

From Information to Participation: Social Media Engagement Strategies in 2026 Portuguese Presidential Race

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Introduction

The growing centrality of social media platforms in modern daily life, extending to countless spheres of daily life and, consequently, also to political and party communication, has reshaped how candidates interact with citizens and how citizens experience political campaigns. Platforms like Instagram have become arenas where visibility, affect, and performance intersect with attention metrics, thus reconfiguring the logics of political communication. In presidential elections, given their one-person nature, candidates not only disseminate political messages but also compete for symbolic proximity, authenticity, and engagement, navigating algorithmic environments that privilege visual narrative and interaction cues.

Based on the concept of Social Media Engagement Behavior (SMEB) proposed by Dolan and colleagues (2015; 2019), this study investigates how the five main candidates for the Presidency of the Portuguese Republic (according to all public surveys available to date) used Instagram during the pre-campaign and campaign period, from December 22, 2025, to January 16, 2026.

This investigation, therefore, focuses on how the candidates employed informative, relational, and participatory strategies to promote engagement, examining both the characteristics of the content and the behavioral responses of users.

The article adopts a mixed-method content analysis, integrating quantitative coding with qualitative interpretation. The objective is not simply to measure engagement, but to understand how it is strategically produced through content design and how the audience specifically responds to each post. To guide this investigation, the literature review addresses four interrelated domains: (1) Instagram as a socio-technical environment; (2) social networks and the dynamics of engagement; (3) engagement in digital political communication; and (4) content analysis as a methodological framework for social media research.

Based on this, the study presents the following illustrative research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: How do presidential candidates use Instagram resources to construct informative, relational, and participatory messages?

RQ2: How do different types of engagement-oriented content relate to variations in audience reactions (likes, comments, shares)?

Furthermore, and resulting from the literature review conducted, 2 hypotheses were formulated, namely:

H1: Posts that emphasize relational cues (authenticity, proximity, behind-the-scenes access) generate higher levels of affective engagement than strictly informative posts.

H2: Participatory stimuli (calls to action, invitations to interaction) are associated with higher levels of interactive behaviors (comments and sharing).

By systematically comparing communication styles and engagement outcomes, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of political communication practices in social media and their effectiveness in stimulating citizen engagement in contemporary electoral contexts, using the pre-campaign period for the presidential elections in Portugal as a basis for analysis.

Instagram as a socio-technical environment for political communication

Instagram has become central to modern communication because it combines visually appealing content with metrics that indicate attention, popularity, and relevance. It is also part of the “platformization” of communication, where features, algorithms, and interface design influence what gets seen and engaged with (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). As a result, it is no surprise that political communication also considers this tool very important, especially because of its mix of visual storytelling and metric transparency.

Scholars of platform studies emphasize that communication practices are shaped not only by human actors but also by platform architecture, algorithms, and interfaces. As van Dijck et al. (2018) argue, platforms mediate social relations by embedding economic and technical logics into everyday communication practices, and Instagram is emblematic of this “platform society.” The algorithms on these platforms create ‘information bubbles’, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and increasing polarization (Santos & Leandro, 2026). Initially conceived as a photo-sharing application, it has evolved into a highly curated visual ecosystem structured around visibility, aesthetics, and engagement (Ago & Duarte, 2025). Highfield and Leaver (2016) describe Instagram as a space where “visual vernaculars” emerge, blending personal expression, branding practices, and social signaling. Content is evaluated through visible engagement metrics, reinforcing competitive dynamics around attention, which is of the utmost importance for political candidates.

Visuality is decisive. Whereas Twitter privileges text-driven dialogue, Instagram fosters affective and symbolic communication through imagery, lifestyle cues, and staged authenticity. Abidin (2018) highlights how influencer cultures perfect strategies of relatability, intimacy, and aspirational appeal. Political actors are increasingly adopting similar tactics, humanizing their personas and presenting everyday moments to signal closeness and trust, which is why the

search for authenticity is prominent in electoral contexts. Enli (2017) observes that digital platforms invite the performance of the "normal," while remaining strategic. Candidates display behind-the-scenes footage, community interactions, or informal encounters as communicative resources, making the illusion of spontaneity a rhetorical device. As the author notes, authenticity functions as a "discursive resource" mobilized to produce credibility (2017, p. 54).

Instagram's affordances actively structure these dynamics. Stories, carousels, reels, stickers, polls, and hashtags invite participation while controlling the format of interaction. Helmond (2015) describes this as "platformization," whereby external content is increasingly shaped by internal design logic. Candidates adapt their messages to fit these affordances, often simplifying policy narratives into visually appealing fragments that aim to get attention, generate engagement, and increase trust.

Against this backdrop, the present study interrogates RQ1, asking how Portuguese presidential candidates employ Instagram's affordances to articulate different engagement strategies. If Instagram privileges affection, proximity, and visibility, one might expect candidates to lean heavily on relational and performative cues.

Social Media Engagement Behavior (SMEB) and engagement logics

Dolan et al. (2015, 2019) reconceptualize engagement as a multidimensional set of user behaviors encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Engagement is not reducible to metrics; it reflects how users interpret, interact with, and co-create meaning around content. In their framework, users engage to satisfy informative, relational, hedonic, and self-expressive needs. Dolan and colleagues (2015) note that engagement unfolds along a continuum from passive consumption to active co-creation, structured by platform affordances and social context. Engagement, they write, can include "liking, sharing, commenting and producing new content" (p. 263), but its meaning lies in the motivations and interactions that underpin these actions.

The expanded formulation presented by Dolan et al. (2019) reinforces engagement as dynamic, interactive, and relational. Engagement occurs over time, within communities, and in response to strategic signaling by organizations or public figures. It can be stimulated by informative cues, emotional appeals, participation prompts, and opportunities for co-creation. Parallel scholarship supports this relational view. Brodie et al. (2011) conceptualize engagement as a psychological state that emerges through iterative interactions, while Calder et al. (2009) connect engagement to perceived relevance and experiential value. These contributions converge on the idea that engagement is socially constructed and co-produced rather than merely counted.

From a political communication perspective, this insight carries analytical consequences. Engagement is not simply a reflection of citizen enthusiasm; it is also the outcome of intentional content strategies. Informative posts may trigger cognitive processing; relational posts foster belonging and loyalty; participatory posts mobilize action and dialogue.

The SMEB framework, therefore, directly informs H1 and H2. If engagement behaviors are responsive to cues, then relational cues should foster affective reactions (likes, supportive comments), and participatory cues should increase interactive behaviors (commenting, sharing). Testing these propositions helps us to bridge theoretical insights with empirical observation.

Digital Political Engagement and Communication

As written by Duarte et al. (2024, p. 4), "immediate access to information, interactivity, and the cult of 'self' are characteristics inherent to the evolution of digital communication," to which political communication has not been indifferent, we add.

Digital media have changed the dynamics of campaigns by restructuring the relationship between candidates, parties, journalists, and citizens. For Chadwick (2017), contemporary campaigns operate within a "hybrid media system," where old and new media coexist and mutually shape visibility. Political messages circulate across various platforms, amplifying those that attract attention and interaction.

With the rise of social media, expectations for interactivity have intensified. However, campaigns generally manage engagement strategically. Stromer-Galley (2014) shows that, although social media promises participation, professional campaign organizations often control interactions to maintain message discipline. Engagement is encouraged—but selective. Enli (2017) emphasizes that performing authenticity is fundamental to digital campaigns. In the 2016 US presidential election, candidates used Twitter to position themselves as outsiders, expressing spontaneity and emotional intensity (Jorge & Duarte, 2024). Authenticity, however, remains carefully staged. As Enli states, "authenticity must be performed" (2017, p. 52). Moreover, Generation Z values authenticity and transparency in political communication (Santos & Leandro, 2026). Similar strategies apply to Instagram, where visual intimacy becomes a key resource, and to TikTok, where young people are encouraged to "break the visual styles, narratives, and cultures of the past, giving them a 'stage' to express themselves innovatively and creatively, creating a new aesthetic in youth entertainment media." (Dias & Duarte, 2022, p. 2).

Stier et al. (2020) expand on this by examining how Facebook and Twitter mediate political communication through algorithms and audience segmentation, arguing that engagement acts both as feedback and as currency, influencing visibility within platform ecosystems, since high engagement increases the chances of algorithmic amplification. Kreiss and McGregor (2017) also demonstrate that technology companies actively collaborate with campaigns, offering tools, training, and analytics that shape communication practices. Therefore, engagement is not a phenomenon driven solely by the user; it is institutionalized through platform governance and campaign infrastructures.

In this context, engagement acquires enormous symbolic and strategic value for political candidacies. Vaccari (2013), Jungherr (2016), and Gomes and Reis (2024) highlights how engagement metrics signal viability, mobilization capacity, and media relevance. However, engagement can reflect polarization, outrage, or contestation rather than support, so interpretation requires caution and contextual analysis. This information further clarifies the rationale for RQ2 by exploring how different messaging strategies correlate with different audience reaction patterns. Instead of assuming that engagement automatically translates into

support, the study treats engagement as a mediated indicator shaped by content design, platform functionalities, and the broader dynamics of the campaign.

Instagram posts were collected manually from the candidates verified accounts. For each post, both content-related variables and engagement metrics were recorded.

Content related analyzed the format (Photo / Carousel / Reel), the topic (Program / Competitors / Mobilization / Personal), type of clue (Informative / Relational / Participatory), type of Interactivity (questions / polls / other / none), and call to action (none / like / comment / share / vote / link / repost).

Engagement data includes the number of likes, comments, shares, and reposts, as displayed publicly. All data were collected 2 days after the posts were public to allow the number of interactions to grow and stabilize.

Coding Scheme and Variables

Content analysis was conducted using a structured coding scheme derived from the SMEB framework. The coding protocol integrates three main dimensions:

1. *SMEB Categories*: Posts were classified according to engagement-oriented strategies, particularly informative, relational, and participatory cues, reflecting different mechanisms through which candidates seek to stimulate user engagement.
2. *Content Cues*: Additional variables captured specific content features, such as thematic focus, narrative style, personalization, emotional tone, and the presence of explicit or implicit calls to action.
3. *Platform-Specific Features*: Instagram-specific affordances were coded, including visual framing, use of interactive elements (e.g., questions, prompts), and multimodal characteristics that may influence engagement behavior.

To ensure analytical consistency, a detailed codebook defined all categories and indicators. Coding was applied systematically across the entire dataset.

Engagement Metrics and Normalization

Audience engagement was operationalized through three metrics: likes, comments, shares, and reposts. To allow meaningful comparisons across candidates with differing audience sizes, engagement figures were normalized by the number of followers, expressed as rates per 1,000 followers. This normalization procedure reduces structural bias associated with account popularity and enables a more accurate assessment of relative engagement performance.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in two comparative stages. First, an intra-candidate analysis examines variations in engagement levels across different types of content and SMEB categories within each candidate's Instagram activity. Second, an inter-candidate comparison assesses

differences in content strategies and corresponding engagement outcomes among the five candidates.

Quantitative analysis focuses on identifying patterns and variations in normalized engagement metrics across categories, while qualitative analysis supports the interpretation of how specific content cues and platform features contribute to engagement dynamics. This combined approach allows for a nuanced understanding of both the strategic use of Instagram and its reception by users during the pre-campaign period.

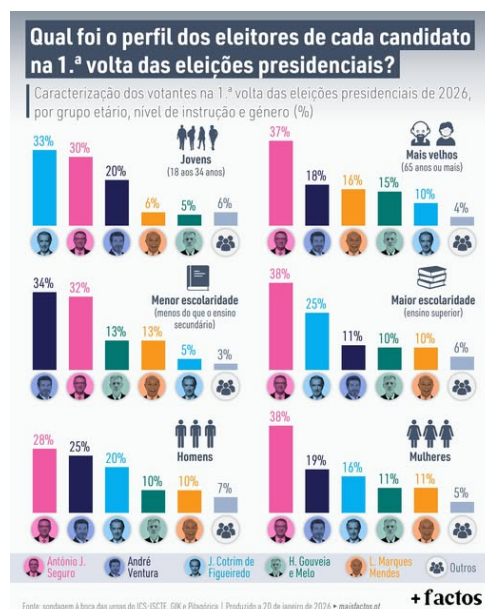
Reliability and Validity

The use of an established theoretical framework (SMEB), a transparent coding scheme, and normalized engagement indicators strengthens the reliability and comparability of the findings. By integrating content characteristics with behavioral metrics, the methodology ensures alignment between theoretical assumptions about engagement and empirical observation.

Overall, this methodological approach provides a robust basis for analyzing how presidential candidates deploy Instagram as a tool for engagement-oriented political communication and how audiences respond to these strategies during a critical electoral phase.

An overview of the total use of Instagram as a communication platform for the five candidates shows that Seguro, who managed to get the best result at the end of the first round, had 41.400 followers on the last day of the campaign. That number clashes with the second best, Ventura, who had harnessed 878.000 up until that point. Among the other three, Cotrim de Figueiredo - who didn't make it through to the second round - had 221.000, Gouveia e Melo summed 26.900 and, finally, the least followed candidate was Marques Mendes, with 19,700.

Figure 1. *Poll on the profile of voters for each candidate, first round of the 2026 presidential elections. Copyrights: MaisFactos.pt. © Copyright 2021-2026 Instituto Mais Liberdade - Todos os direitos reservados. Source: <https://maisliberdade.pt/maisfactos/caracterizacao-dos-votantes-na-1-volta-das-eleicoes-presidenciais-de-2026/>*



As far as the amount of their feed publications during the analysis' time frame, Seguro takes the lead, having 6.8 posts per day, on average, and a total of 177 posts; followed by Gouveia e Melo, who summed 167 publications, with an average of 6,4 per day. Marques Mendes is third, with a total sum of 117, and an average count of 4,5 per day; and with a very similar cadence, Ventura and Cotrim de Figueiredo, 86 and 81 in total, respectively, and an average daily posting of 3,3 and 3,2. The following table summarizes this overview (Table 1):

Table 1. *Number of Followers, Posts, and average posts by day of the Top 5 candidates.*

Candidate	Followers (16/Jan/2026)	Posts (22/Dec/2025 - 16/Jan/2026)	Average posts per day
Antônio José Seguro	41.400	177	6,8
André Ventura	878.000	86	3,3
João Cotrim de Figueiredo	221.000	81	3,2
Gouveia e Melo	26.900	167	6,4
Luís Marques Mendes	19.700	117	4,5

Source: Self-elaboration.

Zooming in on each candidate and using the theoretical framework, the objective now is to underline the profile of the contenders in terms of Instagram use.

Antônio José Seguro

Disregarding the engagement factor, observing Table 2 with AJS results, the lead candidate, the most used format was "reels" (88), seconded by "carousel" (58), and "photos" (37). Those publications' content was mostly both "institutional" and "campaign event" (respectively, 86 and 74), and less "individual" (23). Looking at the main topic (Program / Competitors / Mobilization / Personal), Seguro only addressed his competitors once, and chose to use the Instagram feed mostly to mobilize supporters (122). As far as more personal themes, they appear 33 times, and content about his program appears 27 times. Those posts leaned more towards a more informative type of content (74), and less about relational and participatory matters (56 and 53, in order).

Table 2. *Summary of Engagement Metrics by Content Characteristics. Antônio José Seguro.**

Category	Subcategory	n	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Shares (M)	Reposts (M)
Overall (no condition)	—	—	3,597	298	205	33
Format	Reel	88	3,624	302	135	38
	Photo	37	4,887	508	618	44
	Carousel	58	2,733	158	47	20

Framing	Institutional	86	3,499	308	337	39
	Individual	23	4,894	552	118	30
	Campaign Event	74	3,308	207	78	28
Theme	Program	27	3,259	277	183	38
	Opposition	1	2,844	143	43	35
	Mobilization	122	3,336	252	233	32
	Personal	33	4,860	492	123	34
Cue Type	Informational	74	3,559	342	397	42
	Relational	56	4,128	349	90	29
	Participatory	53	3,088	183	57	26

*Note. n = number of posts. M = mean. Engagement metrics refer to average likes, comments, shares, and reposts per post.

Taking engagement measures into consideration in the same time frame, he totalized, on average, 3597 “likes”, 298 “comments”, 205 “shares”, and 33 “reposts”. The preferred format was “photo” (4887), followed by “reels” (302) and “carousel” (2733). “Photos” also generated most of the comments (508), “shares” (508), and “reposts” (44).

When the type of publication is considered, Seguro’s publications with a more individual trait do better in “likes” (4894), and “comments” (552), though the most shared, by far, are institutionally prone (337). Reposts do not differ significantly.

Seguro’s posts on personal topics garner the most likes (4860) and most comments (492), while mobilizing ones are the most shared (233). In terms of reposts, the numbers do not present a significant variation. The most popular cue is ‘relational’ (4128), but not far from the other two, ‘informative’ (3559), and ‘participatory’ (3088). The least commented cue is ‘participatory’ (183), while the other two present a very similar quota: ‘informative’ gathers 342 and ‘relational’ 349. Looking at shares, by far, cue ‘informative’ takes the lead, with 397 against ‘relational’ (90) and ‘participatory’ (57). Reposts don’t show a major difference, albeit ‘informative’ is still the front-runner.

André Ventura

Based on Table 3, Ventura’s Instagram reveals a clear preference for “reels” (60), followed by “photos” (26), and no “carousels”. The content of those posts has a very symmetric distribution, totaling “campaign event” (33), “institutional” (32), and a bit less “individual” (21). In terms of the main topic, this candidate chooses this social medium to mobilize supporters (36), address opposition (21), and expose his agenda (19); personal posts are fewer, totaling just 10. His publications leaned more towards a more informative type of content (39) and participatory (31), and less about relational matters (16).

Table 3. *Summary of Engagement Metrics by Content Characteristics. André Ventura.**

Category	Subcategory	n	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Shares (M)	Reposts (M)
Overall (no condition)	—	—	33,819	3,029	2,534	521
Format	Reel	60	36,810	3,133	3,316	619
	Photo	26	26,917	2,789	730	294
	Carousel	0	—	—	—	—
Framing	Institutional	32	35,307	3,679	1,478	412
	Individual	21	40,356	3,172	5,308	949
	Campaign Event	33	28,217	2,308	1,793	354
Theme	Program	19	22,712	2,301	770	210
	Opposition	21	54,224	5,114	5,494	1,189
	Mobilization	36	29,159	2,332	1,225	324
	Personal	10	28,849	2,543	4,383	418
Cue Type	Informational	39	37,251	3,621	2,889	681
	Relational	16	33,927	2,986	4,483	502
	Participatory	31	29,447	2,307	1,082	330

*Note. n = number of posts. M = mean. Engagement metrics refer to average likes, comments, shares, and reposts per post.

Looking at engagement measures, this candidate totalized, on average, 33819 “likes”, 3029 “comments”, 2534 “shares”, and 521 “reposts”. The preferred format was “reel” (36810), followed by “photos” (26917). “Reels” also gather most of the comments (3133), “shares” (3316), and “reposts” (619), far from the number of photos.

Considering the type of publication, Ventura’s publications with a more individual feature do better in “likes” (40356), “shares” (5308), and “reposts” (949). Institutional ones are second best liked (35307), but best when it comes to “comments” (3679), though the most shared, by far, are institutionally prone (337). In this case, “campaign events” are clearly the least preferred, commented, shared, or reposted publications.

Ventura’s posts referring to opposition summed the most likes (54224), by a considerable distance, as well as are the most commented (5114), shared (5494), and reposted (1189). The other three categories present very similar results, far from the popular content based upon opposition. In terms of reposts, the numbers do not present a significant variation.

Unlike the imbalance mentioned above, the cue types that Ventura’s publications demonstrate are quite similar among them. Either ‘informative’ (37251), ‘relational’ (33927), or smaller ‘participatory’ likeness (29447). These specific posts, ‘participatory’ ones, are always less engaging in comparison to the other two types. ‘Informative’ are indeed the most commented

(3621) and reposted (681), but not the most shared - those are the 'relational' ones, with 4483 shares.

João Cotrim de Figueiredo

Globally, on the results of Table 4, Cotrim's Instagram feed mostly consists of reels (52), photos (21), and some 'carousels' (8). Out of those, most publications are 'institutional' (41) or 'individual' (29), rather than about campaign events (11). Most of the posts were either personal (37) or to mobilize voters (32), not for divulging the candidate's program (9) or aiming at the opponents (3). Regarding the cues given by each post, 'relational' (39) and 'informative' (37) were primary, and very few were 'participatory' (5).

Table 4. Summary of Engagement Metrics by Content Characteristics. João Cotrim de Figueiredo.*

Category	Subcategory	n	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Shares (M)	Reposts (M)
Overall (no condition)	—	—	14,173	265	2,396	394
Format	Reel	52	13,295	245	2,730	350
	Photo	21	17,254	365	2,199	578
	Carousel	8	11,795	135	742	199
Framing	Institutional	41	15,068	301	2,146	476
	Individual	29	14,312	257	2,744	337
	Campaign Event	11	10,469	153	2,412	241
Theme	Program	9	13,427	308	3,123	541
	Opposition	3	11,278	306	5,135	307
	Mobilization	32	15,036	262	2,045	456
	Personal	37	13,842	254	2,301	312
Cue Type	Informational	37	16,169	328	2,428	554
	Relational	39	12,547	218	2,487	253
	Participatory	5	12,086	175	1,456	314

*Note. n = number of posts. M = mean. Engagement metrics refer to average likes, comments, shares, and reposts per post.

On what concerns engagement, Cotrim summed, on average, 14173 "likes", 265 "comments", 2396 "shares", and 394 "reposts". If the format is considered, then the followers' favorite were photos (17254), seconded by reels (13295), and carousels (11795). Deepening the analysis to the type of frame, the preferred was the 'institutional' type (15068), followed by 'individual' (14312), and 'campaign events' (10469). Out of those, 'institutional' posts were also the ones that gathered more comments (301), the 'individual' had 257 comments, and campaign events appear less inviting to commentators, with only 153 in total. However, if we look at the shares, all of the frames seem to balance, with 'individual' kind taking the lead with 2744, 'institutional' 2146, and 'campaign events' 2412. The reposting was more evident in the 'institutional' type (476), instead of 'individual' (337) or the ones about the campaign events (241).

Regarding the topics covered in this medium, Cotrim de Figueiredo's followers stated a preference for the mobilizing ones (15036), although comments (262), shares (2045), and reposts (456) did not match the liking. Conversely, the most commented and reposted publications were the ones where the candidate debated his program (308 and 541, respectively), and the most shared were the ones Cotrim devoted to talking about his opposition (5135). 'Personal' tone was not as engaging as the other topics and did not take the lead in any criterion. If cues are the focus, 'informative' posts are Cotrim's followers' favorites, being the most liked (16169), commented (328), reposted (554), and the runner-up in shares (2428), where 'relational' posts took the lead. 'Participatory' cues, however, were not very engaging for his followers.

Henrique Gouveia e Melo

Turning our attention to Gouveia e Melo's Instagram feed (Table 5), 'reels' (141) are the main kind of post, namely excerpts of TV debates with strong affirmations from the candidate. Photos (17) and carousels were less used (10). Ranking the kind of framing given to posts, 'institutional' (84) and 'campaign events' (69) were preferred, unlike individual ones (15). Furthermore, where covered topics are concerned, the mobilizing ones (99) are first, seconded by personal ones (31), program (29), and opposition-themed came last with only 9 likes. Considering cues, the more informative posts were most liked (88), then the participatory ones (45), and, finally, the relational posts gathered only (35).

Table 5. Summary of Engagement Metrics by Content Characteristics. Henrique Gouveia e Melo.*

Category	Subcategory	n	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Shares (M)	Reposts (M)
Overall (no condition)	—	—	2624	306	231	15
Format	Reel	141	2877	330	269	18
	Photo	17	1458	208	43	4
	Carousel	10	1033	128	9	4
Framing	Institutional	84	2946	389	107	21
	Individual	15	2914	278	127	11
	Campaign Event	69	2169	211	404	10
Theme	Program	29	3155	385	161	23
	Opposition	9	4096	878	80	20
	Mobilization	99	2096	224	53	13
	Personal	31	3385	326	909	14
Cue Type	Informational	88	2760	376	94	19
	Relational	35	3433	303	813	14
	Participatory	45	1730	172	47	9

*Note. n = number of posts. M = mean. Engagement metrics refer to average likes, comments, shares, and reposts per post.

The liberal candidate managed to totalize, on average, 2624 likes, 306 comments, 231 shares, and only 15 reposts. Those engagement numbers are not considering specific views, such as per format - in fact, this candidate's followers showed a preference for reels, in all four measures, harnessing 2877 likes, 330 comments, 269 shares, and 18 reposts; the other types of posts did not manage to engage as much. Regarding framing, the average calculation of engagement was very balanced across all types (institutional, individual, and campaign events): the only number that stands out is the shares of campaign events (404). About themes of the Instagram posts for Gouveia e Melo, two seem to incite his following more, being those 'opposition' (4096 likes on average), and 'personal' (3385). The notable difference lies in the number of comments and shares - 878 for publications on the opponents, and 909 shares of posts with a more personal streak. Regarding the kind of preferred cues that emerge from the analysis are 'informative' (2760), though 'relational' ones are, by far, the most shared (813).

Luís Marques Mendes

When it comes to Marques Mendes' campaign on Instagram (Table 6), there was a clear preference for reels and carousels (55 and 52, respectively), instead of photos. Moreover, unlike the other candidates, the focus of the framing was prominently put on 'campaign events' (84, against 28 'institutional' and 5 'individual'). Considering the main topic in the publications, there was an obvious choice to mobilize (94), far from only 17 posts concerning his program, and 3 personal and oppositional posts each. Therefore, it is not a surprise that most posts leave a participatory cue (89), a much bigger number than informative (23) and relational (5).

Table 6. Summary of Engagement Metrics by Content Characteristics. Luís Marques Mendes.*

Category	Subcategory	n	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Shares (M)	Reposts (M)
Overall (no condition)	—	—	922	377	58	9
Format	Reel	55	1414	748	80	12
	Photo	10	763	202	117	17
	Carousel	52	433	18	23	4
Framing	Institutional	28	1011	374	144	16
	Individual	5	2172	1307	62	7
	Campaign Event	84	818	322	29	6
Theme	Program	17	1033	354	75	16
	Opposition	3	808	404	21	8
	Mobilization	94	864	353	55	7
	Personal	3	2239	1206	93	8
Cue Type	Informational	23	1003	382	61	15
	Relational	5	3051	1785	542	26
	Participatory	89	782	296	30	6

Note. n = number of posts. M = mean. Engagement metrics refer to average likes, comments, shares, and reposts per post.

If engagement is considered, then his public liked, on average, 922 times, left 377 comments, shared 58 posts, and reposted only 9. Not surprisingly, 'reels' were the favorite format, with 1414 likes and 748 comments. Photos, although the least used format, were the ones that gathered the most shares (117) and reposts (17). As far as related to framing, individual posts are most liked (2172) and commented on (1307), and institutional ones are the most shared and reposted (144 and 16). Nevertheless, research by topic did reveal 'personal' posts as followers' favorites, with 2239 likes, 1206 comments, and 93 shares, surpassed only in reposts of program type of publication (16).

Lastly, looking at cues emerging from Marques Mendes' Instagram feed, relational takes the lead in every engagement measure (3051 likes, 1785 comments, 542 shares, and 26 reposts), being a clear favorite.

To analytically discuss and interpret the results qualitatively, based on Elo and Kyngäs (2008), Neuendorf (2017), Krippendorff (2019), and Rose (2023), several interesting observations can be made from the results.

André Ventura relied mainly on informative and participatory cues, often through individual reels, polemic themes, and opposition-focused content, designed to mobilize supporters and generate strong reactions. Also, the use of humor, satire, and irony to "target" other candidates and parties is a common strategy in his reels. That behavior is common in other electoral campaigns of far-right candidates, as Gomes and Reis (2024) highlight in their study about Bolsonaro (Brazil) and Trump (USA)'s last presidential online campaigns.

It is worth highlighting that the reel (video) format publications were the ones that obtained the most reactions. In fact, the publications that obtained the highest average of reactions, such as likes, comments, and shares, are those in which the candidate made individual reels/videos, often selfies. This is a clear digital campaign strategy that has already been applied and observed by other far-right candidates in other countries, such as Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, as pointed out by Gomes and Reis (2024). Furthermore, this scenario highlights what Helmond (2015) and van Dijck et al (2018) point out: this type of "platformization" communication, especially when related to "informal" contact with the public, can increase feelings of empathy, belonging, and visibility.

Topics such as electoral program, political opposition, mobilization for political support, and personal content are also prominent in Ventura's feed. The average reactions per topic show that his reels and images with content related to the opposition stand out as "controversial" content or content related to "exclusion of groups from society," generating great repercussions and digital engagement. Examples of this are evident in reels with speeches against the Romani community, immigrants, and the LGBT+ community, where they have the posts with the most likes and supportive comments. This strategy of using videos in either selfie formats or those that speak directly to the public emphasizes a digital strategy commonly found in populist speeches of the far right, according to Gomes and Reis (2024).

This candidate uses reels as an "informal" strategy to direct his "personal" perspective in a way that "informs" and "opens the eyes" of his followers, the "Portuguese people." Furthermore, humor, satire, and irony were clear strategies employed in the candidate's "informal" content, where he clearly attracted attention and captivated followers to gain more likes, comments, and

shares, especially in reels about "gender identity," "subsidies to the Romani community," and "anti-immigration rhetoric."

António José Seguro used a more balanced strategy, with a tendency toward informative and mobilization posts, frequently using reels and carousels and including fewer personal or relational cues. This strategy could be compared with Stromer-Galley (2014) study, in which the author demonstrate how this "affective" and "emotional" strategy embraces/mobilizes the supporters to vote. For this candidate, institutional and informative content appears comparatively more "shareable," consistent with the idea that informational cues can stimulate cognitive engagement and distribution when audiences see content as useful for persuasion or mobilization. As the election date approaches, posts with CTAs increase, as do more personal posts that reflect emotions and feelings. The first posts are more neutral in the sense that they "call" people to action, presenting beliefs and positions, and supporters with a public face.

João Cotrim de Figueiredo prioritized informative and relational content, with few participatory posts. The candidate opted for a more serious profile, dedicated to providing information about his program and electoral project, apparently seeking to build a more "professional" visual presidential campaign on Instagram than the other candidates. This strategy is also highlighted by Enli (2017) regarding Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, which proved to be a strategy to be a "more professional" candidate than Trump's campaign.

Another point to highlight is the fact that JCF did not make a single post about the other candidates. The use of video as the main communication strategy was also noted, with about twice as many posts as the other formats (photos and carousel). Regarding framing, the most used option was institutional communication, followed by individual communication and, finally, campaign events. This option aligns with the candidate's discourse, which consistently prioritized, throughout the campaign, the discussion of major future issues relevant to the country and the Portuguese people, rather than mere one-off, daily campaign actions. Finally, it's worth noting the increasing number of interactions throughout the campaign, a result of the candidate's strong performance, ultimately leading to a 3rd place finish. Although the vote did not allow him to advance to the second round, it left him significantly ahead of other candidates who started with higher voting intentions, such as Marques Mendes and Gouveia e Melo.

Henrique Gouveia e Melo predominantly used informative reels, although relational cues stood out in shares. With a content strategy like Luís Marques Mendes, HGM mostly uses reels as the main format of content in his pre-electoral and electoral campaign. Also, the candidate evidenced in his reel content his "authenticity" as an independent candidate, "free of political party" to engage the reliability of the supporters and the voters. This strategy is an "outsider" way to "prove" his credibility to the Portuguese voters (Stier et al., 2020). Moreover, this candidate's Instagram feed supports the idea that content perceived as authentic or personally resonant may be especially likely to circulate even when it does not maximize likes or comments. Additionally, this profile indicates another distinct configuration: informational reels dominate output, but relational cues show particular strength in shares, implying that content perceived as authentic or personally resonant may be especially likely to circulate even when it does not maximize likes or comments.

Luís Marques Mendes adopted a clearly participatory strategy focused on mobilization and campaign events, yet his relational posts generated the highest engagement. Overall, the use

of reels, personal narratives, and mobilization framing suggests that Instagram is used not only to inform but to build proximity and activate followers.

When we look at the Instagram profile of Marques Mendes, it is interesting to note that the format the candidate used most often was the carousel with photographs of campaign events. However, it was the reels with videos also framed from campaign events that obtained the highest average number of likes and comments.

It is noted here that the candidate uses a digital electoral marketing strategy focused on campaign events, mainly highlighting contact with the population. Although the candidate chose not to directly respond to comments on any of the 117 posts, it is these reels and carousels that most stimulate engagement with followers on his profile.

It is also to be expected that Marques Mendes has a greater number of posts aimed at mobilizing the voting population in his pre-campaign and presidential election campaign publications. However, it is the posts with personal themes that obtained the most likes and comments. There are two clear pieces of evidence of digital strategy here, like Ventura's, in the sense of using videos in contact with the public to stimulate empathy with followers, as well as personal themes in reels, which "brings him closer" to his audience. Dolan et al. (2015, 2019) point out that this type of strategy generates engagement on social networks, which provides greater visibility and cognitive and emotional impact with supporters.

Furthermore, regarding the type of content, among all the publications made by the candidate (LMM), the invitation to participate in the campaign was the one that received the most posts. Albeit this type of content did not receive the most reactions on his profile. In this case, it is observed how "human contact," human interaction, welcoming, and "demonstration of care for supporters" generated reinforced engagement in likes and comments. Clearly, LMM directs his greatest efforts on Instagram to establish an authentic affective connection with his audience (Enli, 2017; Jorge & Duarte, 2024). This type of emotional strategy is also found in the other candidates for the 2026 Portuguese presidency, as they highlight content related to direct interaction and mobilization with the population in the streets (Vaccari, 2013; Stromer-Galley, 2014). In sum, the SMEB framework helped clarify how the five leading candidates in the 2026 Portuguese presidential race approached engagement on Instagram. The analysis shows a strong reliance on informative content, often delivered through visually driven formats such as reels, alongside the use of relational elements to convey proximity and authenticity. Reels function as "algorithm-facing campaign material" (short, rhythmic, emotional, shareable), whereas photos/carousels work more as record-keeping/legitimacy displays (institutional framing, events). Participatory prompts were used more selectively, mainly to encourage supporter mobilization. Importantly, candidates differed in how they combined these strategies, resulting in distinct engagement patterns shaped by content format, framing, and thematic focus, such as Seguro's informative/institutional posts being more shareable, Ventura's opposition posts spiking across metrics, and Gouveia e Melo's relational cues driving shares.

Furthermore, relating to Enli's work (2017), authenticity is strategic and credibility contingent. Collected data suggests relational cues "pay off" the most when: (1) they are scarce (few relational posts, high payoff, for example, in Marques Mendes' case) and (2) they align with a candidate's narrative position (e.g., "outsider/independent" credibility cues).

Conclusions

This work examined how the five leading candidates in the 2026 Portuguese presidential race used Instagram to stimulate Social Media Engagement Behavior (SMEB), - based on the methodology of Dolan and colleagues (2015; 2019) - during the pre-campaign and campaign period.

Through a mixed-methods content analysis, the investigation combined quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative interpretation of content cues, focusing on informative, relational, and participatory strategies. The results show that each candidate adopted a distinct communication profile on Instagram, and that engagement outcomes varied according to format, framing, theme, and cue type. Across the sample, reels emerged as the dominant format, reflecting the platform's algorithmic preference for dynamic visual content, also supporting the findings of Highfield and Leaver (2016) about the sociocultural power of visual content on Instagram feed to disseminate ideas. More than that, reels - as a visual content (short video) - generated the highest engagement in all candidates, particularly for Ventura and Gouveia e Melo, confirming that content format remains a central driver of visibility and interaction on Instagram as an electoral marketing strategy.

In response to RQ1, the candidates used Instagram resources in different ways to build informative, relational, and participatory messages. The candidates employed Instagram tools in varied ways to produce informative, relational, and participatory messages. Ventura mainly used informative and participatory signals, especially through personal reels and content centered on opposition, aiming to mobilize supporters and provoke strong responses. Seguro adopted a more balanced approach, with a greater emphasis on informative and mobilization posts, often using reels and carousels, while incorporating fewer personal or relational elements. Cotrim de Figueiredo prioritized informative and relational posts, with participatory content appearing only rarely. Gouveia e Melo relied mostly on informative reels, though relational cues were particularly prominent in posts that were shared more frequently. Lastly, Marques Mendes clearly emphasized participatory content related to mobilization and campaign events, but his relational posts achieved the highest levels of engagement. Overall, the prominence of reels, personal narratives, and mobilization-oriented messaging indicates that Instagram is used not just for information dissemination but also to foster closeness and encourage follower involvement.

Regarding RQ2, the data show that different engagement-oriented content types produced distinct patterns of audience reactions. Reels were consistently the most engaging format, especially for Ventura and Gouveia e Melo. In terms of framing, individual posts generated higher likes and comments for Ventura and Marques Mendes, while institutional posts produced more shares for Seguro and Marques Mendes. The analysis of themes indicated that opposition-related posts generated the highest engagement for Ventura and Gouveia e Melo, while personal posts were highly engaging for Seguro and Marques Mendes, and mobilization posts generated more shares for Seguro and Gouveia e Melo. When considering cue types, relational cues produced higher likes and comments for Marques Mendes and higher shares for Gouveia e Melo. Informative cues generated the highest likes for Cotrim de Figueiredo and Ventura. Participatory cues, however, did not consistently lead to higher engagement across candidates, even though they were the most frequent type in Marques Mendes' campaign. These results indicate that engagement is shaped by the combination of format, theme, framing, and cue

type rather than by a single strategy. Concerning the hypotheses, H1, which proposed that relational posts would generate higher affective engagement than informative posts, was partially supported. This was confirmed for Marques Mendes, whose relational posts generated the highest likes and comments, but not for Ventura and Cotrim de Figueiredo, whose informative posts produced more likes and comments than relational ones. For Seguro and Gouveia e Melo, relational posts did not consistently outperform informative posts in likes and comments. H2, which proposed that participatory stimuli would be associated with higher interactive behaviors (comments and sharing), was not consistently supported. Participatory posts did not generate the highest engagement for Marques Mendes or Gouveia e Melo, and only partially for Ventura, whose participatory posts were engaging but still lower than informative or relational posts in some metrics. These findings suggest that participatory invitations alone are not sufficient to generate higher engagement unless combined with emotional or controversial content. Indeed, results are basically a textbook illustration of Stromer-Galley's thesis (2014): campaigns invite participation, but often in controlled, instrumental ways, and participatory cues alone don't outperform unless fused with emotion/provocation.

Overall, the study contributes to understanding how political actors strategically produce engagement on social media, showing that engagement is produced rather than merely measured. The candidates' use of Instagram reflects different political profiles and strategic objectives, and the results demonstrate that engagement depends on the interplay of format, content cues, and thematic framing. The findings reinforce the importance of a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative metrics with qualitative interpretation, to capture the complexity of digital political communication. This research also highlights that Instagram's affordances shape political communication, privileging dynamic visual narratives and affective proximity, and that political engagement is generated through strategic content design within algorithmic environments.

However, the study also faces limitations. The exclusion of Instagram Stories restricts the analysis to feed posts, which may overlook significant real-time engagement dynamics. Additionally, the absence of statistical tests and the normalization by follower count mean that results should be interpreted cautiously. Future research could extend the analysis to include story content, comment sentiment, and cross-platform comparisons.

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