




Political elite social listening: How Portuguese MPs perceive their own motivations to join and use Twitter/X

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Abstract

Most studies on political actors' use of Twitter focus on content and social network analysis, but not on their motivations and passive usage. We applied a questionnaire to a significant sample of 94 Members of Parliament (MPs), with a quota sample sized by political party representation in Parliament, to survey their motivations to have or not a Twitter account, their target audience and their uses.

We concluded that MPs see Twitter mostly as a political tool unlike other social media platforms. The most common motivation to join and use Twitter is to read other politicians' opinions which helps explain why the small Twitter adoption in Portugal does not deter its use as their peers and political elite is on the platform. That twitter elite can even be a motivator to join as their peer social capital is key to re-election in closed list-elections countries such as Portugal.

Keywords: Twitter; Members of Parliament; Fear of Missing Out; Political Communication

Introduction

The study of Twitter¹ adoption and uses by different political agents, including MPs, as a tool for political communication has already been done in previous literature (Bauer et al., 2023; Baxter et al., 2016; Golbeck et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2013; Hemphill et al., 2013; Said Hung et al., 2023; Segado-Boj et al., 2016; Silva & Proksch, 2022). However, those studies are mostly done in countries in which political agents are expected to use Twitter, mainly because of the high Twitter adoption rate among the general population in those countries (e.g. US, UK, Spain, etc.). This is not the case in Portugal in which the use of Twitter by the general population is only 14,9% (Cardoso et al., 2023) - although it has been on the rise in the younger population. Furthermore, these previous studies have mostly used Twitter data and secondary data to analyze behavior patterns, networks, and content, but have not directly surveyed political agents regarding their views on the platform, their passive use, and how they compare it to other social media platforms.

¹ During part of the data collection and analysis period the social media platform was called Twitter. It has currently been renamed "X".

In this study, we surveyed a significant sample of MPs, with a quota sample sized by political party representation in Parliament, on their motivations to have or not have a Twitter account, their use of the platform, and how they use it in comparison to other social media platforms. The main goal of this research is not to have a clear portrait of how MPs interact or post on Twitter, which could be analyzed by their posts, but what are their motivations, their target audience, their perspective on their use, or why they choose or not to use it.

Literature review

Twitter adoption in Portugal by the general population and by MPs is the lowest in the Western European Union with only 14,9% of the population in the platform but it is growing in the younger generation (Cardoso et al., 2023). This low adoption rate can help explaining why many MPs don't have a Twitter account, as only 41% of Portuguese MPs had a Twitter account in 2020 (Haman & Skolník, 2021) and 56% in 2022 (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024a). It can also explain why some of the most recent comparative studies on the use of the social media platform by political actors have not included Portugal (Praet et al., 2021; Silva & Proksch, 2022; Vliet et al., 2020).

One possible factor that can also impact the lower adoption rate of MPs when compared to single-seat constituencies, like the United States and United Kingdom, is that Western Europe's representative democracies, such as Portugal, have a strong party-based system that is based on direct closed list-elections at a district level (Teixeira et al., 2012). This can impact the political socialization and communication of the MPs as also suggested in a study in Norway (Enjolras, 2014) that has a similar political system. If, in one hand, it means that MPs have less incentives to be on a social media platform – specially in which the general population is not massively adopting – it can, in other hand, become an incentive for MPs to be present in a social media platform in which their colleagues are, given that party recruitment is key.

Previous literature of the use of Twitter for political communication in Portugal is mainly focused on campaign periods and on the political party use and not individual (Moreira, 2011; Penha, 2023). However, a recent study that analyzed the Twitter usage by Portuguese MPs (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024a) concluded that the platform is significantly more adopted by male MPs, from small and non-conservative parties and the largest electoral districts. Portuguese MPs seem to use the platform to cater to a niche "Twitter Elite" and their following is impacted by public recognition (e.g. TV commentary and leadership positions) but their popularity on the platform is not, just being impacted by their level of activity.

Research on Twitter adoption by political actors has already been done also at European level (Larsson, 2015; Scherpereel et al., 2017) and other countries (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014; Quinlan et al., 2018), but, as it was done in Portugal (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024a), the focus has mostly been sociodemographic and political variables, observable variables that can answer the question "What characteristics have the MPs that adopt Twitter" but not "Why". The main difference is the methodology needed to answer the second question as only direct questioning of MPs would allow a further comprehension of their motivations to join the platform.

Previous European studies have questioned MPs directly on their Twitter use (Bauer et al., 2023; Frame & Brachotte, 2015) but not on their motivations to join the platform. One explanation is that their studies were done in countries with high adoption rates, therefore MPs having a Twitter account is almost a given. That

is not the case in Portugal, so we directly surveyed a sample of Portuguese MPs on why they have or have not joined Twitter and confirm if their motivations to join the platform are similar or different to other social media apps.

RQ1: Why do MPs join or do not join Twitter?

RQ1.1: Are the MP's reasons to join Twitter different than other social media apps?

Previous studies that have questioned MPs directly on their Twitter use in European countries were in France (Frame & Brachotte, 2015) and in Germany (Bauer et al., 2023). In France, the study interviewed 5 MPs but focused mainly on what they thought would be winning strategies on Twitter and its limitations. In Germany a questionnaire was applied to a non-representative sample of the Germany MPs but focused on the limitations the MPs felt when using the account.

The study by Frame and Brachotte (2015) offered an analysis of the activity on Twitter with three main communication functions: monitoring, interacting, and disseminating. Most studies on the activity of political actors on Twitter have only focused on the latter two (interacting and disseminating), as they are the most "active" and visible ones. That may be the reason why those studies, both in the US (Golbeck et al., 2010; Hemphill et al., 2013) and Europe (Baxter et al., 2016; Enjolras, 2014; Graham et al., 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Segado-Boj et al., 2016, 2016; Vergeer et al., 2011), mostly concluded that the use of the MPs is for "Broadcasting". Recent studies also mentioned the term "amplifier" (Silva & Proksch, 2022), as political actors seem to go online to spread even wider the messages they are pushing in other arenas.

As the methodologies of these studies only allow for the analysis of two communication functions, their focus has been mostly on the contents published – for instance in their relationship with traditional media (López-Meri et al., 2017; Marcos-García et al., 2021; Oceja et al., 2019) or use of personal and humorous content to relate with the electorate (Baxter et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2018; López-Meri et al., 2017; Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2022) – and on their interactions (Agarwal et al., 2019; Baxter et al., 2016; Enjolras, 2014). Both communication functions have also been analyzed for the use of Twitter by Portuguese MPs (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024a, 2024b). However, there is still a gap in the literature regarding the third communication function - monitoring – which can only be answered directly by the MPs.

RQ2: How do MPs perceive their use of Twitter?

RQ2.1: Is the MPs' perceived use of Twitter different than other social media apps?

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, have also been criticized as Habermas (2022) suggests that there is a decrease of the "deliberative quality" of the discussions online due to the "echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2006), with less and less shared view of reality due to the "reinforcing spirals" (Slater, 2007). This could be indeed disruptive to public spheres (Klinger et al., 2023) and downgrade the open public sphere to a semi-public one (Staab & Thiel, 2022).

The question regarding the level of interaction the MPs have on Twitter, and their deliberative quality regarding values and political homophily, is also analyzed by another type of homophily mentioned by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954): status homophily. This type of homophily is based on social status characteristics and has been identified as well in the interactions of political actors on Twitter, for instance

in the privileged interactions between journalists and politicians (Enjolras, 2014; Ruoho & Kuusiplao, 2019). This idea also fits with the “amplifier” function of Twitter (Silva & Proksch, 2022) as journalists can be considered “vital multipliers” (Keller, 2020, p. 193).

Previous studies have focused on the intermedia agenda-setting and its direction from and to traditional and social media, including Twitter (Gilardi et al., 2022; Su & Borah, 2019; Su & Xiao, 2024) and the use of Twitter by journalists as a source of information (Heravi & Harrower, 2016; Parmelee, 2013), or how Twitter posts could be considered the contemporary “press release” (Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017). Many of these studies focused on content analysis or interviews with journalists, but not on the intentionality of political actors, for instance if politicians see journalists as a target audience when posting on Twitter.

In Portugal this “Twitter Elite” (Ruoho & Kuusiplao, 2019) has been theoretically described by Barriga (Barriga, 2017) and empirically studied by Ferro-Santos and colleagues (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024b). However, it is not clear whether the MPs do have journalists and/or other political actors as their main target audience when posting on Twitter, as their posting agenda may be different than their interaction one.

RQ2.2: What is the target audience of the MPs when posting on Twitter?

Methodology

Survey development

The survey was designed in five parts: 1) sociodemographic questions; 2) use of the Internet; 3) media diet; 4) use of social media platforms; 5) Twitter participation. The survey design was from the general internet use to the particular use of the social media platform Twitter. However, the focus of the current research is mainly on the fourth and fifth segments.

Most questions in the fifth segment were designed by the research team to answer the research questions and were based on previous literature on the use of Twitter by political actors. However, most questions from the other segments were tried and tested questions taken from previous research surveys “Sociedade em Rede 2013” (Cardoso et al., 2015) and “Digital News Report 2022” (Cardoso et al., 2022) in order to have tested questions as a baseline. The lead researcher of the surveys used as inspiration gave consent for them to be used in this study. In Appendix 1 there is a guide to how the variables that were used in this study were developed.

The survey was approved by the ethical committee from the authors’ university. The informed consent had to be signed and delivered along with the answered survey to be considered for the research.

Sampling and administration of the survey

At the time of the questionnaire distribution - between January and May 2023 -, it had been one year since the general election in January 2022. After the election, 8 political parties were represented in Parliament – 4 left-wing parties: Partido Comunista Português (PCP), Bloco de Esquerda (BE), Livre (L) and Partido Socialista (PS); 1 party that identifies outside of the left-right spectrum: Partido dos Animais e da Natureza (PAN); and 3 right-wing parties: Partido Social Democrata (PSD), Iniciativa Liberal (IL) and Chega (CH), a far-right party.

After the general elections in January 2022, PS had a majority of seats and formed the government. The political parties had the following seats in Parliament: PS - 120; PSD - 77; CH - 12; IL - 8; PCP - 6; BE - 5; PAN - 1; Livre – 1.

The population was 230 MPs, and we aimed to achieve a sample of 92 MPs, representative of the size of the parliamentary group with a minimum of one (table 1), to have a confidence level of 95% and an error margin of 8%.

The first mode of administration of the survey was a self-completion questionnaire, delivered by e-mail. After approval by the Parliament President, the survey was sent to the chiefs of staff of each parliamentary group (one per political party) to be distributed to the MPs. However, some chiefs of staff didn't respond to the email, so the researchers distributed the survey directly to the MPs in the Parliament building until the number of MPs for the representative sample was achieved. When the survey was hand-delivered by the researchers to the MPs, it was given back to the research team either by being sent by email, delivered by the MP to the chief of staff or given back directly to the research team, but no questionnaire completion was supervised.

The sample cannot be considered completely a random sample as there may have been a sampling bias towards MPs that were considered more likely to answer by the chiefs of staff or more present in the Parliamentary meetings where the questionnaire was personally distributed by the research team. In this sense, we have a quota sample, that "(...) is claimed by some practitioners to be almost as good as a probability sample" (Bryman, 2012, p. 201). The quota sample size can be analyzed in table 1.

Table 1: Quota sample size

| Party | Number of MPs 2023 | % MPs per political party | Number of MPs per party for the sample goal | Minimum of one per political party | Number of collected survey answers |
|--------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--|---|---|
| PS | 120 | 52.2% | 48.0 | 48 | 48 |
| PSD | 77 | 33.5% | 30.8 | 31 | 31 |
| Chega | 12 | 5.2% | 4.8 | 5 | 5 |
| IL | 8 | 3.5% | 3.2 | 3 | 3 |
| PCP-PEV | 6 | 2.6% | 2.4 | 2 | 2 |
| BE | 5 | 2.2% | 2.0 | 2 | 3 |
| PAN | 1 | 0.4% | 0.4 | 1 | 1 |
| Livre | 1 | 0.4% | 0.4 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 230 | 1 | 92 | 93 | 94 |

Source: Own elaboration

Although the sample was not aimed to be representative of the percentage of MPs with a Twitter account per political party, we also analyzed the final sample to ensure we had enough replies in the last segment of the questionnaire that was regarding the use of Twitter.

Therefore, we established a minimum number of MPs per party with a Twitter account based on 1) the percentage of MPs from that party that had an identifiable Twitter account on 2nd April 2022; 2) the number of MPs per party in the quota sample.

This minimum number was achieved for every party and even overachieved in some cases.

Results

RQ1: Why do MPs join or not join Twitter?

Out of the 94 MPs from the sample, 93 answered the question regarding their knowledge of what Twitter was and 89 of them (96%) replied that they knew what Twitter was.

However, out of the 92 that replied regarding if they had a Twitter account, 49 (53%) said they had an active account (opened it in the last month), 9 (10%) said they had an account but didn't use regularly (i.e. didn't open the app in the last month but opened it in the last six months), 11 (12%) said they had an account but didn't use it and 23 (25%) said they didn't have an account.

Therefore, we can say that in our sample, 69 MPs had a Twitter account, but out of those, only 60 (49 with an "active account"; 9 that didn't use regularly but used it in the last six months; 2 that didn't answer that question) were invited to answer the third part of the questionnaire regarding their use of the platform.

Regarding the MPs' motivations to join Twitter (table 2), the four main motivators were all regarding a passive use of Twitter – to read my colleagues' opinion (73%), to be updated on the news (71%), to understand the opinion of the voters (70%) and to keep up with the pages of official political entities (66%). However, more than half of the MPs that answer this question also mention more active motivations when they started using the app - sharing their political position (61%), to share and inform on their political party's position (57%) and to communicate their parliamentary work (54%).

On the media related motivations to join Twitter, the main motivation is to be updated on the news (71%), followed by to share news (43%) and to promote their presence in the media (30%), but just 5 MPs (9%) said that one of their motivations was to answer questions from journalists.

Finally, regarding non-political and personal motivations, 34% said their motivation was to keep up with non-political topics and 18% to share non-political topics and to interact with other accounts on non-political topics.

Table 2: Motivation to join Twitter - multiple choice (N=94; N/A= 36; NR= 2)

| Motivations to join Twitter (multiple choice) | # | % |
|--|----------|----------|
| To read my colleagues' opinion | 41 | 73% |
| To be updated on the news | 40 | 71% |

| | | |
|--|----|-----|
| To understand the opinion of the voters | 39 | 70% |
| To keep up with the pages of official political entities | 37 | 66% |
| To share my political position | 34 | 61% |
| To share or inform on my political party's position | 32 | 57% |
| To communicate my parliamentary work | 30 | 54% |
| To share news | 24 | 43% |
| To identify topics that I can do parliamentary work on | 23 | 41% |
| To keep up on non-political topics | 19 | 34% |
| To share my daily activities | 18 | 32% |
| To promote my presence in the media | 17 | 30% |
| To answer questions from the electorate | 15 | 27% |
| To promote my future activities | 13 | 23% |
| To share non-political content | 10 | 18% |
| To interact with other accounts on non-political topics | 10 | 18% |
| To answer questions from journalists | 5 | 9% |
| To involve the electorate in the elaboration of bills and other parliamentary work | 4 | 7% |
| Other motivations | 4 | 7% |

Source: Own elaboration

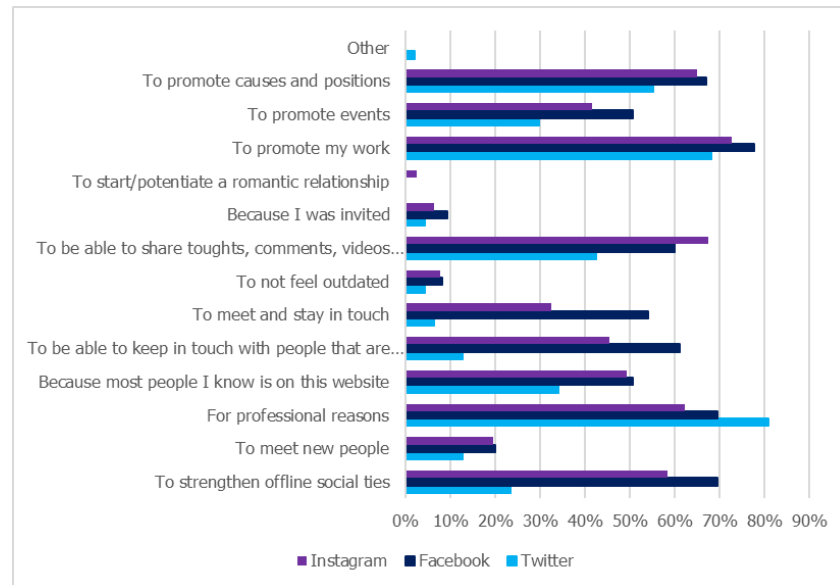
The main reason the MPs identified for not having a Twitter account or not using it for more than six months is that they "don't see any added value to the platform" (n=12; 44%) and is followed by "lack of time" (n=9; 33%). Other reasons MPs have selected for not joining or have used Twitter in the last 6 months were "Keeps informed on what is happening on Twitter without needing an account" (n=5, 19%); "Don't know how to use Twitter" (n=2, 17%); "Is afraid of negative consequences from the use of Twitter" (n=1, 4%); "Doesn't know many people that are active users on Twitter" (n=1, 4%). No MP selected the option "Doesn't know what Twitter is". From the MPs that also selected "other reason" (n=5, 19%) and elaborated on that, two identified the toxicity and conflict between Twitter users as the reason to not join the platform, and one mentioned that they would create an account soon.

RQ1.1: Are the MPs reasons to join Twitter different than other social media apps?

The MPs that use the different social media platforms were invited to answer what were their motivations to join them (Figure 1). Comparing the percentage of users that selected the different motivations for each platform, there are some notorious differences between the motivations of the Twitter users to join and the other platforms analyzed: Facebook and Instagram. The first and main one is "For professional reasons", in which more than 80% of the Twitter users selected as a motivation which is the only motivation of the possible choices that had a higher percentage than of the other social media platforms. On the other hand, the motivations "To meet and stay in touch", "To be able to keep in touch with people that are far away"

and “To strengthen offline social ties” were barely selected as motivations to join Twitter in comparison with the other social media platforms analyzed.

Figure 1: Motivations to join Twitter, Instagram and Facebook (N=94; Twitter: N/A=47, Facebook: N/A=9; Instagram: N/A=17)



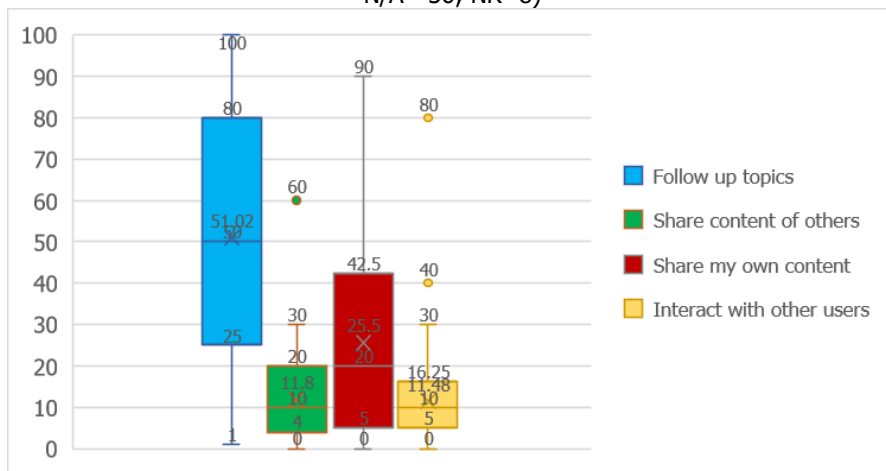
Source: Own elaboration

RQ2: How do MPs perceive their use of Twitter?

Of the MPs that answered the questionnaire and used Twitter in the last six months (N=58; NR=3), 50 (91%) were only them publishing in their own account and 5 (9%) also shared the account details with a political advisor for them to publish content in their name.

In Figure 2 we can analyze the MPs' self-perception of the percentage of time spent on 4 different Twitter actions. Out of the 51 MPs that answered the question, 40 clearly stated that they spent more time in one action than the others: 27 in following up topics of interest, 11 in sharing their own content, 1 in sharing content of others and 1 in interacting with other accounts.

Figure 2: Boxplot of MPs' self-perception of percentage of time spent on 4 different Twitter actions (N=94; N/A= 36; NR=8)



Source: Own Elaboration

The way the Portuguese MPs use Twitter is mostly as they expected or what motivated them to join Twitter in the first place (table 2 and 3). However, as shown in table 3, there were some uses that surprised the MPs, like "To identify topics that I can do parliamentary work on" and "To promote my presence in the media", and other uses that were more identified as motivations but not real uses like "To answer questions from the electorate".

Table 3: Motivation to use Twitter, surprise uses and not as expected (N=94; N/A= 36; NR= 2)

| Reasons to use the Twitter account (Multiple-choice) | # | % | Surprise uses (A) | Not as expected (B) |
|--|----|-----|-------------------|---------------------|
| To read my colleagues' opinion | 43 | 77% | 6 | 4 |
| To be updated on the news | 42 | 75% | 3 | 1 |
| To understand the opinion of the voters | 40 | 71% | 4 | 3 |
| To keep up with the pages of official political entities | 38 | 68% | 4 | 3 |
| To share my political position | 34 | 61% | 4 | 4 |
| To communicate my parliamentary work | 32 | 57% | 7 | 5 |
| To identify topics that I can do parliamentary work on | 30 | 54% | 10 | 3 |
| To share or inform on my political party's position | 29 | 52% | 3 | 6 |
| To promote my presence in the media | 23 | 41% | 8 | 2 |
| To share news | 22 | 39% | 3 | 5 |
| To keep up on non-political topics | 21 | 38% | 7 | 5 |
| To share my daily activities | 21 | 38% | 5 | 2 |
| To promote my future activities | 14 | 25% | 7 | 6 |
| To answer questions from the electorate | 12 | 21% | 4 | 7 |

| | | | | |
|--|----|-----|---|---|
| To share non-political content | 11 | 20% | 4 | 3 |
| To interact with other accounts on non-political topics | 10 | 18% | 5 | 5 |
| To involve the electorate in the elaboration of bills and other parliamentary work | 9 | 16% | 6 | 1 |
| To answer questions from journalists | 9 | 16% | 4 | 0 |
| To read my colleagues' opinion | 43 | 77% | 6 | 4 |

Source: Own elaboration

(A) #MPs - didn't select as motivation but selected as reason to use

(B) MPs - select as motivation but didn't select as a reason to use

RQ2.1: Is the MPs perceived use of Twitter different than other social media apps?

The MPs were asked about different uses for different social media platforms, including different political and personal usages. Of the MPs that use each platform and answered that question (Twitter n=53, Facebook profile n=71, Instagram n=76), there is a much higher percentage of MPs that replied they only use Twitter for political reasons (N= 21, 40%), than Facebook (N= 15, 19%) and Instagram (N=9, 12%).

RQ2.2: What is the target audience of the MPs when posting on Twitter?

When asked who the MPs' target audience was when posting on Twitter (multiple choice, N=94, N/A=36; NR=3), 78% of the MPs replied it was their electorate, 45% their colleagues, 35% journalists, 27% their friends and 13% said they didn't have any one in mind when posting.

Limitations

Like any study this one also has its own limitations. The main one is that we are extrapolating analysis based on a sample, that although significant, still can't fully comprehend the complexity of the universe in study. Although that analysis was not done for this study, the MPs answered political filiation and sociodemographic questions in the questionnaire and signed an informed consent form that was approved by the investigators' university ethical committee. Although their answers to the questionnaire were anonymized, we must consider that the replies to the survey are not only a self-perception but also what the MPs want to publicly answer.

Discussion, conclusions and further research

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) on the peer network and news

To answer the first research question - Why do MPs join or not join Twitter? - we can say that the main motivation for MPs to join Twitter was to keep up with political topics - either by reading their colleagues' posts, news, the voters' opinions, or pages of official political entities. The first conclusion that is of particular

interest is that the motive most selected by MPs to join Twitter was to read what their colleagues were posting.

Regarding the motivation to not join or not have used their Twitter account in the last 6 months, the key reasons were not seeing any added value to the use of the platform and lack of time to use it. Interestingly, only one MP selected as reason "Doesn't know many people that are active users on Twitter" which is of relevance because it reinforces the idea that although the overall Portuguese population has a small Twitter adoption rate (Cardoso et al., 2023) which could be a barrier to new users joining a network in which they don't know many active users, the political elite, such as MPs, have a much larger adoption rate, so, that would not be a deterrent for its adoption. On the contrary, as their peers are increasingly more on the platform, and as party recruitment is key for their re-election, that may be a strong motivation as their symbolic and social capital can be reinforced by belonging to that network. This idea reinforces the first main conclusion regarding the importance of the peers' network in Twitter as a key motivation to join Twitter. This analysis could even be extended to the idea of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) that has already been linked to the use of social media platforms (Fioravanti et al., 2021) and the consumption of news online (Shabahang et al., 2021) which is also a motivation to join the platform and a preferred activity by MPs on Twitter. Previous research on the Twitter adoption of Portuguese MPs (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024a) concluded that MPs from small and non-conservative political parties were significantly more likely to join the platform, we can argue that in those parties the "peer pressure" to not be the one-out of the platform would be clearer. Further work could develop on the peer pressure influence for MPs and other political actors adopting and using social media platforms and dwell in more detail on the FOMO feeling including its measurement using scales as suggested by Abel and colleagues (2016).

Political elite social listening tool

In answering the second research question we can say that most MPs use Twitter in a more passive way - almost as a social listening tool to check on their colleagues and voters' opinions, be updated on the news, and follow up institutional accounts - only posting and interacting on occasion. However, there are also some MPs that use Twitter more as "dumping" tool, closer to the idea of broadcasting (Enjolras, 2014; Golbeck et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2018; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Segado-Boj et al., 2016), in which they mainly open the platform to post their own content and get out of the app. A second conclusion that we can point out is that this idea of most MPs using Twitter as a social listening tool, and not just as broadcasting tool, still keeps the use of the platform away from the promises of "direct representation" (Coleman, 2005) and "continuous democracy" (Rodotà et al., 2007). Firstly, because it lacks the interaction of most MPs in the platform, and, secondly, because, in a country with such low Twitter adoption rate, the voters they "listen to" are a more politically and/or technologically savvy than most and, therefore, not truly representative of the electorate - and specially if some MPs mostly "listen" to each other and some Twitter elite.

The MPs mostly use Twitter as they expected when they joined the platform, but there are some uses they didn't expect like "To identify topics that I can do parliamentary work on" and "To promote my presence in the media", and other uses that were more identified as motivations but not real uses like "To answer questions from the electorate". The use of Twitter "To identify topics that I can do parliamentary work on"

is of special interest and demonstrates the use of Twitter as a social listening method – MPs may not interact much with the constituents on Twitter, but they use the platform to listen to them. This effect had also been studied regarding the impact of Facebook publications on the UK MPs participation (Bollenbacher et al., 2022) but with a content analysis method.

Mostly (just) business – Twitter as a political tool

A third important conclusion of this study is the use of Twitter, by the MPs, mostly as a political tool and not a personal one as seen in other countries (Baxter et al., 2016; López-Meri et al., 2017) . Before joining, the Portuguese MPs seemed to see Twitter mostly as a political tool, with just a few respondents including non-political motivations to start using Twitter, which is also replicated in their replies regarding their actual use of the platform. When compared with their motivations to join other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, they again considered Twitter a more professional tool, joining mostly for “professional reasons”, and not as much as keeping in touch or strengthening their offline relationships. Furthermore, this can also be seen as a way of professionalization of political communication in Portugal and reinforces the idea of Media Ideology (Gershon, 2010) and appropriation (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996). As individual political communication is up to the MPs most of the times (95% in the case of Twitter), with no help from advisors or a team – unlike in other countries (Bauer et al., 2023), the MPs consciously define different uses and contents for different social media platforms which shows some level of sophistication and strategy in their communication. This conclusion must be contextualized as most people in Portugal that are outside of certain thematic circles as politics and media don't use Twitter.

More to keep up with the news than to set the news

Regarding the MPs' target audience when posting on Twitter, the fact that most MPs chose the electorate as one of their target audiences is of special interest because in a previous study (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024b) that analyzed their interactions on the platform, the electorate was not the type of accounts that the MPs mostly interacted with, but their colleagues, other politicians, and political influencers. This can have two possible explanations: firstly, they may have as target audience to their posts the electorate but prefer to interact with colleagues and other political actors that they know or know of; secondly, they may have the intention of interacting more with the electorate than they do, and this survey shows of their self-assessment based on intention and not the reality of their actions.

Another point of notice is that most of the MPs on Twitter don't have journalists as their target audience, which can be a relevant finding because clearly there is a close relationship between the media and the political sphere on Twitter. Previous studies show that Portuguese MPs share a lot of media content (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024a) and 71% of MPs did point out that “keeping up with news” is an activity they use Twitter for. On the other hand, there are news pieces that use politicians' tweets as news source, although there has never been a study that shows how much it happens in Portugal. Therefore, it begs the question: do MPs not see journalists as a valuable target audience on Twitter or just don't admit it? And are they an actual valuable target audience for MPs on Twitter? Further research is needed on this topic, including how

much the traditional media in Portugal uses and quotes MPs and other political actors based on their Twitter posts.

This study concludes that most Portuguese MPs see their own use of Twitter as political tool and not a personal one, unlike other social media platforms. Twitter as a political tool is not only seen as a broadcast device by some MPs, as other studies have pointed out, but also as a social listening tool. Nevertheless, this use can have its shortcomings as the percentage of Twitter adoption in Portugal is low and, therefore, the MPs may be “listening to” a very close tight “Twitter Elite”. Finally, although the Twitter adoption in Portugal is low, the MPs do want to be on Twitter because of this political use and the fact that their colleagues are also on the platform, which can create, specially in some parliamentary groups, a peer pressure to also be on it.

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Appendix

Table: Authors' definition of the variables of current study

| Research Question | Macro level variables | Based on |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| RQ1 | Motivations to join Twitter | Previous literature review that mentions different political actors' motivations to use Twitter: interaction with electorate and broadcast political positions (Baxter et al., 2016; Enjolras, 2014; Silva & Proksch, 2022), relationship with the media (López-Meri et al., 2017; Marcos-García et al., 2021), relationship with peers (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024b), and personal content (Baxter et al., 2016; Graham |
| RQ2 | Motivations to use Twitter | |

| | | |
|-------|--|--|
| | | et al., 2018; López-Meri et al., 2017). Different variables were defined to account for different levels of engagement (e.g. read, share, interact) based on the three communication functions mentioned by Frame and Brachotte (2015). |
| RQ1 | Reasons to not join or not have used Twitter for more than 6 months | Own elaboration |
| RQ1.1 | Motivations to join a specific social media platform | Based on the motivations on question L.12 of the survey "Sociedade em Rede 2013" (Network Society 2013) (Cardoso et al., 2015) and applied to the social media platforms Instagram, Facebook and Twitter |
| RQ2 | Who can publish in the account | Based on a study (Bauer et al., 2023) that estimates that only one third of the members of the German Bundestag in 2020 operated their Twitter accounts alone. |
| RQ2 | Self-perception of percentage of time spent on different Twitter actions | Own elaboration |
| RQ2.1 | Political, Personal and Mix use of Twitter, Facebook (profile) and Instagram | Own elaboration, based on the conclusions of previous studies (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024a) that the Portuguese MPs use of Twitter is not as personal as in other countries, and decision to compare it to other social media platforms |
| RQ2.2 | Target audiences in the use of Twitter | Own elaboration, to test the idea of MPs using Twitter as intermedia agenda-setting (Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017) and the possibility of MPs seeing journalists as target audience for their Twitter publications |