moderate                      | Moderate                    |
| Maria <sup>^</sup>   | Female | 26    | Right / Monarchist / Antifeminist           | Low (online only)             | Moderate                    |
| Carlos <sup>^</sup>  | Male   | 32    | Right / Conservative                        | Moderate                      | Moderate                    |
| Aurora               | Female | 25    | Right / Monarchist / Antifeminist           | High                          | High                        |
| Agnes                | Female | 18    | Right                                       | Moderate (online only)        | High                        |
| Aline                | Female | 34    | Left / Progressist                          | Moderate                      | Moderate                    |
| Julia <sup>^</sup>   | Female | 31    | Left / Progressist                          | Moderate                      | High                        |
| Jessica <sup>^</sup> | Female | 29    | Left / Progressist                          | Low (online only)             | Moderate                    |
| Luciana              | Female | 30    | Right / Conservative / Antifeminist         | High (online only)            | High                        |
| Marcos               | Male   | 22    | Left / Progressist                          | Moderate                      | High                        |
| Anne <sup>^</sup>    | Female | 19    | Left / Progressist / Radical Black Feminist | High (online only)            | High                        |
| Camila               | Female | 24    | Right / Libertarian / Antifeminist          | High                          | High                        |
| Roberto              | Male   | 19    | Right / Conservative / Monarchist           | Moderate (online only)        | High                        |
| Bruna                | Female | 19    | Centre (annulled the vote)                  | Low (online only)             | Moderate                    |
| Lucas                | Male   | 20    | Left / Indigenous                           | High                          | High                        |

*Notes.* \*All names are fictional, some suggested by the participants, other chosen by the researcher.

\*\*Ages at the time of the interview in 2019.

<sup>^</sup>Indicates face-to-face interviews.

The term *online only* is used when political participation is pursued solely through online means, not encompassing going to demonstrations on the streets, for example.

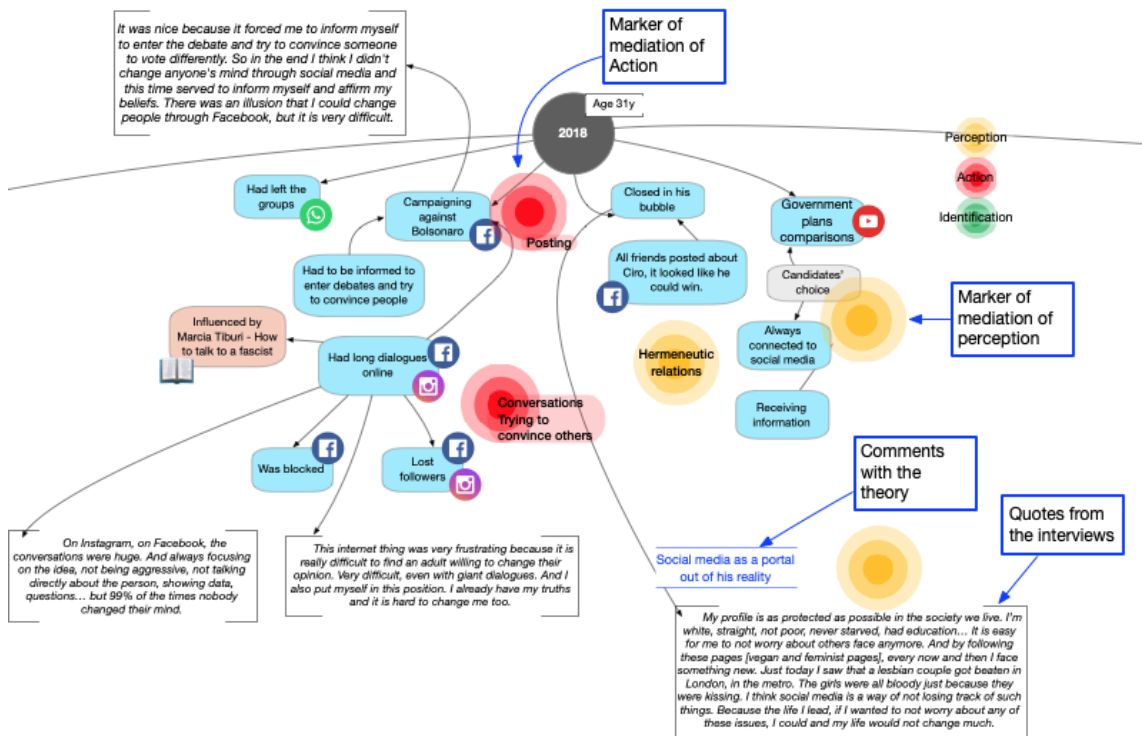
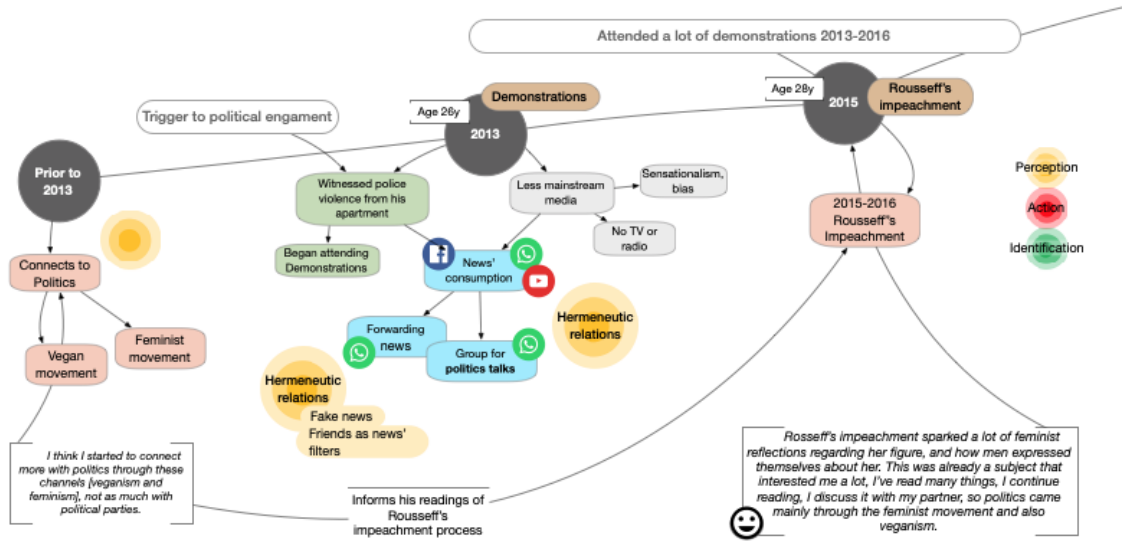
# Analysis

## Appendix F

### Selected Maps of Political Becomings

|   |   |  |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| 1,6k friends<br><b>Personal</b>                                     | <b>Political Engagement:</b><br>Moderate-low   online/offline<br><b>Main Political Identifications:</b><br>Left |  | <b>Paulo</b><br>Man<br>32 years old<br>White<br>Middle class | Spiritualist<br>Capital city<br>Southeast<br>Actor |
| 23k followers<br>2,7k following<br>18,5k followers<br>403 following | <b>Social Media Usage:</b><br>High<br><b>Main Participation Mode:</b><br>Contributor                            | I think of myself as lightly politically engaged, I know about some issues, but if it is to sit and talk about it deeply, I'll get lost. I think it is really superficial [my political engagement], but I also don't think it is too bad. |  |  |

Data Accessed on 27 December 2019



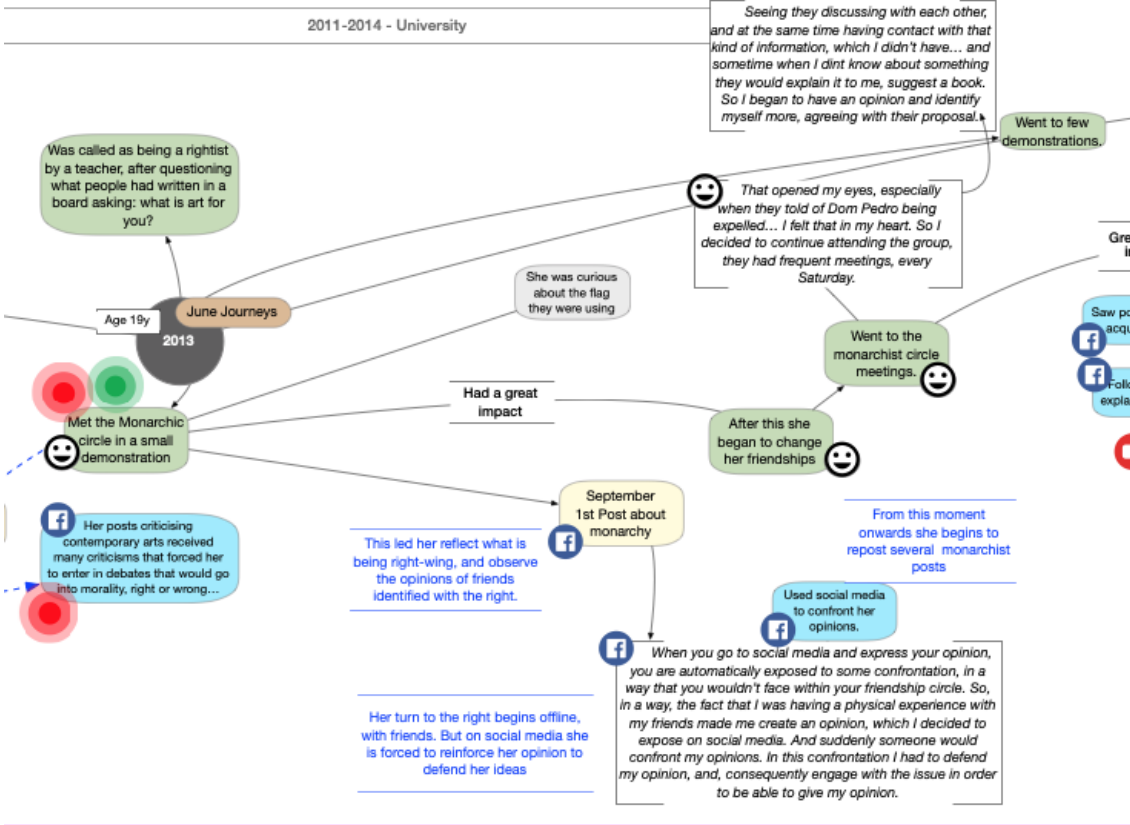
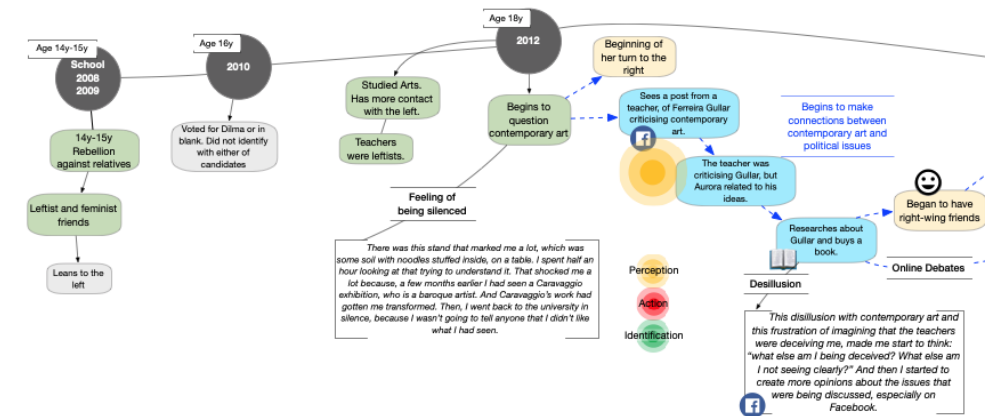
1.5k friends  
 6k subscribers  
 2k followers  
 627 following  
 Data Accessed on 04 January 2020  
 10k subscribers  
 04 October 2021: 5.9k followers

**Political Engagement:**  
 High | online/offline  
**Main Political Identifications:**  
 Monarchist  
 Conservative  
 Antifeminist  
**Social Media Usage:**  
 High  
**Main Participation Mode:**  
 Civic Instigator

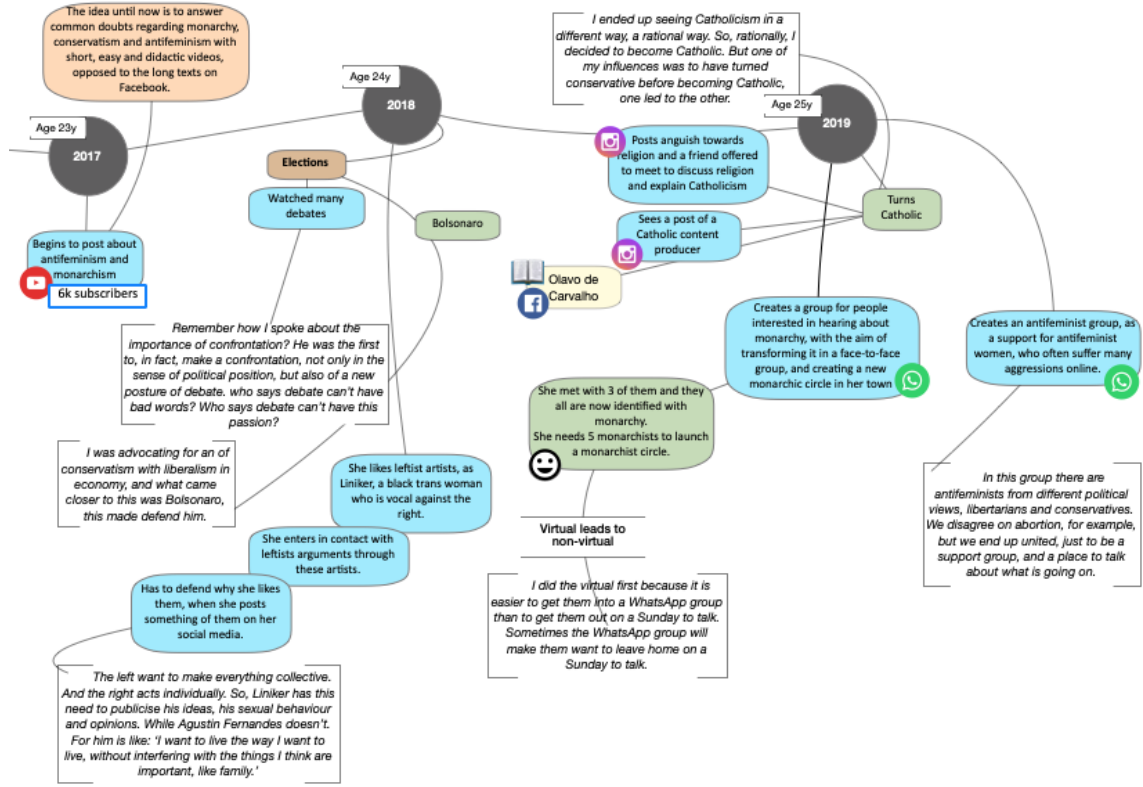
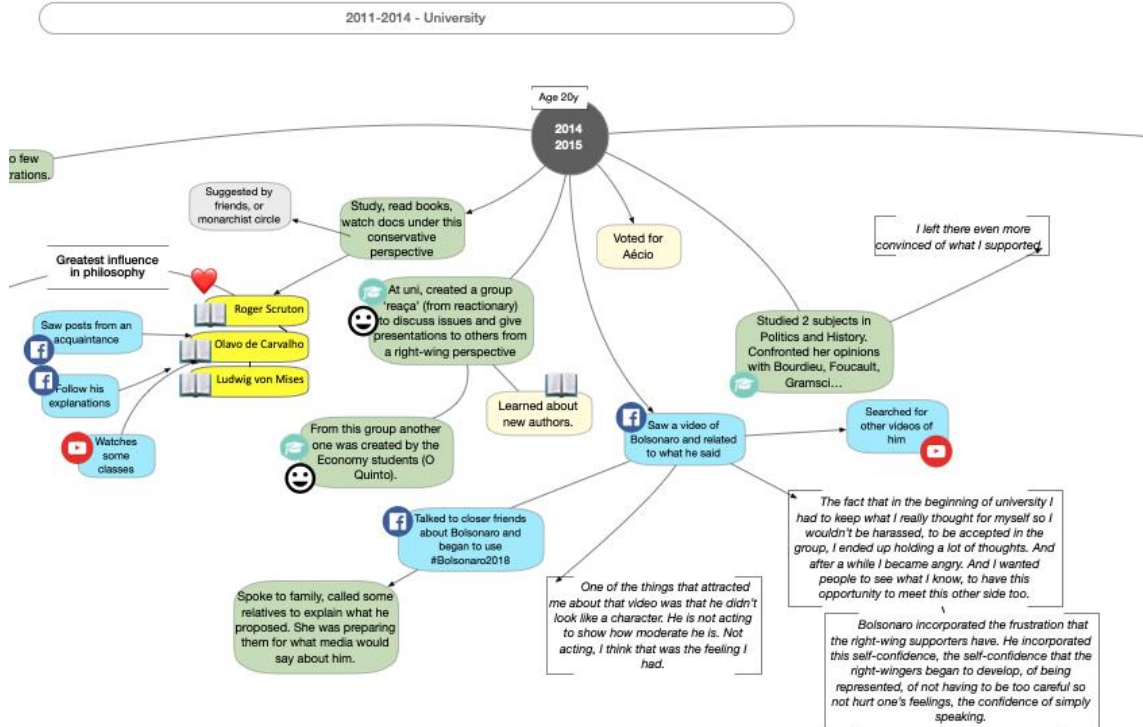
**Aurora**  
 Woman  
 25 years old  
 White  
 Middle class  
 Christian / Catholic  
 Small city  
 Southeast  
 Teacher

I use social media for two purposes. One is to inform, and another is to provide some training to people. My channel not only informs people about monarchy, but also trains militants, on YouTube. This is my goal.

2011-2014 - University







**6k subscribers**

**7k followers**

**564 following**


Data Accessed on 9 March 2020

04 October 2021: 42k followers

04 October 2021: 21k followers

**Political Engagement:**  
High | online

**Main Political Identifications:**  
Conservative  
Antifeminist



**Luciana**

Woman  
30 years old  
White  
Middle Class

Christian / Evangelical  
Capital city  
North  
Student

**Social Media Usage:**  
High

**Main Participation Mode:**  
Civic instigator

When the political debates started to emerge on social media, those heated discussions, people engaging in political campaigns for their candidates I realised: "oops, I will need to study this to understand what is happening and make my choice."

