RESEARCH NOTE (PRELIMINARY REMARKS)

Political communication in WhatsApp? An introductory assessment of the phenomenon and its affective implications

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamic role of WhatsApp in political communication among Spanish users, with a particular focus on the platform's impact on affective polarisation as one of today's epitomes of emotional expression. Using a combination of quantitative data from a nationally representative survey and qualitative insights from focus group discussions, the study investigates how we use WhatsApp to discuss public affairs, how the interaction between affordances and the group dynamics of close social ties affects that discussion, and how this may relate to affective polarisation. The findings highlight that WhatsApp is a significant medium for political talk, especially among younger and more educated users. Additionally, the research underscores the importance of understanding the unique affordances of WhatsApp, such as its privacy and immediacy, which create a hybrid space for public-interpersonal communication. These features differentiate WhatsApp from other social media like Twitter and Facebook and are key to grasp the link between WhatsApp usage(s) and affective polarising outcomes, even though this association is strongly moderated by other variables, such as political interest or perceived party system polarisation.

Keywords:

Affective polarisation, political talk, social media, Spain, WhatsApp.

1.- Introduction and relevance

The contemporary political landscape is growingly shaped by the dynamics of social media platforms, which have transformed how information is disseminated and consumed (Habermas, 2022; Smyrnaios and Baisnée, 2023). However, existing evidence on these platforms –and especially on the relationship between them and the phenomena of fragmentation and polarisation– accounts for a fundamental problem: rather than being the fruit of extensive research conducted at a cross-platform level, it relies disproportionately on Twitter and Facebook, thus broadly equating available evidence on social media with available evidence on just these two platforms. There have been some calls for cross-platform research (Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021; Tucker et al., 2018), and it cannot be ignored that there is an increasing interest in approaching alternative sites, such as YouTube (Brown et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2022) or Reddit (Kitchens et al., 2020; Waller and Anderson, 2021). Nonetheless, as admitted in several systematic reviews (Cea and Palomo, 2021; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021), the number of current investigations focusing on Twitter and

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Facebook surpasses 70% of the total, fundamentally because of the methodological challenges that arise when approaching platforms other than those two (Cea and Palomo, 2021).

I argue that there are multiple reasons to advance a new research agenda towards the study of private social media like WhatsApp instead, and that those go far beyond the very fact that these platforms are understudied in the academic literature, with only a few of recently published scientific works devoted to them (see Chadwick et al., 2023a, 2023b; Hall et al., 2024; Masip et al., 2021; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2018). First, the generalisation of existing findings is problematic, not only because these predominantly relate to Twitter and Facebook, but also –and especially– because they are therefore founded upon two algorithm-led platforms. Among other things, the latter generally refer to a dimension of the social media-fragmentation/polarisation link dissimilar from that graspable through non-algorithm-led platforms (that is, the extent to which platforms *create* echo chambers or *make* people more angry/polarised vs the extent to which they serve as –exemplar– spaces for individuals to segregate and/or radicalise themselves).

Second, and in this same vein, the concrete characteristics of private social media deviate from those of traditional SNSs. The pro-diversity weak-tie and heterophily friendly affordances of platforms like Twitter might counter humans' tendency towards sectarianism, hence making sense of the partially optimistic results associated with these platforms when it comes to measuring their impact on polarisation. However, in WhatsApp, the facilities to interact with strong ties as well as the structurally homophilic composition of groups, around which individuals self-select due to their interest in a theme, provide a suitable window of opportunity for the fragmentation of the public space along the lines of collectives who opine alike; ultimately, WhatsApp's affordances may pave the way for the configuration of hermetic and non-diverse spaces unlikely to curb humans' tribalist drives.

Finally, private social media are so widespread that they enjoy higher usage ratios than many SNSs (Newman et al., 2022), with WhatsApp being the most utilised platform in Europe. Today, 62% and 20% of Europeans use WhatsApp for general purposes and political news, respectively, which contrasts with the less than 30% and 10% who use Twitter, for example. Also, WhatsApp is often among the top three platforms for the consumption of political information in every country, and, with exceptions (France, Greece), it has become the most widely used platform in general, with more than 70% of Spaniards, Italians or Germans daily interacting in this site (Newman et al., 2022).

This need for crossing the boundaries of public social media notwithstanding, the corresponding literature on private sites is scarce. Some studies have portrayed WhatsApp as a burgeoning tool for political communication broadly able to shape elections in a multifaceted way (Caetano et al., 2018; Cheeseman et al., 2020; Evangelista and Bruno, 2019; Garimella and Tyson, 2018; Moura and Michelson, 2017; Pont-Sorribes et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2022). Some others have addressed the intricacies of misinformation dissemination through the platform (Alonso et al., 2021; Banaji and Bhat, 2020; Basavaraj, 2022; Cardoso et al., 2022; Elías and Catalan-Matamoros, 2020; Garimella and Eckles, 2020; Kischinhevsky et al., 2020; Machado et al., 2019; Sundar

et al., 2021; Visani et al., 2022). And a last set of investigations has examined the effects of WhatsApp –political– usage on certain outcomes. More concretely, concerning the link between WhatsApp and fragmentation/polarisation, Valeriani and Vaccari (2018) find a slightly positive link between discussing politics on the platform and ideological extremism, while, drawing from the Chilean context, Scherman et al. (2022) show that WhatsApp usage increases perceived political polarisation, but not affective polarisation, the latter conclusion also being reached by Lee et al. (2021) for Japan and the US. Yarchi et al. (2021) even reveal a depolarising impact of WhatsApp usage on the political content produced by users. However, these scholars draw from artificially created WhatsApp groups of ideologically diverse, highly educated and politically engaged citizens and, therefore, under conductive conditions for that depolarisation to occur. And this is all: we hardly count with any more studies delving into the singularity of this platform and its effects.

In this light, I suggest a new research agenda in, at least, two directions. On the one hand, in the comprehensive understanding of whether and how exactly citizens utilise private social media like WhatsApp for politics, including whereabouts information is accessed and political talk takes place, when, with whom, why, and for what. These questions might seem obvious and should indeed incarnate the starting point of any rigorous inquiry of the Meta-owned platform; however, beyond their preliminary addressment by Masip et al. (2021), Pont-Sorribes et al. (2020) or Zhu et al. (2022), we hardly have any knowledge about them. Paradoxically, there is a growing body of literature scrutinising the dynamics of misinformation dissemination within WhatsApp, but the very prior exercise of defining the ways in which individuals encounter politics in the app and characterising WhatsApp political users, conversations, and the spaces where the latter occur has not been done. Given the lack of an algorithm that interacts with users' behaviour, these questions constitute a precondition to ultimately elucidate whether –and when– individuals fragment themselves into echo chambers when using WhatsApp politically.

Another line of research would, on the other hand, relate to the exploration of the effects of WhatsApp political usage on various dimensions of polarisation (ideological and affective). Building on the original work of Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2021), Scherman et al. (2022) and Valeriani and Vaccari (2018), who assess the effects of political talk on WhatsApp, this endeavour should conceptualise the multifaceted nature of that discussion. In other words, it should discern (1) different types of WhatsApp political conversations, and (2) different political experiences within the platform (discussing politics vs accidentally receiving political content), as distinct conversations and experiences may lead to distinct polarising outcomes. Moreover, it seems naïve to believe that WhatsApp usages possess a univocal effect across the population. Hence, studies should also determine which population segments are (more) prone to be affected by them, and in which direction.

This research note is part of an entire in-progress investigation which aspires to comprehensively fill these gaps. As for this particular note, which is not a closed work, we narrow our aspirations and simply attempt to present some preliminary reflections and findings on both research lines, such that they can benefit from the discussions we may hold in the framework of a panel about political communication and emotions.

Moreover, this note is deliberately succinct; for the sake of brevity, it addresses certain conundrums and introduce some findings that we deem convenient, but it leaves some relevant others unaddressed here. Yet, a more encompassing piece will be presented in July at the congress. Thus, the guiding questions of the note, on which we start shedding some light, are:

- (How) do we use WhatsApp to discuss public affairs? How does the interaction between affordances and the group dynamics of extra-political, social ties affect that discussion?
- What is the relationship between WhatsApp political talk(s) and affective polarisation?

2.- Some methodological remarks

To explore our questions, we rely on both quantitative and qualitative data sources. First, we count with a custom-built Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) survey representative of the whole of Spain. The sample consists of 800 citizens of legal age, and the variables included in the quota sampling were age, gender, region of residence (based on NUTS27 classification), and educational level. This novel survey (one of the first ones collecting information about WhatsApp usage habits and key political attitudes at the same time) was administered by Ipsos Spain, with respondents being recruited from online panels and being offered nonmonetary incentives to participate.

Data collection occurred during the first quarter of 2024 and hence amidst an intense political cycle, just after 2023 municipal, regional, and general elections, in the aftermath of PM Sánchez's investiture and of the numerous debates about the Amnesty Law, and on the eve of the 2024 Galician, Basque, Catalan, and European elections. In this vein, the study of Spain seems convenient for a twofold reason. On the one hand, precisely due to the intensity of its political year, which leads us to assume that overall interest in politics, partisan sentiments, and eagerness to engage with political affairs are particularly prominent. On the other, because, together with Italy, Spain is the European country with the highest WhatsApp usage shares (Newman et al., 2022), with this platform outranking all the others, including Twitter, Instagram, TikTok or Facebook.

Second, this study employs qualitative focus groups with the aim of stimulating reflection on the part of the participants on how WhatsApp is used when it comes to enter in contact with politics, how WhatsApp political talk tends to be, and why those are the cases. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews have often been utilized to investigate how closed platforms influence people's everyday informational experiences (Swart et al., 2019; Matassi et al., 2019). These methods are effective because, to a certain extent, WhatsApp mirrors offline communication patterns and is designed for maintaining strong social ties (Chan, 2018).

Thus, from November 2023 to June 2024, we have organised eight focus group sessions in Madrid, each consisting of four to six participants (N = 40) and lasting approximately 90 minutes. Acknowledging the limitations of focus group studies in terms of generalisability, we aimed to reduce representativeness issues by selecting participants based on age, sex, educational level, place of residence, occupation, ideology, and interest in politics, following previous research (Goh et al., 2019). Moreover, it has been

suggested that within-group homogeneity capitalises on individuals' shared experiences and guarantees secure environments for the expression of sincere information and opinions. Therefore, we count with a group of Gen-Z people, a group of millennials, a group of Gen-X and boomers, a group of +60-year-old individuals, a group of rightists, a group of leftists, a group of highly educated professionals (university studies), and a group of individuals without university education.

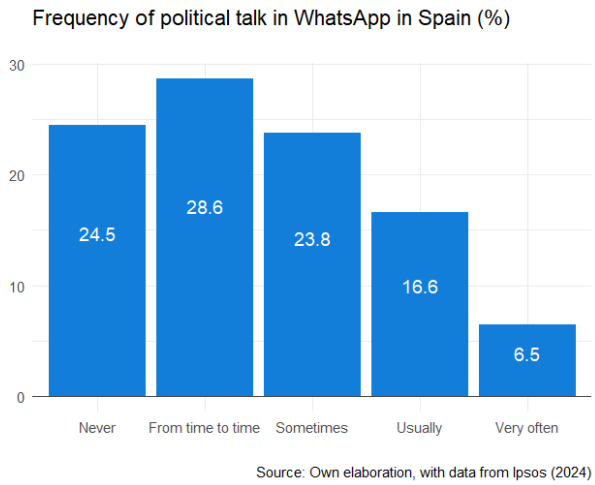
The homogeneity of our groups around a given variable does not preclude their heterogeneity concerning many others, of course. Since no pecuniary incentive was available as a compensation, participants were selected according to the aforementioned criteria from third contacts of the research group's weak ties, hence guaranteeing that no personal link existed between the researchers and the participants themselves. Logically, the latter were conveniently informed of their right to withdraw, how their anonymised data would be used, and who would access it, providing informed consent. A member of the research team moderated all the sessions using semi-structured questions, and the discussions were recorded and later transcribed.

3.- WhatsApp, a singular digital means of political communication

3.1.- Sizing the prevalence of political talk in private social media: do we actually discuss public affairs in WhatsApp?

Descriptive statistics on WhatsApp use for political talk provide relevant insights on the importance of this platform for these purposes. In all, three quarters of Spaniards discuss politics or public affairs on this service, even though with different levels of intensity (see Figure 1). Almost a quarter of the population is frequently or very often active in these discussions; almost another quarter is sometimes active; and slightly more than another quarter gets involved in such conversations from time to time and hence with notably lower periodicity.

Figure 1



Source: Own elaboration, with data from Ipsos (2024)

Interestingly, these figures contrast to a certain extent with those presented by Valeriani and Vaccari (2018) for other European countries in their seminal work. In Germany, the UK, and Italy, these authors register usage ratios between 25% and 35% for talking about politics in private social media. For the sake of comparison, in Spain, that is

roughly the share of individuals who discusses politics only with significant assiduity. This suggests that the use of private social media for political talk might vary substantially across countries (though novel cross-country research would be needed in this sense), but also that Spaniards a priori seem more digitally engaged than their European counterparts when it comes to discussing public affairs on WhatsApp. Of course, the fact that this messaging service is arguably more popular in the Iberian country (with penetration rates higher than 90% according to our survey) may contribute to this state of affairs.

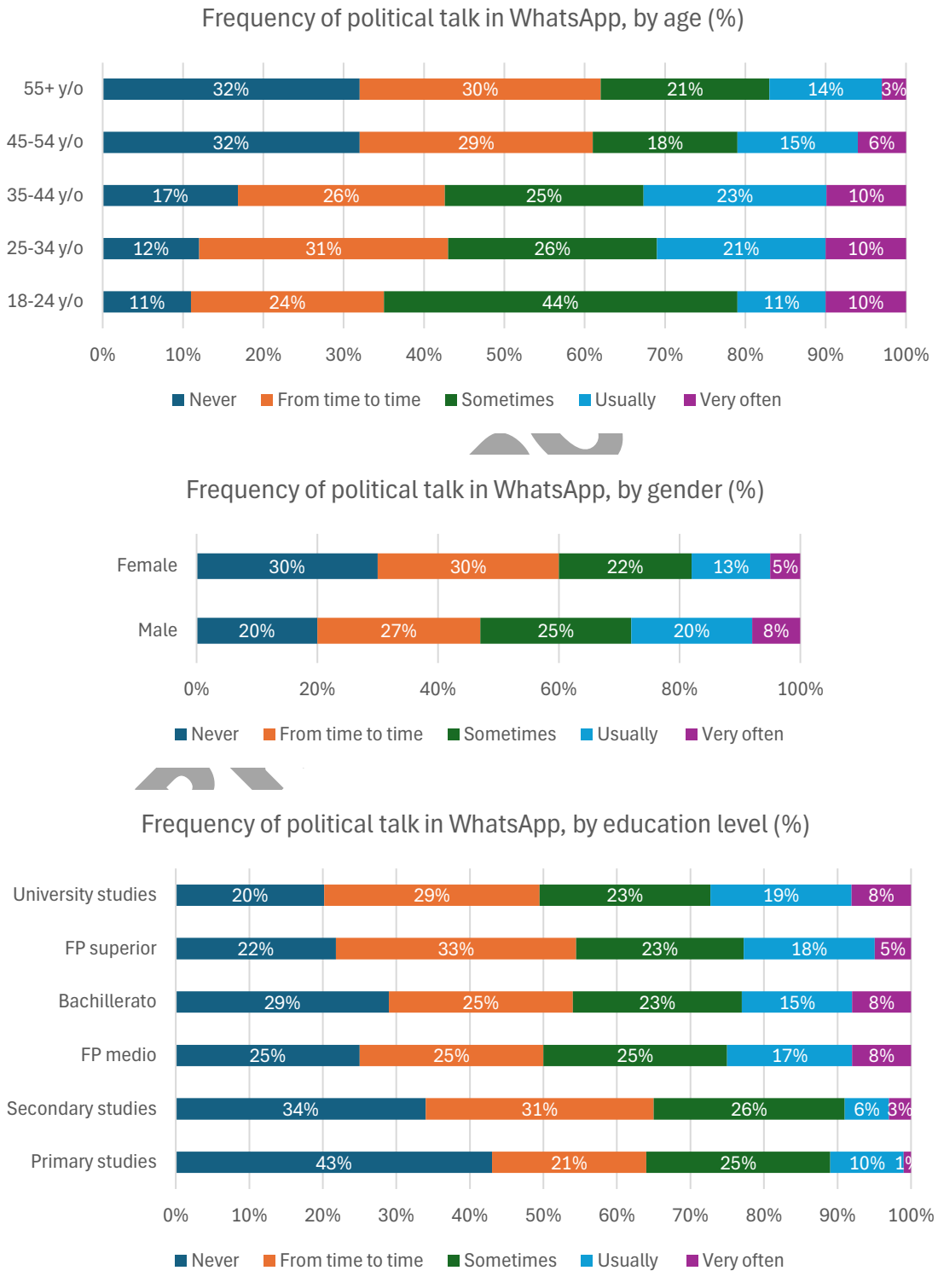
WhatsApp is therefore a prevalent tool for political discussion in Spain, even though it is not equally relevant across all segments of the population. As Figure 2 shows, the use of this platform for political talk is notably higher among the younger population, especially among Gen-Z individuals and millennials, with people older than 45 years old clearly registering lower ratios of frequent use ($\chi 2$ [16, N = 800] = 67,535, $p < 0.001$). As a matter of fact, the share of <45-aged Spaniards who discuss politics in WhatsApp usually or very often rounds 30%, whereas that same percentage shrinks almost to the half for >55-aged individuals. Younger generations' greater familiarity with digital platforms –and the absolute pervasiveness of these in their daily lives– seems to play a role here.

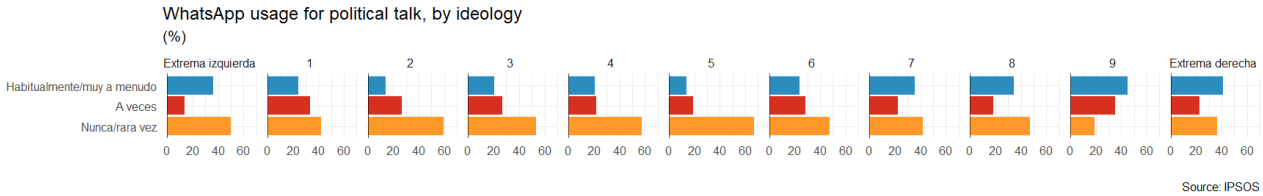
Sharp differences can also be observed along other traits. Men engage in WhatsApp political talk more frequently than women, and so do highly educated individuals in comparison with Spaniards accounting for lower levels of educational attainment. In this vein, especially significant are the differences between those who declare to never discuss politics in WhatsApp: this share amounts to 30% for women, but only to 20% for men; similarly, this percentage is of almost half of the population (43%) for people with primary education studies only, but of one fifth (20%) for those who completed university studies.

A last descriptive finding deserves some attention. When sizing the number of individuals who use WhatsApp to discuss public affairs according to their ideology, a twofold interesting pattern emerges (see the last snapshot of Figure 2). On the one hand, and in line with the work of Valeriani and Vaccari (2018) or Scherman et al. (2022), we observe that the highest shares of frequent WhatsApp users for these purposes can be found among the extreme left and the extreme right. Whereas in most ideological stances (from the left to the right), the amount of people who never or just occasionally discuss politics in the platform outranks the amount of people who usually or very often do so, the picture is balanced or even favourable for the active users in the case of the ideological extremes. This suggests, as Valeriani and Vaccari (2018) tacitly do, that these people, who are likely to support more controversial positions, might not feel comfortable with sharing their ideas in public (social media), but find in the more closed and private arena of WhatsApp a useful vehicle to differentially engage with politics. On the other hand, it is interesting that the share of individuals who usually or very often discuss politics in WhatsApp is significantly higher among those who locate themselves in the rightist spectrum (in the 6, 7, 8, and 9 positions of the 0-10 left-right scale). For instance, around 20% of Spaniards self-positioning in the centre-left 3 of that scale discuss public affairs in WhatsApp usually or very often; however, that percentage doubles to almost 40% for their counterparts in the centre-right 7 of the same scale. This

singular pattern might be related to some sort of stigma associated with the expression of right-wing ideas in public (see Dinas et al., 2024): some right-wing individuals could feel more fearful of voicing their viewpoints in the public realm (or may simply see no added value in doing that), and they could exploit the hermetism of private social media alternatively.

Figure 2





Source: Own elaboration, with data from Ipsos (2024)

3.2.- How can WhatsApp political talk be characterised? Some key points

3.2.1.- Online instant messaging as hybrid public-interpersonal communication

As stated above, the academic production reflecting on the kind of communication that occurs on private social media is scarce and limits itself to a handful of investigations (Chadwick et al., 2023a, 2023b; Hall et al., 2024; Masip et al., 2021; Swart et al., 2018; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2018). Yet, these works provide a useful conception of personal messaging as some type of "hybrid public-interpersonal communication" (Chadwick et al., 2023a). Indeed, platforms like Twitter tend to guarantee the publicity of interactions, so that they become observable to mass audiences (Baym, 2015); however, WhatsApp is never fully public. It is utilised among strong-tie networks of family, co-workers and friends (Masip et al., 2021; Swart et al., 2019) who often harness a wide set of "technological affordances" (Masip et al., 2021) that makes the platform unique:

- Privacy, which encourages the unrestricted exchange of messages, as communication usually takes place among "trusted ties" (Yamamoto et al., 2018).
- Personalisation and segmentation, which facilitates communicative exchanges through channels created with specific purposes.
- *Safety*, as conversations occur among people who know each other, and end-to-end encryption guarantees that messages can be read only by chat participants (users are hence "protected" from algorithms).
- Immediacy, interactivity and perpetual everyday connection, which enables permanent contact within a controlled environment for personal –and political– interaction (Swart et al., 2017).
- Contents' marker-of-provenance loss, including the vanishing of cues about those contents' source or purpose, as information –even when originated in the more traceable world of news– continuously cascades across individual and group settings in an iterative and unsupervised way (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020).

Thus, the closed nature of WhatsApp differentiates the kind of communication afforded by this platform; ultimately, though, the truly distinctive character underlying all these elements is the capacity to move constantly and interchangeably between private and public environments and practices. As Chadwick et al. (2023a, 2023b) reason, overall, what makes personal messaging unique is not its privacy or intimacy, but the effective switching between private, interpersonal, and semi-public contexts, as well as between one-to-ones, small groups, and larger groups. Even though contents from the public world could intervene, no fully public audiences exist. This hybrid public-interpersonal communication nature affords the easy transition of almost any type of political

message from the public world to the private interpersonal communication networks, where the norms of acceptance/tolerance –if they exist at all– or the approaches to the information consumed may diverge. In the same vein, outrageous or disputed contents emerged as a product of WhatsApp small-group dynamics can easily spread across larger groups, hence acquiring a more "public" condition.

Moreover, WhatsApp has obviously not been designed to discuss politics or disseminate news (Oeldorf-Hirsch 2018); these are acts promoted by users within the particular fabric of emotional and intimate digital connection afforded by the platform. To put it differently, this hybrid public-interpersonal communication nature implies that any discussion about public issues on WhatsApp is *de facto* encapsulated within quotidian, informal exchanges with close ties, with political engagement hence being hardly structured, purposeful, or connected with professional informational settings (Swart et al., 2019). Individuals might or might not engage in political discussions, but they will always do so as a by-product of their everyday non-political messaging with other users with whom they have (close) social relationships (see Masip et al., 2021). The latter is indeed a differential aspect for WhatsApp: individuals do not talk about politics with strange followers of users, as they could do in Twitter or TikTok, but with the same people with whom they have cultivated extra-political, friendly ties outside the messaging platform (and which they presumably intend to sustain).[3] Hence, to a certain extent, what occurs within the platform (also when discussing politics) might have tangible *personal* implications in real life.

This hybrid public-interpersonal nature has led some investigations to reflect on how communicative interactions are shaped in this context, or which are the social norms that operate in it. Two accounts stand out in this respect. On the one hand, Kligler-Vilenchik (2021) suggests that group sociability facilitates healthier political discussions by favouring a greater degree of mutual understanding. To reach that conclusion, this author relies in two artificially created WhatsApp groups though. On the other hand, Zhu et al. (2022) and Chadwick et al. (2023a, 2023b) focus on the spread of misinformation and identify a prevailing norm of conflict avoidance within groups, especially when it comes to exert social corrections in these fora. Ultimately, these studies are pertinent first endeavours to tackle the central question here, that is, how this singular nature[4] of the "WhatsApp space" affects –or not– political talk.

3.2.2.- Key singularities of WhatsApp political talk. Preliminary inferences from our focus groups

Consistently with the work of Zhu et al. (2022), our focus groups reveal that discussions around political topics or public affairs are neither excessively frequent in WhatsApp groups, nor considered as appropriate at all for this kind of fora (see Eliasoph and

[3] For the sake of greater nuance, it is pertinent to acknowledge that there are some exceptions to this norm: when groups are organised around a common logistic interest or condition (for example, group of parents or neighbours), their members may not share such closer ties, or they may not be interested in preserving strictly friendly relationships. Still, it is undeniable that they continue sharing some (physical) space outside the messaging app, and that there is a risk for WhatsApp interactions to be echoed in those offline encountering spaces.

[4] The interaction between technological affordances and the group dynamics of social ties who closely know each other and maintain friendly relationships offline.

Lichterman, 2003). For some respondents, this is simply because of the technological constraints of the platform, which encourages fast-paced conversations, often moving across random topics and ideas and hindering articulated discussions. As a participant (R2) put it:

> I actually love discussing politics, for example, but writing a ten-line paragraph to explain why the Amnesty Law is an aberration feels awkward. Discussions tend to move on quickly, and I know I'll see these friends tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. I rather use the platform very much precisely to arrange in-person meetings with them, and we eventually end up talking about public affairs there.

For many others, nevertheless, the inappropriateness of WhatsApp as a space for political talk derives from their very conception of politics as a sensitive, divisive and conflicting arena (see also Chadwick et al., 2023a; Swart et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2022). This would turn political conversations into unsafe endeavours, a feeling enhanced by the fact that, as anticipated above, small WhatsApp groups comprise individuals who generally maintain valuable affective bonds and social ties "in the real world" (beyond that online messaging environment), bonds and ties preferably not to be ruined "because of politics" (R4).

Having said this, and perhaps paradoxically, it is precisely this intimate character of WhatsApp groups that makes political talk occasionally possible by building a safe environment to artfully address issues that would otherwise be circumvented or lead to intense (discursive) fights under alternative circumstances. This connects well with our previous descriptive findings, which suggest that more than 75% of Spaniards do get involved in political discussions in WhatsApp, though in diverging frequencies. In this sense, one could claim that these political conversations are simply online ramifications of classical offline conversations, i.e., that the singularity of WhatsApp political talk is that the Meta-owned platform constitutes the medium through which people currently communicate with each other, also for political purposes. Indeed, there is some truth in those assumptions, as Chadwick et al. (2023a, 2023b) partly posit. Yet, our focus groups seem to support the idea that the political conversation that emerges in this hybrid public-interpersonal environment is distinct from that of other (public) social media and even from offline talk, accounting for singular specificities both in form and substance.

In this light, our qualitative work connects with the studies of Masip et al. (2021) or Swart et al. (2018, 2019) in leveraging the importance of the (group) "segmentation" affordance, which is claimed to define not only the decision-making of users when it comes to share political content, but also the added value represented by other platform affordances (e.g., privacy, personalisation), which are contingent on that segmentation potential. As one participant (R13) noted:

> The reason why I occasionally touch upon political topics in WhatsApp –and only in WhatsApp– is that no one is watching me beyond my friends. Or, better said, that I make sure that only the people I want are reading my messages… You could say: "Maybe those messages are resent to other groups". Well, that could happen, but, in that case, still I am making sure that no one knows that the messages originally belong to me. Directly or indirectly, you are like a phantom.

Perhaps more relevantly, in the context of political talk or bidirectional exchange of messages about public affairs, some association is perceived between WhatsApp's singular hybrid nature (and affordance-social use interaction) and two dynamics that

overfly and characterise most of the political conversations occurring in these spaces. The first dynamic refers to the "empowerment" capacity or rising agency of individuals to voice controversial –if not radical/edgy– opinions, at least to a greater extent that in other public social media. Our participants overwhelmingly stated that they mobilise WhatsApp to send news and express political opinions that they would hardly send or express anywhere else, "with perhaps the exception of Telegram [precisely another private social media]" (R11). Sometimes, this differential use is the product of a deliberate decision for maintaining an apparent position of neutrality in public spaces while unleashing genuine positionings in front of trusted contacts (e.g., R1, R8, R9); sometimes, though, this behaviour is unconscious and derives naturally from the idea that discussing politics is an abrasive endeavour with potential negative externalities when outside trusted circles (R7, R12, R17). This connects well with Boczkowski et al. (2018), who show that individuals associate different social media with different constellations of possibilities and functionalities, hence accordingly revealing different behaviours in each of them. Against its homologous public platforms, WhatsApp would thus be the place to voice stark opinions about politics, especially when those revolve around controversial topics.

This thesis also connects well with Valeriani and Vaccari's (2018) observation that people who censor themselves politically in public social media tend to express their political ideas in instant messaging apps. Our groups, nevertheless, provide a more nuanced picture: sometimes, it is actually about remaining silent in public while voicing political views in the privacy of WhatsApp; some other times, however, individuals are equally prone to touch upon politics in public and private social media, but, whereas in public settings they tinge their ideas with a dose of moderation to escape from harsh judgement (or they simply avoid voicing their opinions as such and limit themselves to retweeting or sharing information), in WhatsApp no brake tends to exist for them to phrase their genuine thoughts or even funnily release savage content, even though when they do not properly align with it (e.g., R11, R13, R14, R17).

Interestingly, this pattern seems slightly more evident among our rightist participants, who often recognise to show extraordinarily different approaches to discussing public affairs depending on the platform they use. Many justify their behaviour alluding to what they understand as today's reigning "dictatorship of political correctness" (R2, R3) or "lefty dictatorship" (R12). In this sense, their political exchanges in WhatsApp reflect some sort of reaction to what they perceive as the impossibility to express themselves in the public sphere given the retaliation that such expressions –they feel– may entail. The safety of WhatsApp interpersonal communication offsets that fear and incarnates an "escape valve to be free" (R1). As a participant (R3) highlighted:

> Today, you can say nothing in public. Also, no one needs to know what I think… Why should they? That can only damage my professional career at some point. I do not feel comfortable with sharing these things in public. But, of course, this does not mean that I do not have clear stances on many things; it is simply that I express them (or I am forced to express them) with the ones who will not judge me.

Importantly, this does not imply that our left-wing participants do not participate in WhatsApp political discussions or harness its public-interpersonal nature, but that they do not perceive so much a burden in the public that push them to engage in explicitly

differential behaviours or discourses between platforms. As a leftist respondent wittily claimed (R8): "I often say similar things everywhere. These are the advantages of being morally tidy and being in the *right* side of history". Ultimately, this finding is not utterly rare. It makes sense in light of the work of Dinas et al. (2024), for example, who show that some rightist values and political expressions in Spain (especially those connected with Spanish nationalism, because of their perceived Francoist inheritance) suffer a stigma that conditions the related public behaviours of concerned individuals.

That said, in our groups I do not see a significantly diverging pattern for those individuals who are more engaged or interested in politics –or who hold more extreme positions– and those who are not –or do not–. It is true that, for the former, this "empowerment capacity" translates into sharing and commenting outrageous content more frequently, whereas, for the latter, it is about expressing the strong viewpoints that they do not feel comfortable sharing out there, regardless of their (non-)fanatic nature. However, the pattern of adapting to the opportunities provided by each platform within the (social) media ecosystem to portray different political versions of the self –and a starker and perhaps more genuine one in WhatsApp– is transversal and cuts across people's degree of extremism or political engagement. In this vein, taking Goffman's (1956) metaphor on the presentations of the self, to a certain extent WhatsApp could be understood as the backstage theatre where "performers" can relax and step out of their "public character" without fear of disrupting their public image, the targeted-audience space where individuals relieve themselves aware that the "actions that would not be condoned in the front stage are free to be expressed". These backstage WhatsApp spaces, in turn, may become influential in moulding the sociopolitical identities of individuals, especially if considering that our focus groups reveal the identity-based nature of conversations as another key singularity of political talk in the platform.

Lastly, one could argue that the reasoning above clashes with some of the mantras that we have heard about social media for the past decade, especially among the general public, namely, those that hold that a key danger of social media precisely refers to the opportunity for anonymity that they provide for users to disseminate radical content or hatred. Without underestimating these fears, the number of people who hide behind fake profiles and engage in these deleterious behaviours may not be as abundant as often imagined. In his seminal investigation, Bail (2022: 70-73) showed that only those who feel "reputed-less in the real world" are prone to proceed that way; most people, who rather subjectively feel that they have some *social position or status* to safeguard, find themselves quite distant from such censored-by-the-public behaviours. Hence, it is not rare to argue that, for the largest part of the population, WhatsApp does serve as the (political) backstage theatre that public social media can by no means epitomise.

All in all, the privacy and intimacy of WhatsApp spaces –small groups in particular–, together with the singular role they play amidst the whole media ecosystem, create safe sanctuaries for (political) expression. In any case, the key here is that the constant blurring and redrawing of the frontiers between public and private/interpersonal milieus afforded by WhatsApp ends up not only allowing for the discussion of public concerns in private settings, but also bringing the conversational criteria and forms of those private settings (such as inter-friend, specific cues of acceptance or tolerance) to the

debate of public issues. This is ultimately why individuals are empowered in such "consequence-less" environments. As a participant funnily put it (R5):

> Thank God we have WhatsApp. If I were to say in public or to type in Twitter what I said in my WhatsApp groups the night of the elections… I would be in jail [laughs]. This is the good thing of WhatsApp: I can comment on anything without having to overexplain what I said or did not say. They already know me. We can talk about heated issues, and I don't need to beware of what the others will think; I can make a joke about immigration, and I will not have to explain to my friend that I am not a racist [he already knows it].

The second dynamic associated with WhatsApp's hybrid nature and political talk revolves around the centrality of trust, which has, at least, two implications for the kind of prevailing exchanges in the platform. On the one hand, the interaction of high interpersonal trust among WhatsApp group members with the platform's logistic capabilities for digital communication, such as memes, stickers, and other multimedia elements, results in conversations that are primarily mundane and familiar (R2, R3, R10, R15). In this sense, Uses and Gratifications theory suggests that individuals actively select media that meet their specific needs, such as the desire for social interaction and entertainment: in our case, WhatsApp may fulfil these needs by providing a space where users can engage in casual and humorous exchanges with close ties. When political talk does occur, it is embedded within this casual context, often taking on a "leisure character" that blurs the lines between serious political discourse and entertainment (R5). As Matassi et al. (2019) reason, WhatsApp is not a news source in itself, and, therefore, any discursive endeavour around public affairs needs to be interpreted apart from conscious decisions of political deliberation or news consumption.

Likewise, the overall trusty and homophilic nature of groups facilitates the use of ridicule in political discussions. Political figures and positions are often mocked, which not only reinforces in-group solidarity but also serves as a means of challenging established actors, structures, and elites (R4, R12). Hence, WhatsApp is also a relevant subversive vehicle for some disenfranchised communities, who articulate their shared (political) concerns through laughter (see also Ndlovu, 2021). Also, the phenomena of *memification* and *stickerization* of politics are particularly prominent on this platform. Memes and stickers, as forms of digital folklore (Shifman, 2014), allow users to participate in the creation and dissemination of political content in a way that is both accessible and entertaining. As this mode of communication often involves the use of humour among trusted ties to comment on serious public issues, this prioritises affective responses over reasoned debate, sometimes turning, under the guise of comedy, into the legitimisation of outrageous content and emotionally rooted characterisations of the political adversary as a vital enemy.

On the other hand, the interpersonal networks fostered by WhatsApp favour "altruistic trust" (Mansbridge, 1999), not "social trust" (Putnam et al., 1993). Social trust enables cooperation among strangers; it is cultivated through reciprocity and information exchange, especially where cooperation is necessary to achieve common goals. Closer personal relationships hardly rely on it though, since individuals are more inclined to inherently trust the information shared by close contacts without needing the explicit credibility cues that are crucial in interactions with strangers (Masip et al., 2021). Indeed, among individuals with deep shared experiences, reciprocity and the

dissemination of high-quality information lose importance when it comes to build and maintain trust. Conversely, Mansbridge's (1999) altruistic trust operates, according to which people tend to trust their family/friends more than is warranted by the available evidence, simply because of the close links that unite them around the same community.

Building on the aforementioned "empowerment capacity" and thus considering WhatsApp as a differential space for the expression of genuine, emotionally rooted (sometimes edgy) opinions, the implications of the prevalence of altruistic trust are twofold for the engagement of users with such a content, especially when it is controversial. First, since trust is inherently warranted in private interpersonal communicative contexts of close ties, political information and points of view (even if extreme) may be more easily assumed as natural or right and less frequently challenged than in other (heterogeneous) public contexts. In fact, in line with Masip et al. (2021), our focus groups point to a distinct relationship between WhatsApp senders and recipients, which strengthens the perceived trustworthiness of the content shared, as individuals are inclined to read, trust, and forward information shared by contacts they consider reliable. Second, precisely since the bonds frequently existing between WhatsApp group members tend to transcend reciprocal sharing of high quality or politically agreeable information, the unchallenging of (radical or outrageous) messages or viewpoints extends to circumstances in which other group members consciously disagree with such messages. On the one hand, because the deep shared experiences through which individuals have built their trusty relationships provide them with a singular, tailored intersubjective framework as well as with a profound knowledge of each other that prevents misunderstandings and real conflict. As a focus group participant emphasised (R7): "We are good friends. I know what he thinks. I let him express himself; the following day it will be me expressing myself. Better to leave it like that. Our relationship will not be tarnished because of political stuff". On the other hand, because, as this same excerpt shows, (altruistic) trust can interact with the social norm of conflict avoidance (Chadwick et al., 2023a), such that the relational capacity of users to correct or contest even outrageous content shrinks once recognising that they are interested in keeping their good interdependent social relationships. In this vein, the unchallenging of that content becomes even more evident when individuals feel that they do not have social license to operate differently (Chadwick et al., 2023a), that is, when other group members do not challenge the corresponding content either (due to the aforementioned reasons) and, therefore, it is perceived that no "permission" has been granted to that end.

3.3.- The multifaceted nature of WhatsApp political talk: types of conversations

When attempting to understand the ultimate purpose of bringing public affairs to the interpersonal context of WhatsApp, we observe that the facilitation of political discussion in small, private WhatsApp groups is contingent on individuals' perceptions of politics, their understanding of digital spaces, and their use of social relationships, rules, and strategies to manage those conversations more broadly. Mostly, our focus groups suggest that these political exchanges are secure endeavours emerged from a context of "social groundedness" among trusted ties (see Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Masip et al., 2021). Yet, our groups also indicate that there is no univocal political conversation in WhatsApp. Depending on the approach to the viewpoints exchanged

and to the other talkers involved in the conversation, we distinguish up to four types of prototypical conversations. Figure 3 unveils this classification, and Figure 4 shows the actual prevalence of each of them thanks to the data of our Ipsos survey. Congruently with all our reasonings above and with the fact that private messages containing public information on WhatsApp are rarely intended to spark political debates or share ideologically diverse information, the two most popular kinds of conversations are those that resemble the "echo chamber model", "relief" and "reaffirming" conversations. In contrast, between 37% and half of the population declare to never engage on WhatsApp in the more diverse clashing or Habermasian conversations.

Figure 3

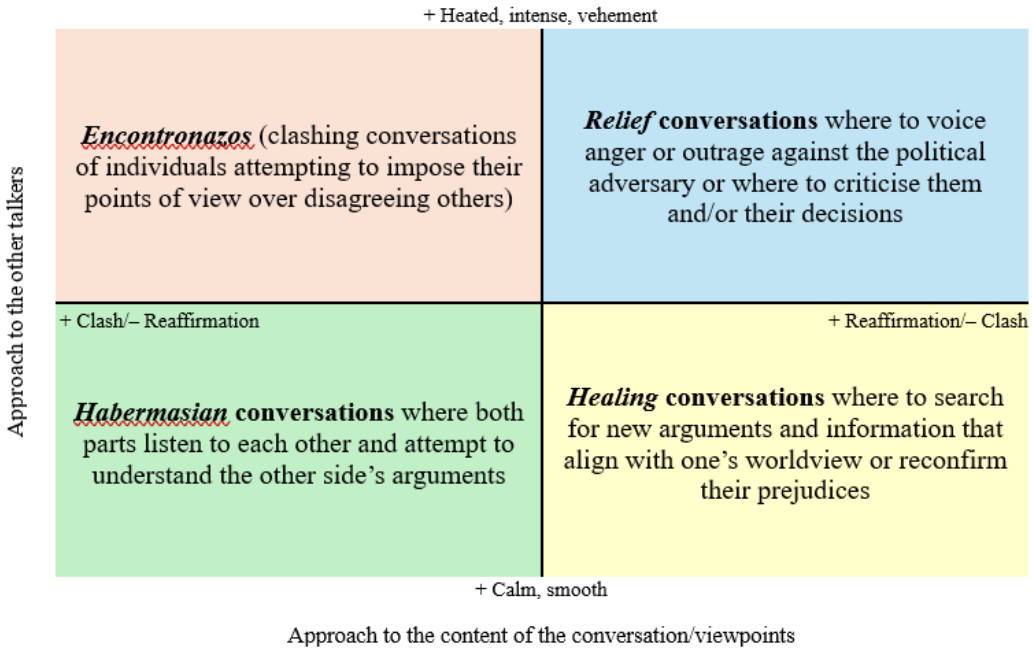
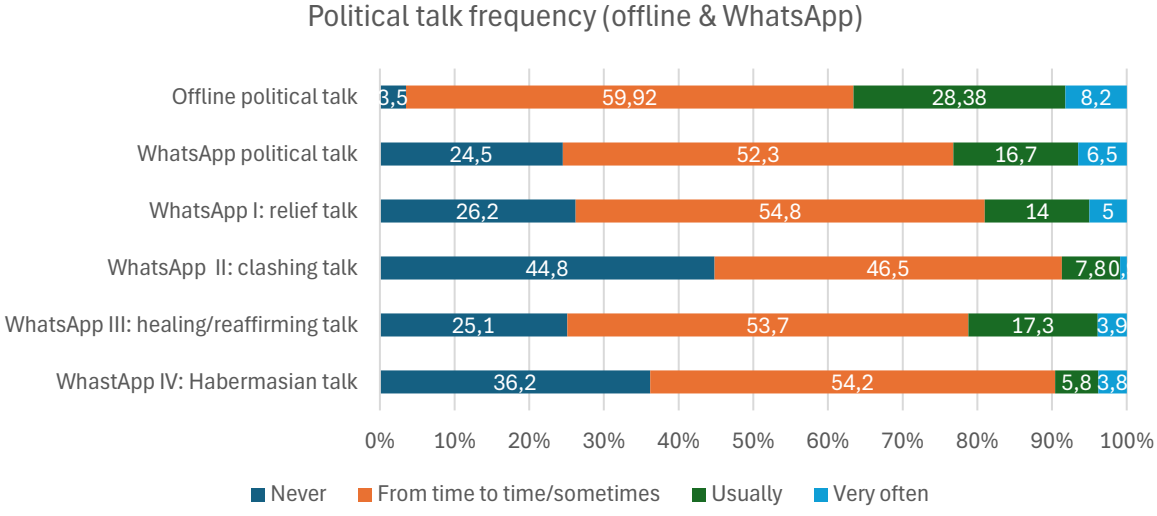


Figure 4



Source: Own elaboration, with data from Ipsos (2024)

3.3.1.- Where do political conversations take place? A note on the kind of WhatsApp groups that lead to certain conversations

Just a brief summary note that may be further developed at the congress. Beyond the work of Swart et al. (2019), which proposes that the purpose of WhatsApp groups (is it a group for parents? For friends? For teammates?) conditions the very possibilities of political talk to occur, our qualitative and quantitative evidence suggest that there are two main axes according to which individuals assess whether and how to engage in such conversations, and a third one which is ultimately dependent on the previous two: personal closeness or trust, ideological affinity, and group size. The latter indeed partially relates to the former two, as larger groups are more prone to comprise weaker (and less ideologically compact) contacts, and vice versa. We observe that users do not consider so carefully the original purpose of the group when discussing politics, as Swart et al. (2019) pointed, simply because this does not always serve as a proxy to get information about the aforementioned two relevant variables. As a participant (R8) noted:

> Obviously, it tends to be that we the group of close friends think alike, and therefore use this cannel for tricky issues like politics. However, I have some groups of [not so close] friends who are ideologically quite different, and at the same time I have a group with my football teammates in which we all have similar opinions. Depending on the issue at stake, I may prefer to express myself in the latter. It is safer.

Thus, one could think that WhatsApp groups' higher personal closeness and ideological affinity boost the probability of discussing politics, at least when it comes to the "relief" or "reaffirming" conversations of the prior section. However, preliminary quantitative tests that we are running suggest that the picture is a bit more nuanced. The excerpt above from our focus groups seems to provide the key here: WhatsApp users search for safe spaces when dealing with politics, but, in that search, personal closeness/trust and ideological affinity do not always paddle in the same direction, and they might even offset each other. To put it differently, at least when having the kind of paradigmatic reaffirming conversations expected from WhatsApp, ideological affinity tends to provide the safety that individuals require to discuss politics, regardless of the personal bonds that unite them; when the latter are so strong, though, the ideological affinity of groups decreases in importance, to the point of being almost irrelevant to voice one's viewpoints when the trust ties are really bold. Thus, reflections on the actual levels of fragmentation in WhatsApp may need to consider the variety of conversations afforded and their dynamics, firstly, and the singular interplay between personal and viewpoint homophily, secondly.

4.- The relationship between WhatsApp and affective polarisation

4.1.- Some theoretical remarks

As stated above, the literature exploring the interplay between WhatsApp political discussions or experiences and affective polarization is scarce, not to say inexistent at all. Affective polarization, characterised by the growing animosity between supporters of opposing political parties (Iyengar et al., 2012), is fundamentally rooted in emotions, manifesting through feelings of distrust, dislike, and even hatred towards political outgroups. Hence, besides addressing a pressing contemporary issue, I find research on

how WhatsApp political talk affects these emotional divides pertinent for a panel concerned with the role of emotions in political communication. Indeed, affective polarisation goes beyond mere ideological disagreements; it shapes how individuals emotionally perceive and react to each other, encouraging depictions of the outgroup as closed-mindedness, immoral, unpatriotic or unintelligent (Iyengar et al., 2019), and even influencing social interactions, voting behaviour, and policy preferences.

Having reported above the extraordinary popularity of WhatsApp to discuss public affairs as well as to get involved in various kinds of prototypical political conversations, I argue that those messaging experiences are associated with the configuration of key political emotions in the form affective polarisation. The unique characteristics of WhatsApp may play a significant role in fostering sectarian information bubbles. Since communication on these platforms primarily takes place within a close-knit circle of friends (Bayer et al., 2016), individuals often connect with others who share similar backgrounds (McPherson et al., 2001) and often even similar political beliefs. In this respect, data from our Ipsos survey indeed indicate that almost a quarter of WhatsApp users are enclosed in political echo chambers, a notable greater figure than that related to other public social media (see Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) for comparison purposes). Thus, users are prone to sharing news articles that reflect their common political perspectives and discussing them in ways that reinforce their existing opinions (Lottridge & Bentley, 2018). Even when group members come across news that contradicts their collective attitudes, they are likely to interpret such information in ways that are consistent with their preexisting views.

Unlike the public nature of social media, where users often adjust their tone to suit the diverse preferences of their audience (Child and Starcher, 2016), WhatsApp users enjoy a higher degree of selectivity or segmentation, as anticipated above, allowing them to communicate with small, trusted groups. In these, there is less concern about managing impressions or opinions, as the participants are already well-acquainted (Bayer et al., 2016). If anything, precisely because of that excuse, there are higher incentives for "mismanaging" impressions and opinions, sometimes leading to the sharing of radical or outrageous content, as suggested above: since there is no need to overexplain what is discussed, these spaces are understood as some sort of refuge to say "what cannot be said elsewhere" (R5).

Moreover, our focus groups revealed that any mention to politics or public affairs in these fora tends to be framed within the dichotomic logics of "us vs them", and that the singular roots of political talk in quotidian interpersonal conversations among social ties generally bring to the fore ardent and widely debatable identity issues or end up turning complex policy issues of public interest into a tribal matter driven by partisan cues. All of this makes reflective engagement with information implausible, while reinforcing the appeal to affects and emotions when approaching to politics. Similarly, our focus groups, together with other studies (see Rowlett and Harlow, 2018), also show that the political messages shared on private social media usually differ qualitatively from those of other sources: public affairs are frequently presented in a sensationalistic form, eliciting emotional reactions while omitting contextual details and background information crucial for substantive political understanding. Such emotionally charged

messages, especially when focused on political parties or candidates and identitarian issues, may influence users' emotional standings and perceptions.

On these grounds, we expect WhatsApp political talk to be positively linked to affective polarisation. Yet, for the sake of a more fine-grained examination of this link, if our theoretical underpinnings are right, we would more concretely expect that "inhabiting" an echo chamber in the platform –i.e., participating in conversations with whose talkers individuals agree significantly more than disagree– is positively associated with higher levels of affective polarisation, as the exposure to and interpretation of public affairs driven by common political views that frequently fosters WhatsApp might lead to positive sentiments towards the ingroup and negative feelings towards the "other" side. In the same vein, if we referred to the prototypical conversations identified in the previous section, we would expect the two most common ones –i.e., those that replicate the echo chamber logics ("relief conversations" and "reaffirming conversations")– to equally have a positive effect on affective polarisation, as they do not only represent the paradigmatic cases of closed, strong-tie (partisan) silos, but also best incarnate the dichotomic and tribal nature of the emotionally rooted WhatsApp conversation that we have conceptualised as the standard above. If anything, we should expect a slightly higher effect for "relief conversations", in that they denote a more fervent and existential discursive tone –and hence a more virulent environment (see Tucker et al., 2018)– besides their reaffirming character. Hence:

H1: A higher frequency of WhatsApp political talk is positively associated with affective polarisation.

H2: Being part of an overall WhatsApp echo chamber when discussing politics is positively associated with affective polarisation.

H3a: A higher frequency of WhatsApp "relief conversations" is positively associated with affective polarisation.

H3b: A higher frequency of WhatsApp "reaffirming conversations" is positively associated with affective polarisation.

While the relationships hypothesised above are relatively straightforward, they may not be uniform across individuals. As Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) suggest in their examination of the effects of social media on political participation, many studies on digital platforms incur the "one-size-fits-all fallacy", that is, they assume that the effects found are consistent across very diverse segments of the population, which is neither intuitive nor plausible. To circumvent this handicap, I argue that there are, at least, three factors that could influence the direction and/or strength of our hypothesised associations. For the sake of simplicity, hereunder I point these three moderators and provide a preliminary, non-exhaustive explanation of how they might condition the posited effects.

First, interest in politics: can WhatsApp political talk experiences affectively polarise the relatively less engaged, or do they mostly affect those who are already active? On the one hand, low-interest individuals might be more prone to passive consumption of political content on WhatsApp as well as to much less emotionally intense interactions, whereas high-interest individuals seem to adjust more to the profile of people who

engage in active, emotionally charged, and selective discussions. Thus, we should expect a higher polarising effect of WhatsApp political talk experiences among those individuals with higher interest in politics. On the other hand, however, it is true that, when assessing outcomes such as political participation, it has been proved that the marginal utility of political experiences on social media is higher among those users who are less involved in politics (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021). Indeed, this reasoning may also be coherent for our affective polarisation outcome: although low-interest individuals could be less prone to echo chamber or emotionally charged conversations, once they are involved in those experiences, the effect these can have on such individuals might be larger than for those interested in politics, who already tend to account for higher polarisation levels by default (as they also have stronger political allegiances and encounter higher quantities of political stimuli in and outside social media in their everyday lives). Thus, I propose these two exclusive hypotheses:

H4a: The aforementioned WhatsApp political talk experiences are related to higher levels of affective polarisation, especially among individuals with high interest in politics.

H4b: The aforementioned WhatsApp political talk experiences are related to higher levels of affective polarisation, especially among individuals with none or scarce interest in politics.

Second, there exists a large academic tradition emphasising the importance of the political context in shaping the effect of individual experiences and behaviours (Zaller, 1992). In this vein, of particular relevance in today's fragmented political landscape could be party system polarisation or, more accurately, the perception of it. Several factors might contribute to such a perception, such as the radicalisation of mainstream parties' discourses (Brown et al., 2021; Olivas Osuna and Rama, 2021), the consolidation of a new de-intermediated media ecosystem that allows for the direct consumption of politicians' differentiating discourses without the editorial filters of journalism (Seelinger and Sevignani, 2022), and an overall information environment that brings to the fore polarisation narratives, partisan journalists who play as exemplars of activist leftists and rightists, and news about elite political exemplars actually becoming more polarised (Ahler, 2014).[5] Be it as it may, the perception of a polarised system conditions not only how citizens make decisions, but also the political predispositions and identities that may shape the effect of certain decisions (Druckman et al., 2013). In this sense, there is evidence that, when the perception of polarisation is high, political differences are more salient and partisan identification becomes stronger and less ambivalent, leading to increased motivated reasoning (and stronger party cue effects), decreased importance for substantive information in opinion formation, and –paradoxically– greater confidence in those substantively ungrounded opinions and/or feelings (Bullock, 2011; Druckman et al., 2013; Nicholson, 2012). Hence, in sum, perceptions of higher polarisation would activate or amplify more tribalist ingroup vs outgroup thinking and decision-making (Iyengar et al., 2012). Under these circumstances, when individuals basically perceive that stakes are high, it is logical that

[5] I do not address it here for the sake of brevity, but we count with analyses from our Ipsos survey showing that WhatsApp political talk experiences have no significant link whatsoever with the perception of party system polarisation.

higher frequencies of emotional political talk in WhatsApp –and especially higher frequencies of echo chamber conversational experiences often appealing to identitarian sentiments– lead to significantly greater levels of affective polarisation. We should not expect such inflated levels under the opposite circumstances, that is, when that ingroup vs outgroup identitarian thinking does not flourish so easily and automatically, given that a lower degree of party system polarisation is perceived (i.e., when it is thought that not so much is at stake). Hence:

H5: The aforementioned WhatsApp political talk experiences are related to higher levels of affective polarisation, but especially when individuals perceive that party system polarisation is higher.

4.2.- Some notes on operationalisation and methodology

For the sake of brevity, we are deliberately concise in this section. Spain is a multiparty system; hence, calculating a measure of affective polarisation is not as simple as it could be in bipartisan systems such as the US. I suggest following the work of Wagner (2021) and measuring our dependent variable as the spread of party/candidate like-dislike scores for each respondent. This approach acknowledges that people can have positive feelings towards multiple political parties or candidates. Someone with low affective polarisation exhibits comparable levels of sentiment towards all parties, whether those sentiments are positive or negative. Conversely, an individual with high affective polarisation displays significantly varying sentiments towards different parties. Calculating affective polarisation using this strategy is straightforward: it involves defining the average absolute difference in party/candidate like-dislike scores relative to each respondent's overall average like-dislike score for the parties/candidates. Also, it turns convenient to adjust this measure according to the parties'/candidates' vote shares (Wagner, 2021). Hence, affective polarisation is computed in the following way:

$$Spread_i = \sqrt{\Sigma_{p=1}^{P} v_p (like_{ip} - \overline{like_i})^2}$$

where p is the party, i the respondent, $like_{ip}$ the like-dislike score assigned by individual i to each party p, v_p the normalised vote share of each party, and $\overline{like_i}$ the weighted mean party affect of individual i. Please note that all the results presented in this manuscript follow this measure and refer to party like/dislike scores. Yet, they have also been replicated following alternative operationalisation (such as the distance measure) as well as alternative like/dislike scores (political leaders instead of parties). These robustness checks are not included in this manuscript but remain largely similar and may be presented at the conference.

Our main independent variables refer to various forms of WhatsApp political talk. The simplest measure is a 1-5 scale capturing the frequency with which individuals use the platform to "discuss current political affairs or talk about public/social affairs" (1 = never; 5 = very often). The same pattern applies to our prototypical WhatsApp conversations (relief, reaffirming, clashing, and Habermasian ones): the corresponding measures size the frequency with which respondents get involved in them, also following a 1-5 scale (1 = never; 5 = very often). The previous section already provides

further information on the conceptualisation of these conversations. Lastly, to measure whether individuals are overall enclosed within an echo chamber in WhatsApp when it comes to discussing politics, we follow Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) and integrate responses from two separate questions that inquire how often respondents participate in WhatsApp political conversations with whose viewpoints/talkers they agree or disagree. For both questions, respondents could select from the following options: "never", "rarely", "sometimes", "usually", and "very often". Thus, I categorise respondents' overall conversational experience in WhatsApp as "two-sided" if they report engagement with agreement and disagreement with equal frequency (whether "very often" or "rarely"); "echo chamber" or "one-sided supportive" if they more frequently engage with agreeing viewpoints or talkers; and "disagreement chamber" or "one-sided oppositional" if they more frequently engage with disagreeing views or talkers. Finally, I label those who declared to "never" discuss politics on WhatsApp as "never discuss".

We add to our models a series of control variables that may have an impact on affective polarisation levels and might therefore confound the relationship between our WhatsApp-related independent variables and our polarisation dependent variable. Thus, include indicators of individuals' interest in politics (1-5 scale), ideology (0-10 scale), satisfaction with the economy (0-10 scale), satisfaction with the political situation (0-10 scale), satisfaction with democracy (0-10 scale), trust in traditional and social media (0-10 scale), frequency of offline political talk (1-5 scale), frequency of traditional media political use (1-5 scale), and frequency of social media political use (1-5 scale). In addition, to build our contextual-level variable of perceived party system polarisation, we follow Lachat (2008), Lupu (2015) and Wagner (2021), among many others, and rely on measures of voters' perception of how far ideologically parties are from each other and from some central position (overall citizens' average placement). We also consider each party's contribution to overall polarisation by weighting their share of the popular vote. Lastly, we take into account the traditional sociodemographic variables: age, gender, urban dwelling (1 = yes; 0 = no), education (1-6 scale), income (1-6 scale), and employment status (polytomous variable where "employed" is the baseline).

Because our dependent variable is continuous, I specify a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. I enter sets of variables in successive steps to evaluate the relative impact of each set on the variance in the dependent variable (Cohen and Cohen, 1983). The variables were added in the following sequence: socio-demographic variables (M1), political attitudes (M2), media-related variables (M3), contextual variables (i.e., weighted perceived polarisation) (M4), WhatsApp-related independent variables (M5, M6 and M7), and finally, the interaction terms between the latter indicators and political interest (M8, M9, M10, M11), on the one hand, and perceived polarisation (M12, M13, M14, M15), on the other.

4.3.- Results and analysis

Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix summarise the results. The model fits are relatively good, with moderate but increasing explained variance: 26%. Some classical variables, such as interest in politics ($\beta = 0.164$, $p < 0.01$), satisfaction with the political situation ($\beta = -0.072$, $p < 0.01$), or frequency of offline talk ($\beta = 0.125$, $p < 0.05$), seem strong predictors of affective polarisation. Unsurprisingly, ideology possesses a quadratic

effect on our dependent variable, with affective polarisation becoming higher in the extremes of the left-right ideological scale. For further details on the effects of other control variables, see Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix.

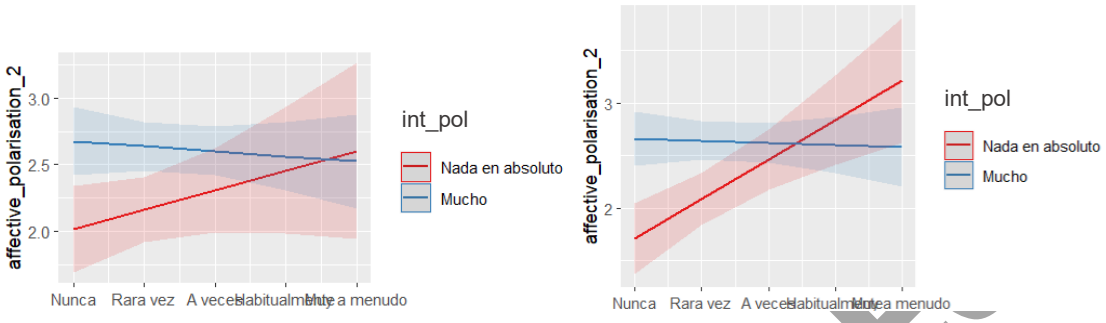
Moving now onto our central focus, the results show that, controlling for a host of variables, the frequent use of WhatsApp to discuss public affairs is positively related to affective polarisation ($\beta = 0.076$, $p < 0.1$), even though the strength of this association is relatively weak and only significant at the 90% level of confidence. Our H1 is therefore confirmed. Turning to more specific experiences in the platform, being involved in a WhatsApp (conversational) echo chamber does not have a significant effect on affective polarisation in comparison with enjoying a balanced record of agreeing and disagreeing discussions. Although the coefficient is positive, as expected, it does not reach statistical significance. Interestingly, being involved in a "disagreement" chamber in the platform does have a weak positive effect on affective polarisation vs our reference category ($\beta = 0.208$, $p < 0.1$). Likewise, never discussing politics on WhatsApp possesses a strong negative effect on our dependent variable ($\beta = -0.278$, $p < 0.01$). Altogether, these findings suggest that whichever is the way individuals engage with discussing politics on WhatsApp (echo chamber, balanced discussions, or disagreement chamber), their levels of affective polarisation will always be higher than if they do not use the platform for this purpose at all. What is more, such findings suggest that, all things equal, it is the "disagreement chamber" WhatsApp experience that affectively polarises more. Lastly, our two prototypical conversations of interest behave as expected and display positive coefficients. Nonetheless, whereas the (calmly) "reaffirming" conversations ($\beta = 0.121$, $p < 0.05$) have strong effect, the "relief" conversations lack statistical significance. We do not elaborate on this here (though we may do it in the presentation), but, interestingly, WhatsApp "clashing" conversations also have a positive effect on affective polarisation ($\beta = 0.104$, $p < 0.1$), while the "Habermasian" ones are strongly negatively associated with our dependent variable ($\beta = -0.157$, $p < 0.01$).

Our last models (see Table 2 of the Appendix) tested the interaction effect of WhatsApp political talk (experiences) and interest in politics, on the one hand, and perceived party system polarisation, on the other, on affective polarisation. Regarding the former, the overall measure of WhatsApp political talk significantly –though weakly– interacted with political interest in predicting affective polarisation ($\beta = -0.060$, $p < 0.1$). More concretely, the positive relationship between WhatsApp political talk and affective polarisation attenuates the higher one's interest in politics is. Or, to put it differently, higher frequencies of WhatsApp political talk are related to higher affective polarisation levels notably more among those who are not interested in politics. This finding is replicated with varying levels of significance for the remaining talk experiences in the platform. Thus, we find no statistical significance in the "WhatsApp (conversational) echo chamber*interest in politics" interaction term, but the coefficient behaves similarly and therefore is negative. The same pattern applies to the interaction terms with our two prototypical conversations of interest, although such an interaction is strongly significant only in the case of the (calmly) "reaffirming" conversations. For a clearer visualisation of these effects, Figure 5 plots the predicted values of affective polarisation as a function of the frequency with which individuals get involved in those prototypical conversations and the interest they have in politics. Altogether, these findings provide support for our H4b while simultaneously rejecting our H4a: once involved in the

classical emotionally charged WhatsApp conversations, low-interested individuals are slightly more affected by them than highly interested individuals.

Figure 5. Predicted values of affective polarisation (interaction plot: WhatsApp prototypical conversations*interest in politics)

"Relief conversation" *"Reaffirming conversation"*



Regarding the perception of party system polarisation, our hypotheses seem to turn right with strong statistical significance. Once again, the overall measure of WhatsApp political talk interacts significantly with the weighted measure of perceived polarisation; the sign of the coefficient is positive, as expected, but this time the interaction term is strongly significant at the highest level of confidence ($\beta = 0.139$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 2 in the Appendix). Interestingly, whereas being part of an overall WhatsApp echo chamber experience predicted higher levels of affective polarisation versus those individuals who never discuss politics in the platform, but not versus those who enjoyed a balanced record of agreeing and disagreeing conversations, our interaction models show that such an echo chamber experience significantly predicts higher affective polarisation, also in comparison with those with a balanced conversational record, but only when individuals hold perceptions of a higher degree of system polarisation. What is more, perceptions of how ideologically polarised the political context is are so crucial that taking part in a WhatsApp echo chamber can have a slightly negative effect on affective polarisation levels when those perceptions are of lower system polarisation. To put it differently, perceptions of elites' ideological divergence become central to the point of shaping the very direction of the effect of being involved in a WhatsApp echo chamber. The same pattern replicates for our two prototypical WhatsApp conversations: in both cases, ceteris paribus, their higher frequencies predict higher levels of affective polarisation, but only if users also appreciate greater levels of system polarisation. Otherwise, individuals' predicted affective polarisation remain constant and even slightly decrease across frequency levels of WhatsApp political conversation. For a clearer visualisation, please refer to Figures 6 and 7, which plot the predicted values of affective polarisation as a function of individuals' perception of party system polarisation and WhatsApp echo chamber (non-)participation, on the one hand (F6), and frequency with which they get involved our two prototypical conversations, on the other (F7). All in all, what these findings suggest is that individuals need to feel that there is much at stake for the emotional, sectarian exchanges that they maintain in WhatsApp to actually lead them to greater affective polarising outcomes; high perceived polarisation makes political differences more salient and intensifies the emotional impact of WhatsApp political talk. The results thus point to the importance that citizens' existing predispositions have for the implications that WhatsApp experiences may have on them.

Figure 6. Predicted values of affective polarisation (interaction plot: being part of an overall WhatsApp echo chamber*weighted perceived party system polarisation)

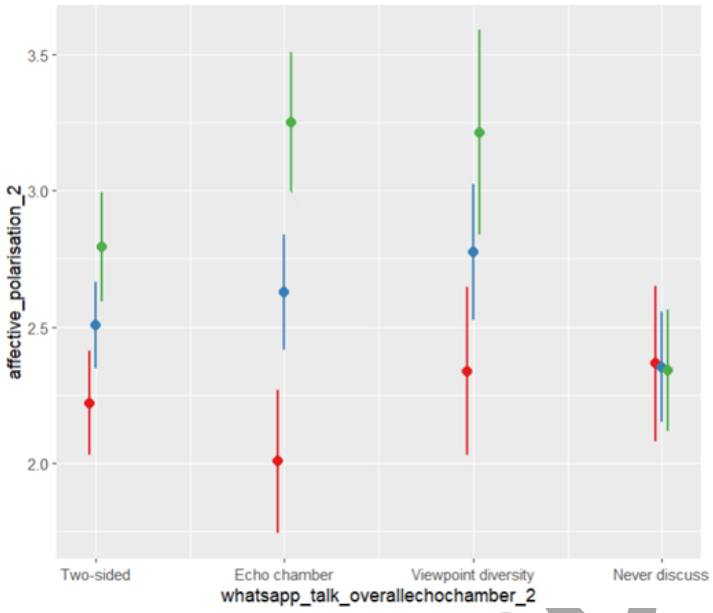
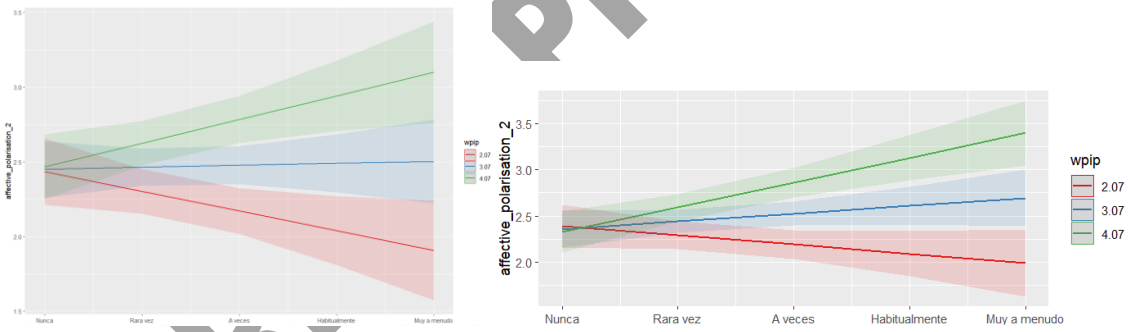


Figure 7. Predicted values of affective polarisation (interaction plot: WhatsApp prototypical conversations*weighted perceived party system polarisation)

"Relief conversation" *"Reaffirming conversation"*



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APPENDIX (REGRESSION TABLES)

Table 1. Results of the OLS models: predicting affective polarisation levels

	Dependent variable:						
	Affective polarisation (Wagner's spread measure)						
	Model 1 (Sociodem.)	**Model 2 (+ Pol. Attitudes)**	**Model 3 (+ media-related variables)**	**Model 4 (+ WPIP)**	**Model 5 (M4 + What pol. talk)**	**Model 6 (M4 + Whats. pol. echo chamber)**	**Model 7 (M4 + What pol. conv.)**
Sociodemographic items							
Age	0.015***	0.015***	0.011***	0.011***	0.012***	0.013***	0.012***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Gender (male)	0.080	-0.045	-0.045	-0.037	-0.048	-0.052	-0.053
	(0.087)	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.079)	(0.079)	(0.078)	(0.078)
Urban dweller	-0.048**	-0.047**	-0.043**	-0.044**	-0.045**	-0.047***	-0.045**
	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Education	-0.020	-0.047*	-0.052*	-0.028	-0.032	-0.035	-0.037
	(0.029)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)
Income	-0.001	0.001	-0.005	-0.002	0.001	0.003	0.001
	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Employment status (base: employed)							
Unemployed	0.064	0.177	0.179	0.186	0.189	0.197	0.179
	(0.164)	(0.152)	(0.150)	(0.148)	(0.148)	(0.147)	(0.146)
Student/housekeeper	0.089	0.151	0.168	0.148	0.156	0.160	0.165
	(0.137)	(0.126)	(0.124)	(0.123)	(0.122)	(0.122)	(0.121)
Retired	-0.161	-0.180	-0.142	-0.146	-0.137	-0.155	-0.121
	(0.143)	(0.131)	(0.130)	(0.128)	(0.128)	(0.128)	(0.128)
Political attitudes							
Interest in politics		0.224***	0.155***	0.180***	0.164***	0.159***	0.143***
		(0.038)	(0.045)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Ideology		-0.462***	-0.475***	-0.452***	-0.442***	-0.440***	-0.443***
		(0.060)	(0.060)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)
Ideology^2		0.049***	0.050***	0.047***	0.046***	0.045***	0.046***
		(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Satisfaction with economy		0.060**	0.053**	0.049**	0.047*	0.048*	0.056**
		(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.024)
Satisfaction with political situation		-0.088***	-0.083***	-0.071***	-0.072***	-0.070***	-0.068**
		(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)

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Satisfaction with democracy	0.077***	0.048**	0.050**	0.053**	0.051**	0.050**
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.021)
Media-related variables						
Trust in traditional media		0.099***	0.091***	0.090***	0.103***	0.098***
		(0.023)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.023)
Trust in social media		-0.034	-0.032	-0.031	-0.020	-0.020
		(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Frequency of offline political talk		0.127**	0.125**	0.125**	0.120**	0.120**
		(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.048)	(0.049)
Freq. of traditional media use for politics		0.016	0.077	0.067	0.066	0.045
		(0.058)	(0.053)	(0.053)	(0.054)	(0.054)
Freq. of public social media use for politics		-0.021	-0.015	-0.052	-0.029	-0.030
		(0.050)	(0.043)	(0.047)	(0.049)	(0.053)
Political context						
Weighted perceived party system polarisation			0.217***	0.220***	0.235***	0.215***
			(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.040)
WhatsApp-related variables						
Frequency of WhatsApp political talk				0.076*		
				(0.040)		
Whats. overall echo cham. (base: two-sided)						
Echo chamber (one-sided supportive)					0.048	
					(0.103)	
Disagre. chamber (one-sided opposition)					0.208*	
					(0.120)	
Never discuss					-0.278***	
					(0.104)	
WhatsApp relief conversation						0.025
						(0.053)
WhatsApp clashing conversation						-0.157***
						(0.055)
WhatsApp reaff. conversation						0.121**
						(0.058)
WhatsApp Habermasian conversation						0.104*

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							(0.060)
Constant	2.087*** (0.243)	2.002*** (0.301)	1.887*** (0.309)	1.032*** (0.350)	0.981*** (0.351)	1.107*** (0.355)	0.974*** (0.351)
N	800	800	800	800	800	800	800
R2	0.034	0.196	0.228	0.248	0.252	0.262	0.291
Adjusted R2	0.024	0.182	0.209	0.231	0.234	0.241	0.260
Residual Std. Error	1.193 (df=791)	1.092 (df=785)	1.074 (df=780)	1.059 (df=779)	1.057 (df=778)	1.052 (df=776)	1.046 (df=775)

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Table 2. Results of the OLS models: predicting affective polarisation levels [Continued]

	Dependent variable:							
	Affective polarisation (Wagner's spread measure)							
	Model 8 (inter. int. pol. I)	**Model 9 (inter. int. pol. II)**	**Model 10 (inter. int. pol. III)**	**Model 11 (inter. int. pol. IV)**	**Model 12 (inter. wpip I)**	**Model 13 (inter. wpip II)**	**Model 14 (inter. wpip III)**	**Model 15 (inter. wpip IV)**
Sociodemographic items								
Age	0.012*** (0.003)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.003)
Gender (male)	-0.048 (0.079)	-0.051 (0.079)	-0.052 (0.078)	-0.050 (0.078)	-0.048 (0.078)	-0.035 (0.077)	-0.029 (0.077)	-0.041 (0.077)
Urban dweller	-0.044** (0.018)	-0.047** (0.018)	-0.045** (0.018)	-0.043** (0.018)	-0.042** (0.018)	-0.040** (0.018)	-0.039** (0.018)	-0.041** (0.018)
Education	-0.029 (0.027)	-0.033 (0.027)	-0.035 (0.027)	-0.034 (0.026)	-0.029 (0.027)	-0.033 (0.026)	-0.035 (0.026)	-0.032 (0.026)
Income	0.003 (0.013)	0.004 (0.013)	0.002 (0.012)	0.002 (0.012)	-0.006 (0.013)	-0.003 (0.012)	-0.004 (0.012)	-0.005 (0.012)
Employment status (base: employed)								
Unemployed	0.198 (0.148)	0.195 (0.148)	0.182 (0.146)	0.179 (0.146)	0.168 (0.146)	0.177 (0.145)	0.162 (0.145)	0.155 (0.144)
Student/housekeeper	0.156 (0.122)	0.154 (0.123)	0.159 (0.121)	0.179 (0.121)	0.143 (0.121)	0.118 (0.121)	0.147 (0.120)	0.137 (0.119)
Retired	-0.151	-0.162	-0.138	-0.150	-0.174	-0.201	-0.128	-0.147

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	(0.128)	(0.128)	(0.128)	(0.127)	(0.127)	(0.126)	(0.126)	(0.125)
Political attitudes								
Interest in politics	0.293***	0.151***	0.242***	0.352***	0.139***	0.136***	0.126***	0.135***
	(0.079)	(0.064)	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.043)
Ideology	-0.449***	-0.439***	-0.447***	-0.447***	-0.419***	-0.411***	-0.416***	-0.417***
	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.058)
Ideology^2	0.046***	0.045***	0.047***	0.046***	0.044***	0.043***	0.044***	0.044***
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Satisfaction with economy	0.049**	0.049**	0.057**	0.058**	0.055**	0.051**	0.064**	0.065**
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)
Satisfaction with political situation	-0.073***	-0.070***	-0.069***	-0.072***	-0.065**	-0.069***	-0.063**	-0.067**
	(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Satisfaction with democracy	0.051**	0.051**	0.049**	0.050**	0.050**	0.050**	0.049**	0.046**
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)
Media-related variables								
Trust in traditional media	0.092***	0.103***	0.099***	0.101***	0.094***	0.097***	0.092***	0.095***
	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.022)
Trust in social media	-0.020	-0.019	-0.020	-0.022	-0.015	-0.011	-0.017	-0.019
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Frequency of offline political talk	0.050	0.049	0.049	0.049	0.102*	0.080	0.068	0.064
	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.054)	(0.054)	(0.054)	(0.052)	(0.054)	(0.053)
Freq. of traditional media use for politics	0.068	0.065	0.045	0.026	0.014	0.023	0.014	-0.001
	(0.053)	(0.054)	(0.054)	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.055)
Freq. of public social media use for politics	-0.046	-0.028	-0.026	-0.025	-0.040	-0.039	-0.031	-0.028
	(0.047)	(0.049)	(0.053)	(0.052)	(0.051)	(0.048)	(0.052)	(0.052)
Political context								
Weighted perceived party system polarisation	0.230***	0.238***	0.219***	0.221***	-0.122	0.241***	-0.131	-0.231***
	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.088)	(0.056)	(0.087)	(0.087)
WhatsApp-related variables								
Frequency of WhatsApp political talk	0.302***				-0.390***			
	(0.124)				(0.112)			
Whats. overall echo cham. (base: two-sided)								

APPENDIX (REGRESSION TABLES)

Echo chamber (one-sided supportive)		0.189				-0.849**		
		(0.386)				(0.336)		
Disagre. chamber (one-sided opposition)		0.323				-0.185		
		(0.470)				(0.390)		
Never discuss		-0.460				0.676**		
		(0.314)				(0.324)		
WhatsApp relief conversation			0.207	0.023			-0.440***	0.012
			(0.137)	(0.053)			(0.115)	(0.052)
WhatsApp clashing conversation			0.101*	0.104*			0.090	0.103*
			(0.060)	(0.060)			(0.060)	(0.059)
WhatsApp reaff. conversation			0.121**	0.488***			0.100*	-0.499**
			(0.058)	(0.127)			(0.058)	(0.120)
WhatsApp Habermasian conversation			-0.156***	-0.153***			-0.148***	-0.149***
			(0.055)	(0.054)			(0.054)	(0.054)
Interaction terms								
Frequency of WhatsApp political talk*Interest in politics	-0.060*							
	(0.031)							
WhatsApp echo chamber*interest in politics		-0.038						
		(0.100)						
WhatsApp disagre. Chamber*interest in politics		-0.030						
		(0.120)						
Never discuss in WhatsApp*interest in politics		0.058						
		(0.088)						
WhatsApp relief conversation*interest in politics			-0.047					
			(0.033)					
WhatsApp reaff. conversation*interest in politics				-0.101***				
				(0.030)				
Frequency of WhatsApp political talk*Weighted perceived system polarisation					0.139***			
					(0.033)			
WhatsApp echo chamber* Weighted perceived system polarisation						0.305***		
						(0.109)		
WhatsApp disagre. Chamber* Weighted perceived system polarisation						0.132		
						(0.128)		
Never discuss in WhatsApp* Weighted perceived system polarisation						-0.270***		
						(0.094)		

APPENDIX (REGRESSION TABLES)

WhatsApp relief conversation* Weighted perceived system polarisation							0.148*** (0.033)	
WhatsApp reaff. conversation* Weighted perceived system polarisation								0.192*** (0.033)
Constant	0.423 (0.455)	1.100*** (0.390)	0.570 (0.449)	0.074 (0.438)	2.041*** (0.431)	1.007*** (0.372)	2.022*** (0.420)	2.397*** (0.425)
N	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800
R2	0.255	0.263	0.283	0.293	0.273	0.287	0.291	0.302
Adjusted R2	0.236	0.249	0.251	0.260	0.252	0.263	0.278	0.290
Residual Std. Error	1.055 (df=777)	1.053 (df=773)	1.045 (df=772)	1.039 (df=772)	1.057 (df=777)	1.052 (df=773)	1.046 (df=772)	1.025 (df=772)

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01