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Impact of digital media on misinformation and social health during the Metástasis case in Ecuador

Impacto de los medios digitales en la desinformación y la salud social durante el caso Metástasis en Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzed the impact of digital media on the dissemination of misinformation and the configuration of social health during the "Metástasis" case in Ecuador, regarded as one of the country's largest political and judicial corruption scandals. An exploratory and descriptive mixed-methods design was applied, combining critical discourse analysis, surveys of seven hundred users of platform X, and semi-structured interviews with two digital communication experts. In addition, sixty posts from the accounts @LaPosta_Ecu and @ Primicias were collected and examined, focusing on interaction metrics such as likes, comments, reposts, and views. Results showed that the digital conversation was mainly structured around judicial corruption and drug trafficking, while the factors influencing virality included the emotional nature of content, the use of hashtags, and the presence of exclusive testimonies. Survey findings indicated that eighty-five percent of users acknowledged the influence of digital information on their opinions, although ninety percent perceived high levels of misinformation, which decreased trust in the media and reinforced social polarization. The interviews confirmed that platform X functioned as a strategic space for public debate but also as a channel for the spread of rumors and false news. In conclusion, the study highlighted the urgent need to promote media literacy policies and fact-checking mechanisms in order to protect social health and strengthen citizens' resilience against the digital infodemic.

Keywords: Digital Media; Public Opinion; Misinformation; Social Health; Media Literacy.

RESUMEN

El estudio analizó el impacto de los medios digitales en la difusión de desinformación y en la configuración de la salud social durante el caso "Metástasis" en Ecuador, considerado uno de los mayores escándalos de corrupción política y judicial en la región. Se aplicó un diseño mixto exploratorio y descriptivo que integró el análisis crítico del discurso, encuestas a setecientos usuarios de la plataforma X y entrevistas semiestructuradas a dos expertos en comunicación digital. Además, se recopilaron sesenta publicaciones de las cuentas @LaPosta_Ecu y @Primicias, en las cuales se examinaron métricas de interacción tales como "me gusta", comentarios, reposts y visualizaciones. Los resultados mostraron que la conversación digital se estructuró principalmente en torno a la corrupción judicial y al narcotráfico, mientras que los factores que influyeron en la viralidad fueron la emocionalidad del contenido, el uso de hashtags y la presencia de testimonios exclusivos. La encuesta evidenció que el ochenta y cinco por ciento de los usuarios reconoció la influencia de la información digital en su opinión, aunque el noventa por ciento manifestó percibir altos

niveles de desinformación, lo cual disminuyó la confianza en los medios y acentuó la polarización social. Las entrevistas confirmaron que X funcionó como un espacio estratégico para el debate público, pero también como un canal de propagación de rumores y noticias falsas. En conclusión, el estudio destacó la necesidad de promover políticas de alfabetización mediática y mecanismos de verificación de información para proteger la salud social y fortalecer la resiliencia ciudadana frente a la infodemia digital.

Palabras clave: Medios Digitales; Opinión Pública; Desinformación; Salud Social; Alfabetización Mediática.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, digital media have radically transformed the processes of information circulation, public opinion formation, and citizen participation dynamics. Social networks, in particular, have established themselves as environments in which information flows rapidly and multiplies through mechanisms of mass interaction, generating a new communication ecosystem that differs from the unidirectional logic of traditional media.[1,2] This change has had significant repercussions not only on politics and culture, but also on public health and social well-being, due to the role of information and misinformation in shaping collective perceptions.[3,4]

Trust in available information is an essential aspect of social health, understood as the ability of communities to interact in reliable communication environments, without the interference of bias or fake news. Various studies have shown that exposure to digital misinformation can have an impact on mental health, increase social polarization, and erode trust in institutions.[5,6,7] In this regard, media and digital literacy has become a global priority, as has the development of public policies that promote critical consumption of information.[8,9]

Recent studies have shown that platforms such as Twitter—now called X—play a central role in the dissemination of narratives, whether informative, persuasive, or manipulative, that directly influence the formation of public opinion.[10,11] In crisis contexts, these platforms often supplement traditional media coverage, allowing immediate access to data, rumors, and testimonies.[12,13] However, this dynamism increases the risks associated with misinformation, which in many cases spreads faster than verified information.[14]

In Latin America, the impact of digital media on sociopolitical processes has intensified in recent years, especially in situations of political and judicial instability.[15,16] In Ecuador, the so-called "Metástasis" case is a recent milestone that exposed a network of corruption linked to drug trafficking and the judicial system, leading to a deep political crisis and a reconfiguration of public debate.[17,18] The magnitude of the case and its media coverage make it an ideal laboratory for analyzing how digital media, particularly platform X, influence the generation of narratives, the viralization of content, and social polarization.

The literature on social media has shown that factors explaining virality include the emotionality of content, the presence of exclusive testimonials, and the strategic use of hashtags.[19,20,21] Likewise, interaction between users, expressed in comments, reposts, and real-time debates, reinforces the perception of immediacy and citizen participation, although it often amplifies polarization and extreme discourse.[22,23] This phenomenon, which has been documented in different international contexts, finds a local reflection in the "Metástasis" case with global implications for the relationship between information, power, and public opinion.

Beyond the political dimension, the phenomenon studied is connected to social health, given that constant exposure to misinformation and polarized discourse can affect public trust and social cohesion.[24,25] International organizations such as the WHO and UNESCO have warned that digital disinformation constitutes an "infodemic," with harmful effects on public health and democratic governance.[26,27] Therefore, understanding how these narratives are generated, disseminated, and consumed in critical contexts is key to designing media literacy strategies, digital regulation policies, and collaborative verification mechanisms.

Within this framework, this study analyzed the impact of digital media, specifically platform X, on the formation of public opinion during the "Metástasis" case in Ecuador. Using a mixed methodological approach, critical discourse analysis techniques, surveys, and expert interviews were integrated to explore the dynamics of viralization, recurring themes in digital conversation, and factors that condition the perception of credibility. The objective was to evaluate the role of digital media in shaping public opinion and its implications for democracy, social health, and citizen trust.

Digital media and public opinion

Over the last decade, digital media have established themselves as priority spaces for the construction of public opinion, partially displacing traditional media due to their immediacy and capacity for interaction.[1,2] Public opinion, understood as the set of collective perceptions and judgments on matters of social interest, is nourished by the information that circulates in these digital environments.[3] European and Latin American studies have shown that platforms such as Twitter/X function as contemporary agoras, where citizens comment on, amplify, or refute dominant narratives.[4,5] However, the openness of the digital space also exposes users to

information overload, polarization, and misinformation.[6]

It is important to note that digital platforms have become a powerful tool for exporting and importing information because they help in a bidirectional way to disseminate and receive information, which will drive the creation of public opinion among the masses and influence society's perception. This helps to create democratic interaction and participation among the audience, posing dangerous challenges such as the spread of false information, and it is here that digital media must guarantee verified information so that public opinion is well-formed and balanced.

DEVELOPMENT
Virality, emotions, and algorithms

Viral spread is one of the most researched phenomena in digital communication. Its explanation has been linked to emotional content, the novelty of the information, and the algorithmic architecture of platforms. [7,8] Berger et al.[9] demonstrated that highly activating emotions, such as outrage or euphoria, increase the likelihood of dissemination. In Latin America, recent research has confirmed that exclusive testimonials and the use of hashtags generate greater reach and engagement.[10,11] However, this dynamism also facilitates the spread of misinformation, as algorithms prioritize content that generates intense interactions, without discriminating against its veracity.[12]

Viral content on social media is a far-reaching phenomenon that allows various types of content, such as videos, posts, images, or links, to spread instantly and massively among users of these platforms. This process, which initially arose spontaneously, has become an object of study and strategic analysis, especially with regard to audience behavior. Social media has the ability to influence users' attitudes, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and although some events go viral without the intention of generating trends or controversy, companies have learned to take advantage of these phenomena to attract and retain customers, both locally and globally.[21]

Digital disinformation and social health

Misinformation has been described as one of the main contemporary threats to social cohesion and public trust.[13] During the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO introduced the term "infodemic" to explain how the circulation of false or misleading information affected public health.[14] Several studies confirmed that constant exposure to misinformation increases social anxiety, erodes trust in institutions, and promotes risky behavior. [15,16] Consequently, the analysis of misinformation on digital platforms is not only relevant to the field of communication, but also to health and technology, as it directly affects collective decision-making.[17]

There are many digital media outlets in Ecuador, but few have an adequate organizational structure and financial remuneration. Those media outlets that, with all the necessary facilities, should provide quality and accurate information to the public often fail to do so, perhaps because their strategies of selling smoke and sensationalism are more profitable, and also because they depend on what companies or the government decide to release as "information" of interest for public consumption.[21]

Over time, people have become increasingly comfortable and adapted to social media, where they consume various digital media, share information, and exchange arguments based on the content disseminated on these platforms. In this digital age, brands that take advantage of this dynamic by offering appropriate content are able to sell their products quickly and effectively. This phenomenon has led audiences to recognize that traditional media are no longer the main source of knowledge and information, but have been displaced by social media as the center of attention.

Social media and polarization in Latin America

In Latin American contexts, social media has played an ambivalent role: on the one hand, it broadens citizen participation; on the other, it exacerbates political and social polarization.[18,19] Research in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Chile has documented how Twitter/X has become a stage for discursive confrontation, in which emotionality and misinformation reinforce ideological division.[20,21,22] Furthermore, in countries with low trust in traditional media, social media has become even more relevant as a source of information, albeit with greater risks of manipulation.[23,24]

Furthermore, it is one of the most studied phenomena in the field of digital communication. Initially associated with memes and playful interactions, over time its potential to influence public opinion, generate trends, and provoke controversy has been recognized. The key elements that make virality a topic of interest are its ability to arouse quick emotions, align with current events, or reflect popular trends. These factors allow companies and digital media to adapt their strategies to promote products, raise awareness of social issues, disseminate information, entertain, influence culture, or encourage active audience participation.[30]

This network has established itself as a fundamental tool for the circulation of information in real time. Communicators, media outlets, and users in general use the platform to share and update data on events

occurring throughout the day, providing immediate and global coverage of diverse topics such as health, economics, politics, and society. This dynamism not only facilitates the dissemination of news, but also promotes the creation of public debates, the formation of opinions, and marketing strategies.

The "Metástasis" case in Ecuador as a scenario for analysis

In Ecuador, the "Metástasis" case exposed links between drug trafficking, justice, and politics, generating an unprecedented institutional crisis.[25] Traditional media coverage proved insufficient, displacing Platform X as the main space for public discussion.[26] Local research showed that publications with testimonies from judicial and political actors were the most shared and commented on, highlighting the centrality of emotionality and scandal in virality.[27,28] At the same time, the circulation of rumors and misinformation deepened polarization, weakened public trust, and questioned the legitimacy of institutions.[29,30]

METHOD

The research was designed using a mixed exploratory and descriptive approach, which allowed for the integration of quantitative and qualitative procedures in order to analyze the impact of platform X on the generation of public opinion surrounding the "Metástasis" case in Ecuador. This design was relevant because it enabled the triangulation of objective data on digital interaction with subjective perceptions of users and experts, promoting a broader and deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The reference population was composed of users of platform X in Ecuador, while the sample was defined through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. In the quantitative phase, sixty posts published in March 2024 by two accounts with wide national reach were selected: @LaPosta_Ecu, with 411 587 followers, and @Primicias, with 1 270 544 followers. These accounts were chosen because of their prominence in media coverage of the case and their ability to generate significant interactions on the social network. In the qualitative phase, surveys were conducted with 700 active users of the platform, who were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria of regular use of X and participation in debates related to the case. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with two experts in digital communication with experience in journalism and social media analysis, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of credibility, virality, and misinformation.

Various complementary techniques were used for data collection. First, critical discourse analysis was applied to interpret the narratives and rhetorical strategies present in user comments, following the model proposed by Van Dijk.[1]

Secondly, an analysis of digital metrics was carried out, which included collecting data on likes, comments, reposts, and views of the previously selected posts, using X's advanced search function and classification criteria based on hashtags such as #Metástasis, #Norero, #MayraSalazar, and #WilliamTerán. Thirdly, structured surveys with closed questions and Likert scales were implemented, aimed at assessing trust in the media, the perception of misinformation, and the level of participation in digital debates. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually, guided by a flexible questionnaire that addressed the credibility of sources, the factors that make content go viral, and the risks associated with the circulation of unverified information.

The research procedure was carried out in several successive phases. First, publications related to the " Metastasis " case during the month of March 2024 were identified and classified, prioritizing those that generated the highest volume of interaction. Subsequently, the publications and associated comments were coded, applying content and discourse analysis techniques that allowed for the establishment of predominant thematic categories.

At the same time, digital surveys were distributed via links shared in online communities related to the topic, ensuring the representativeness of users familiar with the issue. Finally, interviews were conducted with experts, and the findings from both phases were integrated into a triangulation process, which facilitated the comparison of the quantitative results obtained in the metrics with the qualitative perceptions derived from the discourse analysis, surveys, and interviews.

Data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistical techniques in the case of quantitative information, expressing frequencies, percentages, and means that were subsequently represented in tables and figures. In the qualitative phase, an open and axial coding process was used to identify recurring patterns in the discourses of users and experts. Methodological triangulation was essential to increase the internal validity of the study, as it enabled the convergence of multiple sources of evidence on the same phenomenon.[2]

In terms of ethical considerations, the research was conducted in accordance with the principles established in the Declaration of Helsinki and international standards for social science research. The data used in the quantitative phase corresponded to public information available on platform X, which made it unnecessary to request additional permissions; however, the anonymization of users in the results was guaranteed, avoiding the disclosure of sensitive data. Furthermore, participants in the surveys and interviews received prior information about the objectives of the study and gave digital informed consent before participating, ensuring respect for their autonomy and confidentiality.

Regarding methodological validity and limitations, it is important to note that the use of a mixed design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the object of study, although it presented certain restrictions. The sample of publications and experts was limited, which could restrict the generalization of the results to other contexts or platforms. In addition, the analysis focused on a specific period of high information activity, so it did not capture the longitudinal evolution of the debate. However, these limitations were partially offset by data triangulation, which strengthened the credibility of the findings and provided a broad view of the role of platform X in shaping public opinion in a crisis context.

RESULTS

The quantitative analysis of interactions on platform X revealed significant differences in user behavior toward posts related to the " Metastasis case. During March 2024, sixty posts were collected from the digital media outlets @LaPosta_Ecu and @Primicias, the results of which are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Interactions with posts on X related to the Metástasis case				
Account	**Posts**	**Likes**	**Comments**	**Reposts**	**Views**
@LaPosta_Ecu	29	4 192	831	995	871 000
@Primicias	31	6 193	442	3 474	660 800
Total	60	10 385	1 273	4 469	1 531 800

The results showed that @Primicias' posts received a higher number of likes and reposts, suggesting that its content was widely disseminated. In contrast, @LaPosta_Ecu obtained more comments and views, reflecting a higher level of debate and controversy surrounding its posts. This pattern indicated that users responded differently to the coverage styles of each media outlet: one with a greater capacity for virality and the other with a greater propensity to generate public discussion.

When analyzing the relationship between content type and level of interaction, it was observed that posts that included exclusive testimonies, judicial leaks, and statements from key actors in the case received the most attention. These findings confirmed that emotionality and exclusivity were determining factors for virality.
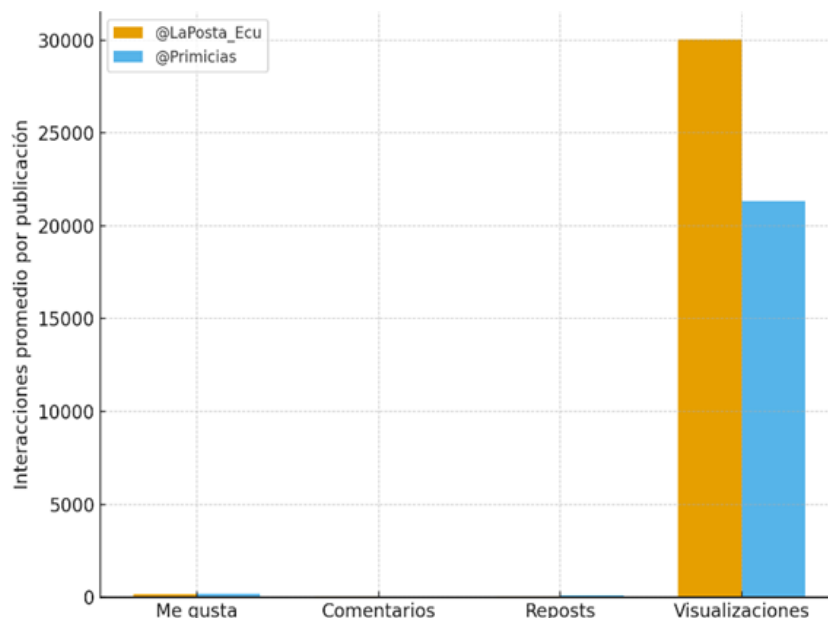

Figure 1. Comparison of average interactions per publication in X

Figure 1 showed that, although @Primicias generated more posts, @LaPosta_Ecu achieved a higher average number of comments and views per post, suggesting that its content stimulated more intense debate among the digital audience.

In relation to the predominant themes identified through critical discourse analysis, user comments focused mainly on judicial corruption (40 %), followed by drug trafficking (25 %) and political impact (15 %). Other topics such as emotional reactions, criticism of the media, and misinformation accounted for smaller proportions (table 2).

Table 2. Predominant topics in X's comments on the Metástasis case	
Topic	**Frequency (%)**
Judicial corruption	40
Drug trafficking	25
Impact on politics	15
Emotional reactions	10
Criticism of the media	5
Misinformation	5

These results showed that digital conversation was strongly marked by perceptions of institutional crisis and citizen discontent, reflecting the centrality of judicial corruption as the dominant narrative.

On the other hand, analysis of virality factors revealed that exclusive testimonials, the use of specific hashtags, and the emotionality of messages were the main triggers for dissemination. Figure 2 summarizes these findings.
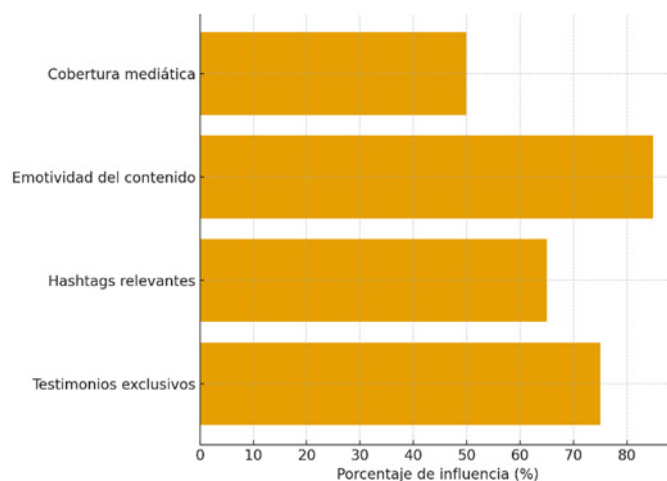

Figure 2. Factors influencing the virality of posts on X

In qualitative terms, interviews with experts confirmed that platform X functioned as a strategic space for the circulation of information in real time, although it also increased the spread of rumors and fake news. Interviewees noted that the emotionality of the content generated rapid but often uncritical reactions, which facilitated the spread of misinformation.

Data from surveys of 700 users reinforced these findings. The majority (65 %) stated that they distrusted the information disseminated on the platform, although 72 % said they actively participated in public debates. In addition, 85 % acknowledged that digital content influenced their opinion formation, while 90 % perceived a high level of misinformation on the platform.
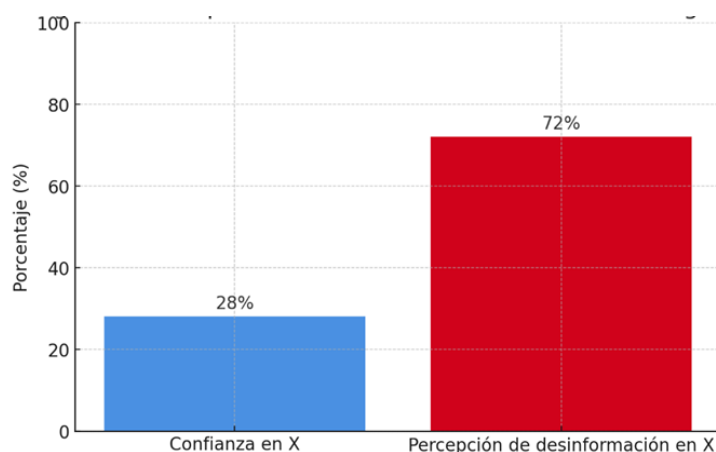

Figure 3. User perceptions of digital media

The results reveal that the majority of users (65 %) distrust the information disseminated on X, reinforcing the need to promote media literacy. However, a high percentage of respondents (72 %) indicated that they actively participate in public debates on the platform, underscoring the importance of X as a space for discussion and the exchange of ideas. In addition, 85 % of users believe that digital media influence their opinion formation, while 90 % believe that there is a high level of misinformation on the platform.
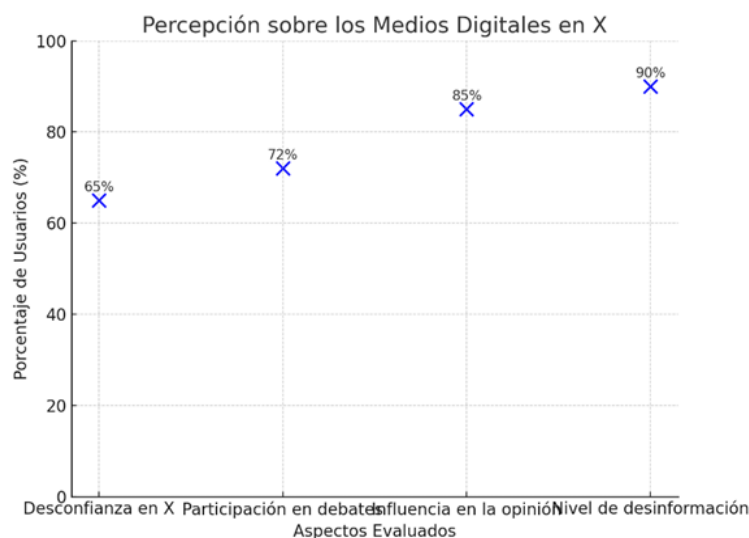

Figure 4. Level of acceptance and perception of information consumption on digital platforms

Meanwhile, in relation to the perception of X's credibility, it has been identified that, although most users perceive X as an influential platform in the formation of public opinion, they also recognize the presence of misinformation and express a lack of confidence in the veracity of the information. This highlights the need to develop strategies that promote source verification and user education on the responsible consumption of digital content.

Measuring credibility on social media depends on a combination of factors, ranging from users' subjective perceptions to algorithmic analysis of sources and content. An effective strategy for assessing credibility on social media should combine methods such as surveys, source analysis, *fact-checking*, and the use of artificial intelligence to detect patterns of misinformation or bias.

The ACD identified the most recurring themes in comments on the " Metastasis " case. These themes, such as judicial corruption, drug trafficking, and credibility, made it possible to identify the most commonly used rhetorical strategies in the comments, especially those that appealed to the public's emotions, which were coded to determine their prevalence in public discourse.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated that platform X played a decisive role in shaping public opinion around the " Metastasis " case in Ecuador, showing how digital media not only amplify the dissemination of information, but also promote the circulation of disinformation and social polarization. These findings coincide with previous research that identified social networks as hybrid spaces, where the immediacy of communication coexists with the precariousness of verification and the prevalence of emotional narratives. [1,2]

First, the centrality of judicial corruption as the dominant narrative in digital conversation (40 % of comments) confirms the findings of Latin American studies that highlight the relevance of corruption and drug trafficking issues in the social perception and loss of trust in institutions. [3,4] As documented by Rodríguez and González in Brazil, [5] the amplification of these narratives in digital environments not only reflects public mistrust but also contributes to consolidating it, fueling a cycle of public outrage.

A key aspect identified in the results was the influence of emotionality and exclusive testimonies on the virality of content. This finding is consistent with Berger and Milkman's theory of emotional diffusion, [6] who argued that highly activating emotions increase the likelihood that information will be shared. In the Ecuadorian case, testimonies from actors such as Mayra Salazar and judicial leaks not only generated peaks of interaction but also served as catalysts for polarized debates. Research conducted in Spain and Chile corroborates that this type of content increases public attention, although it reduces the possibility of rational and critical deliberation. [7,8]

Likewise, user perceptions revealed a contradictory scenario: while 85 % acknowledged that digital content influenced their opinion, 90 % reported perceiving high levels of misinformation on the platform. This paradox

coincides with international studies that describe the coexistence of trust and distrust toward digital media, where users consume and disseminate information despite questioning its credibility.[9,10] From a social health perspective, this dynamic constitutes a risk, as constant exposure to false or manipulated narratives not only erodes institutional trust but can also generate anxiety and a sense of collective insecurity.[11]

Critical discourse analysis also revealed that the digital conversation was not homogeneous, but rather structured around polarized narratives. This phenomenon, documented in different international contexts,[12,13] was intensified in the Ecuadorian case, where platform X functioned as an amplifier of extreme positions rather than a space for pluralistic deliberation. The literature on digital polarization argues that the algorithmic architecture of these platforms reinforces echo chambers, promoting selective exposure to like-minded content and increasing the likelihood of radicalization.[14,15] The findings of this study corroborate this trend, as the most intense interactions were concentrated in posts with high emotional content.

In contrast to studies that point to the democratizing capacity of social media, allowing citizens to actively participate in public debates,[16,17] the results of this research show a critical nuance: although participation was high (72 % reported participating in debates), the quality of the exchange was conditioned by immediacy, emotionality, and misinformation. Thus, the platform was configured more as a space for confrontation than as a forum for informed deliberation.

Finally, interviews with experts reinforced the need to implement media literacy strategies as a key measure to counter misinformation and encourage critical consumption of digital information. This recommendation coincides with that of UNESCO and the WHO, which identify media literacy as an essential tool for reducing the vulnerability of societies to the digital infodemic.[18,19] Thus, the findings of this study have implications not only for communication and politics, but also for social health and public policy, as they underscore the urgency of developing regulatory and educational mechanisms that strengthen citizen resilience to misinformation.

The research confirms that platform X played a dual role in the " Metastasis " crisis: on the one hand, it enabled broad citizen participation and brought issues of high public interest to light; but on the other, it favored the spread of misinformation and social polarization. These results enrich the academic discussion on the influence of digital media in crisis contexts and reaffirm the need to consider disinformation as a problem not only of communication, but also of health and democratic governance.

CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrated that digital media, and in particular platform X, played a central role in shaping public opinion during the " Metastasis " case in Ecuador. The research showed that digital interaction was marked by narratives associated with judicial corruption and drug trafficking, reflecting a high level of citizen discontent and profound questioning of state institutions.

One of the most relevant findings was that the emotionality of the content and exclusive testimonies were decisive factors in the virality of the publications. This dynamic confirmed that dissemination processes in digital environments are conditioned not so much by the veracity of the information, but by the ability of the messages to generate immediate emotional impact. While this phenomenon increased the visibility of content, it also facilitated the spread of misinformation and rumors, which had a negative impact on public trust and the quality of civic debate.

Analysis of user perceptions revealed a significant paradox: although most acknowledged that the information disseminated on X influenced the formation of their opinions, they also expressed a high level of distrust in its credibility. This finding is concerning, as it shows that the platform functioned simultaneously as a primary source of information and a space for misinformation, reinforcing the need to implement media literacy and fact-checking strategies that enable users to navigate critically and consciously.

In terms of implications, the research provides empirical evidence for understanding how digital media affect social health, insofar as constant exposure to polarized content and false narratives can increase collective anxiety, erode institutional trust, and exacerbate social fragmentation. These results underscore the urgency for both the media and public policy makers to develop initiatives aimed at strengthening citizen resilience in the face of the digital infodemic.

The research acknowledges its limitations in terms of the period analyzed and the small number of experts interviewed; however, the findings offer a solid starting point for future comparative studies examining the evolution of digital conversation at different times of crisis, as well as for research aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of media literacy programs in reducing misinformation and promoting healthier and more constructive public debate.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
None.

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