Polarization and Projection in Politics: Notes on the Deliberative Capacities of Adolescents

Polarização e Projeção na Política: Apontamentos Sobre as Capacidades Deliberativas dos Adolescentes

Polarización y proyección en política: notas sobre las capacidades deliberativas de los adolescentes

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Abstract: This article analyzes the perceptions of high-school students in Sergipe regarding online political discussions, aiming to understand their readiness and limitations for deliberation in digital environments. A content analysis of 47 interviews revealed that adolescents navigate the unique social dynamics of social-media platforms in their deliberations, balancing a desire for open dialogue with challenges posed by aggressive interactions and generational conflicts. Their experiences highlight the need for supportive environments to foster constructive political discussions and underscore the role of civic education in this process.

Keywords:
Political deliberation, social media, adolescents, online participation

Resumo: Este artigo analisa as percepções de estudantes do ensino médio em Sergipe sobre discussões políticas *online*, com o objetivo de compreender suas disposições e limitações para a deliberação no ambiente digital. Foi feita análise de conteúdo de 47 entrevistas, explorando como os adolescentes lidam com dinâmicas sociais próprias das plataformas de mídias sociais em suas deliberações, equilibrando o desejo de um diálogo aberto com os desafios impostos por interações agressivas e conflitos geracionais. Suas experiências ressaltam a importância de

ambientes de apoio para promover discussões políticas construtivas e o papel da educação cidadã neste processo.

Palavras-chave:
Deliberação política, mídias sociais, adolescentes, participação online

Resumen: Este artículo analiza las percepciones de estudiantes de educación secundaria en Sergipe sobre las discusiones políticas en línea, con el objetivo de comprender sus disposiciones y limitaciones para la deliberación en el entorno digital. El análisis de contenido de 47 entrevistas revela que los adolescentes gestionan las dinámicas sociales propias de las plataformas de redes sociales en sus deliberaciones, equilibrando el deseo de un diálogo abierto con los desafíos que suponen las interacciones agresivas y los conflictos generacionales. Sus experiencias subrayan la importancia de contar con entornos de apoyo que promuevan discusiones políticas constructivas y el papel de la educación ciudadana en este proceso.

Palabras clave:
Deliberación política, redes sociales, adolescentes, participación en línea

1. Introduction

The political participation of adolescents in digital environments has become an increasingly significant phenomenon, particularly with the expansion of online platforms as spaces for discussion and mobilization. Data from the TIC Domicílios 2024 survey indicate that the 16-24 age group has the most significant online presence in Brazil, reaching 98% of this segment. On the other hand, a 2021 study by the Institute for Intelligence in Strategic Research and Consulting (IPEC Inteligência, 2021) revealed that 83% of young Brazilians consider political discussions on social media to be aggressive and marked by intolerance. Due to fear of being canceled, 59% of this group avoids participating in online political debates. The coexistence of these findings suggests that, although young people and adolescents are widely present in digital environments, they do not perceive them as conducive spaces for debating political issues. Although there is a perception that political debate can be marked by violence, social media plays a central role in constructing a sphere of political dialogue (Gomes, 2018).

Social media has established itself as a significant contemporary platform for discussing socially relevant issues, thereby configuring itself as a new public sphere (Habermas, 2023), despite its contradictions. Although these platforms can be seen as spaces for superficial participation and conducive to anti-democratic, polarized, or uncivilized demonstrations (Papacharissi, 2004), it is also possible to recognize their potential as arenas for expanded and qualified debate, especially for adolescents in the process of developing citizenship.

In this context, it is essential to understand how competencies for exercising citizenship develop among adolescents, including the ability to participate in debate, whether in person or online. Although normatively oriented toward consensus and the pursuit of the common good, it is known that experiences of deliberation can generate heated, even aggressive, discussions.

This article aims to investigate the conditions under which these adolescents engage in online political discussions, seeking to understand the elements that motivate or inhibit their participation. The research assumes that the dynamics of digital interactions, combined with the characteristics of contemporary youth, constitute a complex scenario that deserves academic and practical attention.

We used categorical content analysis to interpret the collected data, allowing us to identify patterns and singularities in the forms of adolescents' political participation. The corpus includes interviews with adolescents from public schools in Sergipe. We present an excerpt from a larger study that adopts an exploratory approach, combining methods such as short-term ethnography, focus groups, and online debate experiments.

We hope that the discussions presented contribute not only to understanding the factors that influence this engagement but also to proposing educational initiatives that improve political discussions in formal and informal learning contexts—both digital environments and the school environment—strengthening citizenship development in adolescence.

2. Deliberative Capabilities of Adolescents in Online Environments

Since this work investigates adolescents' perceptions and forms of participation in online political debates to suggest educational strategies, we seek conceptual tools across three theoretical axes: deliberative democracy, youth and digital media, and media literacy.

The central issues of deliberative theories concern the forms and possibilities of public debate in complex societies and their potential for strengthening democracy. Drawing on

Habermas, Chambers (2003) defines deliberation as "debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable and well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by other participants" (p. 309).

The conception of deliberative democracy adopted here considers, on the one hand, the ideals of equality and rationality as part of a normative model of public debate and, on the other, its agonistic dimension (Mouffe, 2006), presupposing conflict and passion as legitimate components of the democratic process. It must be considered that the public sphere, as described by Habermas more than six decades ago, was already contaminated by the commercial logic of the mass media. The spaces of platformized debate tend to form “semi-public spheres”, characterized by the “rejection of dissonant voices and the assimilative inclusion of consonant voices in their own horizon of supposed ‘knowledge’” (Habermas, 2023, p. 76).

Research on youth and deliberation advocates for incorporating conflict and emotion into political education. Lo (2017) proposes a model based on agonistic deliberation, which guides conflict toward productive forms of negotiation and political action. Keegan (2021) suggests a "critical affective literacy" to encompass other competencies necessary for public debate, beyond the traditional criteria of equality, civility, and reasonableness. A study of young Americans revealed that participants desire calm and civilized discourse but admit to being bored by dispassionate discussions (Peacock & Leavitt, 2016), highlighting the need to consider the affective and contentious dimensions of these experiences.

Values such as equal participation, reciprocity, better argument, and the common good must be incorporated. This requires excluding private interests from the process and some level of material equality and deliberative capacities—developed throughout life, in formal education, and in the world of life. For Maia et al. (2024), deliberative capabilities refer to the motivation and ability to express views based on considered reasoning and reciprocal engagement, done inclusively and respectfully. Although debate mediated by digital devices has its own particularities, the development of these capabilities is crucial in both contexts.

In this research, the deliberationist perspective connects with studies on adolescence and youth in two key aspects. First, we need to consider that adolescents are influenced by the need for belonging and social acceptance, especially on social media (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). This need can conflict with the principles of deliberation, which require openness to diverse perspectives and a willingness to reconsider opinions. When adolescents fear exclusion or

rejection, they may avoid participating in controversial debates or adopt conformist positions to align with the group, thereby limiting the plurality of voices necessary for practical deliberation. Second, Nesi and Prinstein (2015) demonstrate how social media fosters social comparison and validation-seeking, which can lead to self-censorship and hesitation in expressing dissenting opinions. This behavior is particularly problematic for deliberation, as it relies on a diversity of perspectives and a willingness to challenge established ideas.

Adolescence is a crucial phase for the development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills fundamental to deliberation, such as critical-rational debate, reciprocity, and reflexivity (Graham & Witschge, 2003). However, as Uhls et al. (2014) point out, the digital environment can either facilitate or hinder this development, depending on how it is used. From this perspective, it is essential to integrate deliberative education into the school curriculum, providing adolescents with opportunities to practice debating in structured and mediated environments. This can include simulations of deliberative forums, where they learn to listen, argue, and negotiate collective solutions. Furthermore, it is essential to develop emotional resilience, enabling them to deal with disagreement and criticism constructively.

In line with media literacy researchers such as Livingstone (2009), we recognize that more research is needed to understand how adolescents develop strategies to navigate an increasingly unsafe, violent, and polarized digital environment. We reject the notion that they are "digital natives" with highly developed skills to address these challenges. Livingstone and Third (2017) argue, with substantial empirical support, that their skills generally do not go beyond the technical dimension and that there are significant gaps in critical skills for online use. Scolari (2018) has already pointed out that, although they demonstrate technical and creative skills, the same is not true for ethical online skills. In a study of Portuguese youth, Matos et al. (2023) found no relationship between developed digital skills and levels of online political participation. Although these authors do not directly address deliberation, competencies related to ethical stance and critical thinking in digital interactions are essential for engaging in a respectful and productive debate. In this sense, the work developed by researchers such as Baptista et al. (2018), Magalhães and Cal (2019), and Maia et al. (2024) articulates deliberation and education, proposing models of educational practices for developing deliberative competencies in Brazilian schools. Our research seeks to contribute to this debate by focusing on aspects of these experiences in digital environments.

Thus, we believe that understanding the perceptions, feelings, and behaviors of adolescents from Sergipe regarding online political debate can contribute to shaping the landscape already outlined in previous studies, as well as aid in the formulation of strategies for the formation of "democratic mindsets," as advocated by Paulo Freire (1973). In line with Dewey (1979, p. 94), we advocate for a democratic education, understood as the ideal of "expanding the individual's abilities in a progressive development oriented towards social ends."

Although this research is anchored in studies on deliberation and youth, it is also important to consider theoretical approaches that discuss the skills necessary for critical action in digital environments. Authors such as Pérez Tornero and Varis (2010) and Hobbs (2011) emphasize that education for digital citizenship necessitates the development of technical, critical, and participatory skills within an information ecosystem characterized by abundance, misinformation, and disputes over meaning. We recognize that digital platforms create conditions that facilitate youth deliberation. Affordances—visibility and public validation, persistence/replicability, and algorithmic curation—reorder incentives for exposure, belonging, and confrontation (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), while "affective publics" help explain the weight of bonds and emotions in the circulation of arguments (Papacharissi, 2015). This context interprets the dialogue between deliberation, youth, and media/information literacy.

3. Methodology

We collected data through 47 in-depth interviews with public high school students in six municipalities in Sergipe, from March to May 2024, covering diverse socioeconomic and cultural realities. The in-person, semi-structured interviews were integrated with a broader exploratory study, including short-term ethnography, focus groups, and online debate experiments. The materials related to self-reported perceptions and behaviors were subjected to categorical content analysis (Sampaio & Lycarião, 2021), guided by a codebook derived from the literature on deliberative quality (Maia, 2023) and exploratory analysis. The procedure included coding, category construction, and pattern interpretation, linking participants' voices to the research objectives (Costa & Amado, 2018).

Categories	Codes	
Perceptions about aggression	Reasons	Situations
Topics they like/	Animals	Children's and Adolescent Rights Mental Health Gender Democracy Economy Religion Party Politics Gun Carrying LGBT Issues Rape Pedophilia Drug Legalization Death Penalty
Topics they do not like	Abortion	Instagram Discord TikTok Online In Person
Where they debate/	Education	With teachers With third parties
Where they do not debate	Quota System	Conflicts Political Action Indignation Exercising Citizenship Fighting for Rights
Who they debate with/	Social Inequality	Negative feelings
Who they do not debate with	Nationalism	Presents arguments Respectful dialogue Does not change one's mind Gets excited Avoids disagreement

Table 1. Categorization created for content analysis. (Source: Empirical research)

The process involved coding the data, constructing analytical categories, and interpreting the patterns found, always seeking to connect the participants' voices with the research objectives

(Costa & Amado, 2018). This methodological approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing adolescents' political participation in digital environments, while also providing support for proposing educational actions aimed at enhancing these discussions.

4. Results

The analysis of the interviews revealed patterns that help us understand the conditions under which adolescents participate in political debates. In the following sections, we discuss who they usually debate with and the reasons for avoiding certain groups (4.1), the role of affection and emotions in conflicts (4.2), the generational tensions that hinder dialogue with adults (4.3), attitudes toward changing opinions (4.4), and the reasons for maintaining firm convictions even in deliberative contexts (4.5). These results highlight both limits and potential for developing deliberative capacities in digital and in-person environments. It is worth noting that, although the results are organized into analytical categories, these dimensions do not operate in isolation from one another. There are interrelationships between affects, ideological positions, generational relationships, and interaction contexts, which configure complex digital ecologies (Fuller, 2005). Technical and social factors, such as recommendation algorithms, platform visibility regimes, and norms of membership in online groups, shape these ecologies. These interrelationships compose digital ecologies in which visibility regimes and public evaluation increase the reputational costs of dissent, and algorithmic curation tends to reduce perceived informational diversity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

4.1 With whom they debate

Deliberation presupposes the exchange of ideas between individuals with diverse perspectives; however, adolescents tend to engage in political discussions primarily with close acquaintances, especially schoolmates and friends. Respondents typically discuss politics with family members, friends, classmates, and occasionally with strangers online (Figure 1). Debates often take place in person at home, at school, at family gatherings, and online, primarily on WhatsApp.

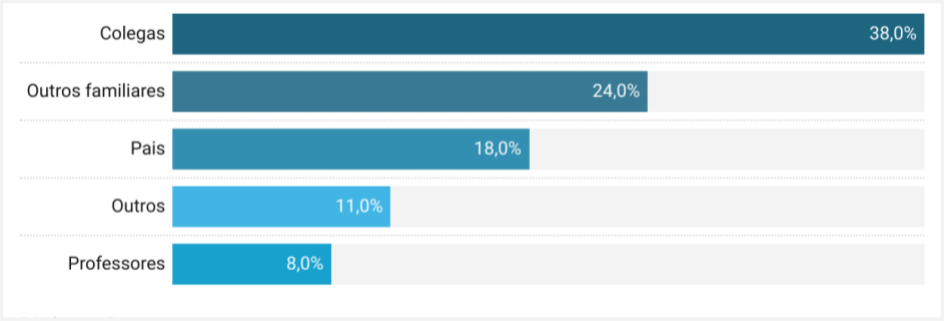


Figure 1. Who teens debate with (percentage of mentions). (Source: Field research)

We found a preference for in-person debates—54% more frequent than online ones—associated with the search for safe environments to express opinions. Adolescents tend to discuss politics with peers, indicating comfort with shared perspectives, and show resistance when they perceive a lack of understanding of the topic or fear of aggressive opposition. This limits the plurality of voices and reinforces preexisting views (Graham & Witschge, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). For example, one interviewee stated:

> With my friends, because they already know I do not know how to express myself very well... Online, I can look up a word I have forgotten. I feel more comfortable. (Interviewee #1, Nossa Senhora das Dores, May 2024)

On social media, interactions between peers are prevalent, particularly in WhatsApp groups and on platforms like Twitter/X, and Instagram. This, combined with aggression and poor moderation, leads to polarized and unconstructive debates. This highlights the importance of family social circles in promoting open dialogue. Furthermore, we observed some resistance to debate among adolescents due to their limited knowledge of the subject. A student from Aracaju reported having difficulty debating with a peer with a more political background, but stated that he shares his opinions with friends, classmates, teachers, and family, seeking intimacy and freedom.

While, on the one hand, this lack of knowledge can be seen as a legitimate concern, on the other hand, it is clear that some adolescents avoid discussing specific topics out of fear of being challenged or even aggressively rejected. We can infer that such reports demonstrate an inability to deliberate in specific environments or social groups due to factors such as fear of exposure and insecurity about political issues. However, they may also demonstrate a fear of not fitting in with their peer network.

Studies on social media and identity, such as those by Valkenburg and Peter (2011), highlight how adolescents shape their opinions and behaviors to conform to the expectations of

their peer groups. The fear of not belonging to a peer network can lead to self-censorship and hesitation to participate in debates.

School emerges as a crucial space for deliberation, particularly in teacher-organized debates or school projects. In these contexts, adolescents demonstrate a greater willingness to listen to and consider different points of view, aligning themselves with the principles of deliberation. Students often discuss politics with both peers and teachers. Moreover, although some have faced challenges to their positions, they remain engaged in conversations, especially during classes on subjects that raise political issues.[1]

While some teenagers debate with family members, there is an apparent difficulty in engaging in dialogue with older people, especially when faced with ideological differences. Most, however, are wary of discussing politics, especially in family situations, due to fear of conflict and disagreement. Some avoid discussions due to extreme family positions, while others prefer to talk with friends, where there is more openness to different opinions. Other teenagers feel their family does not hear them and prefer not to participate in political debates to avoid arguments. They seek to understand different points of view but are not always successful due to others' lack of openness to dialogue.

On social media, teenagers tend to interact with people who share similar opinions, especially in WhatsApp groups or on platforms like Twitter/X, and Instagram. However, the anonymity and lack of moderation on these platforms often result in polarized and unconstructive debates, distancing themselves from deliberative ideals. Political polarization is reported by the research subjects as a factor that hinders or even prevents dialogue:

> I am afraid to discuss politics with my family because my father is a Bolsonaro supporter, and the rest of my family, including his brothers, are supporters of the Workers' Party. Therefore, I prefer to avoid discussing it because my father and mother are also supporters of the Workers' Party. I mean, I am neither a supporter of the Workers' Party nor a supporter of Bolsonaro, so I prefer to avoid it at home. I never talk about it. (Interviewee #4, Estância, May 2024)

4.2 Affects

Deliberation requires mutual respect, but conflicts are part of the process (Mouffe, 2006). Negative feelings predominated when adolescents debated politics (Figure 2). Reports indicate a preference for in-person contexts to avoid online aggression; the feeling of anonymity facilitates

[1] In Aracaju, the discipline of Sociology was mentioned as being conducive to debates in the area.

disinhibition and hostility, increasing insecurity in those targeted (Kowalski et al., 2014). To preserve relationships, many avoid discussions with inflexible interlocutors, even though this reduces the diversity of perspectives.

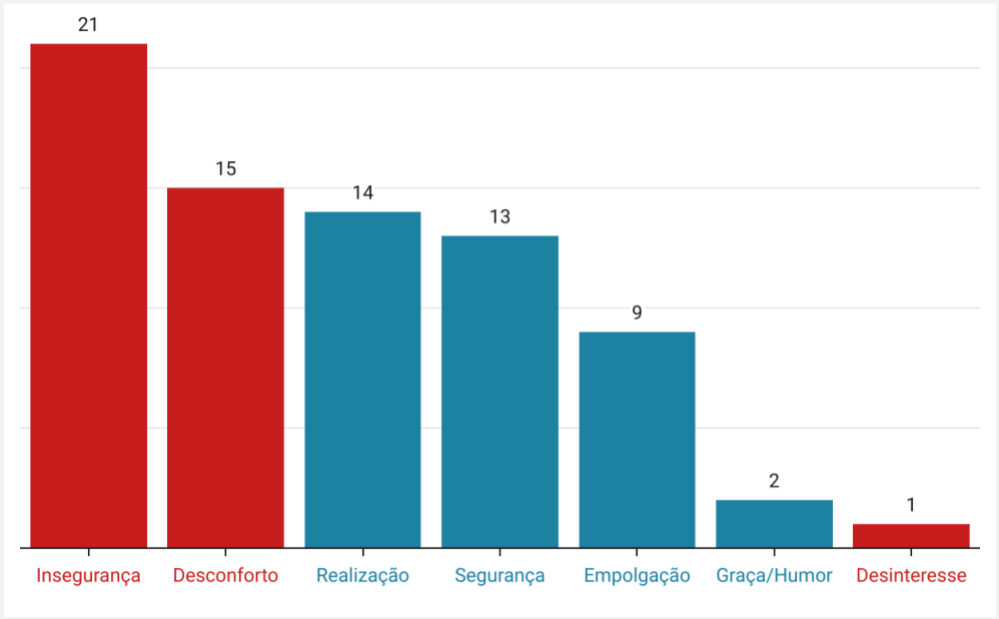


Figure 2. How teenagers feel about debating (total mentions). Negative feelings are marked in red, while positive feelings are marked in blue. (Source: Field research)

Aggressive behavior can arise when there is a lack of reciprocity in debate—that is, when there is no real exchange of arguments, only the imposition of opinions. Graham and Witschge (2003) indicate that the deliberation process depends on a willingness to listen and reflect, and that without this, communication can become confrontational and unproductive.

Some believe it is better to debate in person to avoid aggression, while others see the internet as a "lawless land" for expressing opinions without consequences. This suggests that face-to-face interactions are perceived as more respectful and conducive to constructive dialogue, which may be associated with the sense of anonymity that social media fosters (Kowalski et al., 2014), potentially ensuring safety for the aggressor and insecurity for the victim, who are often adolescents.

The sense of anonymity is directly linked to the phenomenon of cyberbullying and verbal aggression in digital media. Studies show that adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to these behaviors, as the digital environment can encourage the expression of hostility without fear of direct retaliation (Kowalski et al., 2014). In our research, we heard

interviewees report a preference for face-to-face discussions to avoid online aggression, which reflects this dynamic.

Many interviewees mentioned the importance of maintaining a courteous and respectful tone during discussions, even when faced with disagreements. This approach is essential for deliberation, as it enables the consideration of diverse perspectives. To preserve the quality of the dialogue—and also relationships—some adolescents prefer to avoid discussions with people who display aggressive behavior or who are unwilling to listen to opposing opinions.

> Many people are very extreme on both sides, so if we were to talk, what would that person do to us? So, sometimes it is better to avoid it, walk away, and say nothing. (Interviewee #2, Lagarto, May 2024)

This strategy, while understandable, can limit the diversity of perspectives in debates and encourage self-censorship. Analyzing the circulation of discourse on Twitter/X, Papacharissi (2015) proposes that political debate in a digital environment is organized much more around belonging to groups—called "affective publics"—than around the exchange of public reasons. This phenomenon may be driving adolescents away from online public debate, and what could be a space for deliberation becomes something to be avoided (Aneas et al., 2024).

Finally, according to some interviewees, presenting well-founded arguments supported by reliable sources and solid evidence appeared to play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of deliberation on social media. This is because when they observed political influencers anchoring their opinions in facts and data, adolescents realized that this practice not only strengthens the credibility of their positions but also contributes to raising the level of debate, favoring a dialogue less prone to excessive emotional reactions.

4.3 Generational Conflicts

Deliberation presupposes the inclusion of diverse voices; however, adolescents face challenges when attempting to engage in dialogue with older individuals, especially family members. These generational conflicts limit the deliberative potential of interactions. Analysis of the accounts indicates that when families are open to differing opinions, adolescents find this environment a valuable opportunity to exercise their deliberative skills:

> I think when you agree, you become a pawn, so I really like to say, "Dad, I do not agree with a lot of what you say," and then he asks, "Why don't you agree?" And then we debate, and usually it is at lunch; they are like personal conversations. (Interviewee 2, Aracaju, April 2024)

The literature on political socialization often highlights the role of parents as primary agents in shaping adolescents' political opinions. According to this perspective, parents are fundamental role models, transmitting values, beliefs, and political behaviors that shape adolescents' views on politics. Easton and Dennis (1980) emphasized that parents were the leading influencers of adolescents' political attitudes. This view assumed that adolescents internalized their family members' opinions through processes of imitation, dialogue, and exposure to political discussions in the home.

Putnam (2000) argues, however, that social and technological changes have reduced the family's influence on political socialization, especially with the advent of social media. This does not mean that parents have entirely lost their role, but rather that their influence is being shared with other social actors.[2] Moreover, in some cases, it is disregarded.

Many interviewees mention that they avoid discussing politics with older family members, especially when there are ideological differences. The aggressiveness and inflexibility of some adults discourage adolescents' participation, creating barriers to deliberation. This reflects a generational divide that complicates open discussions about political beliefs. In this regard, they mention that their parents tend to be aggressive or inflexible in their opinions, which discourages dialogue. Instead of promoting the exchange of ideas, these interactions often result in conflict and frustration. As a result, the fear of being judged or ridiculed for their opinions leads them to avoid political discussions in family settings. A lack of empathy can lead to generational conflict. If adolescents perceive that their elders are not interested in listening, this creates a barrier to deliberation, making intergenerational dialogue more difficult. Furthermore, Graham and Witschge (2003) suggest that deliberative practice requires time and patience, elements that can be compromised when there are disparities in experiences and values between generations.

Thus, the perception of the family environment as a space for the intergenerational transmission of political values, where parents played a central role in shaping their children's political identities, appears to be being reconfigured. Adolescents' reports indicate significant difficulties in discussing politics—especially with their parents —when ideological differences are present.

[2] Like the influencers they mentioned, who have the ability to schedule political discussions and present biases with which they associate themselves.

4.4 Changes of Opinion

One of the pillars of deliberation is the willingness to reconsider one's own opinions in light of dialogue with others. However, adolescents demonstrate an ambivalent attitude toward changing their opinions. In more constructive debates, especially with peers or in school settings, adolescents are willing to change their minds when presented with compelling arguments (Figure 3). This openness is crucial for deliberation, as it enables the incorporation of new perspectives and facilitates discussions that evolve toward thoughtful solutions.

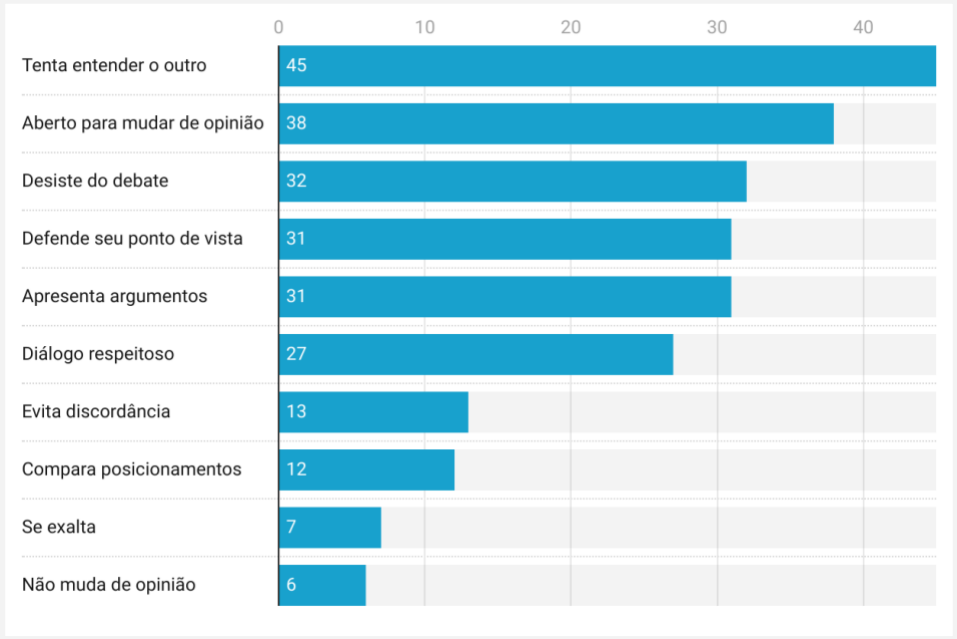


Figure 3. How Teens Debate (Total Mentions). (Source: Field research)

A recurring theme is the perception that others are resistant to changing their opinions. One interviewee commented:

> I try to speak calmly and listen to what the person is saying, but often they are close-minded and do not want to see it. I try to demonstrate why the opinion is incorrect, and I attempt to understand why they hold that opinion. (Interviewee 2, Poço Verde, June 2024)

Difficulty changing perspectives is often recognized, and it is frequently attributed to others—a projection effect. The fear of not belonging to a group can make some adolescents silent or conformist (Barros Filho, 1995). Weak socio-emotional skills intensify this fear (Uhls et al., 2014), restricting full participation and the adoption of positions consistent with their own convictions.

The fear of not belonging also restricts adolescents' ability to fully participate in deliberations, leading them to adopt positions that do not always reflect their true convictions. In

contrast, when engaging in online debates or interacting with older individuals, adolescents tend to be more resistant to changing their minds. They often attribute this inflexibility to others, especially on social media, where impunity can encourage more rigid stances.

This aspect directly relates to the notion of reflexivity discussed by Graham and Witschge (2003). According to the authors, deliberation is not only about expressing opinions, but also about reconsidering them in light of rational arguments. The inability to change one's mind reveals a flaw in deliberative practice, as it suggests that participants are unwilling to examine their own beliefs critically.

Furthermore, according to the adolescents' reports, what they understand as "political fanaticism" leads to a lack of respect for the opinions of others, creating an environment where defending a candidate is seen as mandatory. As a consequence, it generates divisions and makes it challenging to weigh different lines of thought.

4.5 Maintaining Convictions

An oscillation between openness to change and maintaining firm convictions is observed. Difficulties arise when discussions spiral out of control due to "closed mindedness" and lack of knowledge (Figure 4). Exposure to echo chambers reinforces polarized views, making it challenging to engage with diverse ideas (Habermas, 2023). In online contexts, greater anonymity and the potential for aggression make adolescents more defensive.

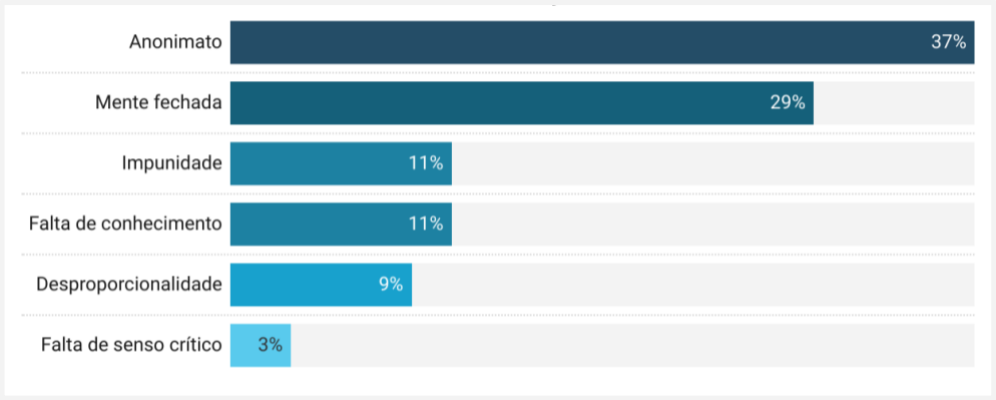


Figure 4. Reasons most mentioned by adolescents that hinder deliberation. (Source: Field research)

The perception of "immaturity" in deliberation, especially in the online environment, represents a challenge among adolescents. This immaturity can be attributed to factors such as ongoing cognitive and emotional development, which limit the ability to engage in complex

debates and consider divergent perspectives. Furthermore, echo chambers, created by algorithms that prioritize content aligned with pre-existing beliefs, reinforce polarized views and hinder exposure to diverse ideas (Habermas, 2023). These factors combine to create an environment conducive to immature behaviors, such as personal attacks, impatient behavior, and resistance to changing opinions.

While some adolescents are open to changing their opinions, this willingness depends on the context. For example, one stated:

> I really enjoy discussing politics... but it depends on the person I am discussing it with. (Interviewee 3, Poço Verde, May 2024)

This suggests that their openness to change is influenced by the dynamics of the conversation and the individuals involved. In debates on controversial topics, such as abortion or gun ownership, adolescents tend to be more resistant to changing their minds. They often mention that they prefer to avoid these topics or that they feel uncomfortable discussing them, which limits the deliberative potential of these discussions.

The willingness to change one's mind also appears to be influenced by the environment in which the debate takes place. In online environments, where anonymity is greater and the potential for aggression is higher, adolescents tend to be more defensive and less open to reconsidering their positions.

Furthermore, we question whether the resistance to changing one's mind lies within adolescents or in the individuals with whom they interact. This is because often, the inability of others to change their minds is actually related to their own inability to change. In this regard, studies attribute the concept of psychological projection: a defense mechanism in which individuals attribute to others characteristics, feelings, or behaviors that they themselves possess but do not recognize or are unwilling to admit (Baumeister et al., 1998). In the context of this research, adolescents may be projecting their own resistance to changing their minds onto others, accusing them of being "closed-minded."

5. Conclusions

The results show that, although they support the normative principles of deliberation (equality, reciprocity, rationality, and freedom), adolescents identify obstacles inherent to digital platforms—anonymity, impunity, and the lack of spaces for understanding—and prefer to debate in person with peers of the same age, especially in school settings. In these co-present

interactions, they adopt conflict management strategies, such as respectful dialogue and well-founded arguments. However, even in controlled debates (in person or in WhatsApp groups), discussions deviate from deliberative ideals, highlighting limitations in emotional regulation and argumentative competence.

The online environment intensifies aggression and a lack of empathy (Anderson et al., 2018). The fear of public judgment, combined with the desire for acceptance, generates self-censorship, alignment with dominant opinions, and avoidance of controversial topics. This dynamic is reinforced by the constant social comparison that social media fosters (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) and the assessment of personal worth through likes and comments (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Consequently, many adolescents avoid expressing genuine convictions, compromising the diversity of perspectives that sustain democratic deliberation.

A "projection effect" was also observed at three levels: (1) declaring oneself open to dialogue while attributing inflexibility to others; (2) recognizing toxicity as someone else's problem, without taking responsibility for potential escalations; and (3) attributing generational conflicts to adults, ignoring one's own communicative rigidity. This defense mechanism contributes to the fragmentation of debate and hinders the self-criticism necessary for deliberative improvement.

To develop deliberative capacities, it is imperative to create environments—both in-person and online—that combine socio-emotional support, qualified mediation, and encouragement of active listening. Schools stand out as a privileged space for structured debate exercises, allowing adolescents to practice perspective shifting, affect regulation, and evidence-based argumentation. At the same time, public policies and greater platform accountability are essential to curb the effects of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2020) and reduce incentives for polarized interactions.

We did not map technical platform variables or systematically code them. However, based on the literature, public metrics, persistence of statements, and algorithmic logic likely influence youth's dispositions toward deliberation. Future research could integrate digital ecology indicators with qualitative protocols and combine media and information literacy—such as source analysis, attention governance, and affect regulation—to test whether these skills moderate the effects of group belonging and reputational pressure.

We conclude that critical media literacy is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for strengthening youth deliberative practices. Future interventions should integrate training in emotional regulation, argumentation techniques, and analysis of algorithmic influence on the visibility of dissenting voices. Subsequent research can test these proposals in various sociotechnical contexts, assessing whether they foster more inclusive, reflective, and resilient forms of political participation in the face of the pressures of conformity and exclusion that are typical of social media.

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