# Virtual discussions on political issues and the virtual public space in Algeria: Facebook as a model

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**Abstract:**

This article seeks to analyze and describe virtual discussions about political issues on Facebook in Algeria, using content analysis of 458 written comments and responses. The post published by "El Biled journal" on Facebook is about a topic related to the draft amendment to the constitution. The study is based on three indicators: justification, reciprocity, and coherence.

As results, we found that the justification method was dominated by the expressive character based on superficial expression that is abstract from any arguments. We also note a weakness in the reciprocity and coherence criteria, as most of the comments did not adhere to the publication's original topic and did not receive many responses. The interaction was with only 39 comments where the offensive method was the most used.

**Keywords:** Content analysis; Facebook; Virtual discussions; Virtual public space.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the spread of the Internet and the huge increase in its use, some optimistic research proposals have emerged about the possibility of the Internet in forming a public space in which the process of exchanging information, opinions and ideas among citizens is enhanced. This proposition coincided with the emergence of interactive communication platforms and their increasing role in creating open arenas for virtual meeting between individuals to express their positions towards issues of public concern in their societies, which facilitated some political practices, including discussing political issues, which was once the preserve of the official authorities.

It has become possible to delve into political issues thanks to many interactive platforms such as blogging spaces, dialogue forums and social networks, which has drawn the attention of studies that dealt with the issue of public space and its relationship to the Internet, and many of them focus on online discussions as an essential element of the public space. Many researchers argue about the possibility of the Internet in general and social networks in particular to provide a possible remedy for the crisis of the faltering public space by providing democratic communication platforms that are not linked to the constraints of space and time (Freelon, 2010, p1173). And expanding more spaces for deliberation on various issues, especially political issues, as the Tunisian researcher, Al-Sadiq Al-Hamami see that the Internet expands the public space because it contributes to overcoming the elitist and representative dimension in favor of the deliberative dimension, which enhances the participation of citizens in political life (الحمامي، 2011، ص20). Marcoccia asserts that the power of the Internet lies in enabling its users to engage in political discussions on the Internet and contribute to the development of their ability to identify interests and express (Marcoccia, 2003, p12). This is because virtual discussions provide an opportunity for the debaters to know about other opinions and other values. Exposure to different and opposing

viewpoints can strengthen arguments and work to change people's opinions. Also, through virtual discussions, citizens' views and points of view are represented (Stromer-Galley, 2014, p5), and thus contribute to the formation or expansion of public space.

The belief in the power of the Internet in general and social networks in particular in shaping a public space, and the optimistic view about its ability to provide open platforms for political discussion among citizens, does not negate the existence of some problems and barriers that can prevent this from being achieved. Where another group of researchers believes that discussions on the Internet are sometimes hostile and related to narrow topics that are not always related to public affairs and are limited to groups that are ideologically compatible (الحمامي، 2011، ص21). This calls for a greater understanding of these communicative practices over the Internet and directs our interest to know the characteristics of these discussions in an Algerian virtual space represented on the "El Biled journal" page on Facebook.

## 1.1 The problem

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas was interested in the public space as a space for issues of public affairs, issues of communication and the living world based on dialogue and discussion (العلوي، 2014). His works have formed the basis for many studies that sought to understand the virtual discussions that can arise within the public space formed by the different platforms of the Internet. Some of them have followed the deliberative criteria stemming from Habermas' thought, which requires rationality, honesty, respect and equality as well-established criteria for deliberation aimed at achieving consensus and understanding. While another group of researchers believes that it is necessary to adapt new criteria for evaluating virtual discussions to suit the characteristics of virtual communities on the Internet, slightly reduce the ideal criteria and allow for diversity and difference.

This article will focus on describing and analyzing virtual discussions on public issues,

in particular political issues, according to a set of indicators inspired by similar foreign research (Graham 2010, Schneider 1997). We chosen theses researches because they intersect with our study and focus on less severe criteria than the official deliberative criteria which is based on the work of Habermas. The indicators studied in this article are: Justification, Reciprocity, and Coherence. It should be noted that the identification of these indicators came according to the nature of our research problem. Our aim is to attempt to describe and evaluate virtual discussions about a publication related to the draft amendment of the constitution published by "Al-Bilad Page" (Journal el Bilad, 2020) on Facebook on May 7, 2020. The research problem of this study came as follows:

What are the characteristics of virtual discussions about a post related to the draft amendment of the constitution on the "El Biled journal" Facebook page?

**Sub-questions**

- What are the justification methods included in the participants' discussions through the comments listed under the studied post?
- To what extent did the participants interact with each other in the comments listed under the studied post?
- Did the discussion participants stick to the original topic of the studied post?

**Study objectives**

- Reveal the justification methods involved in the participants' discussions.
- Knowing the extent to which participants engage with each other in the reciprocal discussion process.
- Disclose the extent to which the discussions adhere to the original topic presented by the post under study.

## 1.2 Method and tool

This study belongs to the descriptive analytical studies, which are based on content analysis. Content analysis is one of the common research methods in media and communication domain. It is the most widely used tool in the virtual public space research as revealed by previous studies.

One of the most common definitions of content analysis is Berlson's definition. Berlson sees content analysis as "a research method aimed at quantitative, objective and systematic description of the apparent content of communication" ( عبد الحميد، 1979، 17ص). Zeidan Abdel-Baqi considers it "a major method in communication research, which combines the experimental method with the historical method."

Samir Hussein points out that content analysis is not a stand-alone method, but rather is just a method or tool used by the researcher among other methods" ( عبد الحميد، 1979 42ص). In the same direction, Youssef Tamar believes that content analysis is a method or technique that depends on the systematic treatment of the contents of the material under analysis" (112 تمار، 2019، ص).

In this study, content analysis was used as a tool for the purpose of analyzing and describing a sample of the participants' discussions, represented by the comments and responses to the comments.

## 1.2.1 Study sample

The study relied on an intentional sample first represented in (El Biled journal) on the Facebook network, as it is the most followed news page in Algeria, with 10 million followers.

The subject of the draft constitution amendment was chosen as an issue for study. It is an issue of general political concern, and the issue has received great interest and anticipation from the Algerian citizens on Facebook.

We chosen a publication posted by the page, on May 7, 2020, to be studied. The

content of the posted publication was entitled: "The draft constitution: a vice president, only two terms in the presidency and parliament." This text was attached to a picture of the Algerian flag and the interface of the constitution, as well as a link referred to the newspaper's website that includes an article on the published topic (https://elbilad.net/Article/detail?id=107135).

### 1.2.2 Categories of Analysis

a. **Justification method:** This category represents the justification method included in the participants' comments and is divided into:

- Argumentative method: This method represents the inclusion of arguments and evidence for the purpose of defending the opinion or opposing the opinion of another participant, such as providing accurate numbers and statistics, quotations from reliable sources, comparisons and examples based on real experiences.

- Offensive method: This method represents the inclusion of hostile nature, such as accusations, insults, and judgments.

- Ironic method: This method represents the inclusion of irony and mockery.

- Expressive method: This method represents expressing an opinion and expressing views that are not supported by arguments, such as making suggestions or expressing support or opposition without giving justifications.

b. **Interaction with comments:** We mean by this category the interaction of participants with each other in the discussion through written responses. This category has been included in order to reveal the reciprocity, and the following sub-categories are:

- Existence of interaction with comments: These represent comments that have recorded responses from other participants.

- Absence of interaction with comments: These represent comments that have not recorded any responses from other participants.

c. **Relevancy of comment:** This category refers to the topic on which the comments are revolved. We have included this category in order to reveal the coherence index and the extent to which the comments adhere to the main topic included in the post. This latter addressed three points from the draft amendment of the constitution, which are: Determining the mandate of the president and appointing a vice president for him and determining the mandate of Parliament. This category includes the following sub-categories:

- Comment related to the published topic: It represents the comment is related to the topic and points included in the post published by the page.

- Comment not related to the published topic: It represents the comment's departure from the topic and the main points included in the post published by the page. This type may be related to other points from the draft or different topics.

### 1.2.3 Validity and Reliability

Before starting to analyze the content of the comments, we first presented the content analysis form to the referees for the purpose of arbitration and evaluation, and based on their observations, we modified what should be modified.

For the reliability procedure, we relied on coders to analyze an initial sample of the comments listed under the studied publication. The Pearson coefficient was applied, where we obtained a stability coefficient of 0.97 (97%), which is a very good percentage.

### 1.3 Study concepts

**Virtual discussion:** The discussion represents a rational interactive process. Habermas sees within his theory of communicative action that the discussion is an

interaction between at least two people who establish an interpersonal relationship whose goal is to reach consensus.

Habermas connects the discussion in the public space with the strength of the argument, regardless of the social level of the participants (ملكاوي، 2013، ص 17). The virtual discussion of political issues according to Greffet and Wojcik is a process of exchange and interaction between Internet users who intervene in the same space on a 'political' topic (Greffet & Wojcikm, 2008, p21).

In this study, we mean by discussions the written comments and responses produced by the participants interacting with the publication posted by "El Biled journal". The published topic is related to the draft amendment of the constitution, through which the participants try to put forward their ideas and opinions.

**Virtual Public Space:** Habermas defines public space as "a group of people who are publicly assembled to discuss issues of public interest with the intention of forming public opinion" (Habermas, 1978). He links the participation of individuals in the public space with the public use of the reason. While John Mark Ferry sees that: "The public space is public, where opinions are formed through free discussion that is actually translated into political discussions" (بن غربية، 2019، ص258).

The emergence and spread of modern technologies for the Internet, especially social media, has expanded the emergence of a new public space or the so-called virtual public space. This latter is defined by (Redric Mayor) as: "a new human and technological environment for the expression and exchange of information" (صغير عباس، 2018، ص118).

It is also defined as: "Those large areas in which its members deal with new issues and problems in order to conclude accordingly a formula for how they live and work together and collectively in the present and in the future" (اليحياوي، 2015، ص4). Young describes it as "An interactive symbolic public space based on the exchange and sharing of opinions and

ideas" (2015 ،رشاد زكي).

In this study, we mean by virtual public space a virtual space on the Facebook network that contains a group of individuals, united by the same space and interest despite their geographical distance and cultural and social difference.

## 1.4 Related studies

**First study:** (2018 ،صغير عباس) aimed to highlight the manifestations of the presence of the public space through the interaction on two news pages on Facebook. Where the main question came as follows: How is the virtual public space embodied through interaction in virtual groups based on the Habermasian conception?

The study relied on the ethnographic method, and used content analysis as well as observation. The obtained results are presented in what follow: The virtual groups and pages formed a space for self-expression in the public discussion space, away from the restrictions of censorship.

**Second study:** (2020 ،بوروبي و بوخبزة) aimed to highlight the interaction of Facebook users with issues of public affairs, by posing the following problem: Is it possible to form a virtual public space through User interaction with public issues on Facebook?

The study relied on the survey method using the content analysis tool on an intentional sample represented in the "Here is Algeria" page.

The study relied on the following categories: Participation tools, gender of interaction, significance of nicknames, language of dialogue, methods of interaction, nature of arguments, most popular comments and mediator interventions.

Among the most prominent results: the opinions varied between the sarcastic style and the serious style, and in general, they did not include arguments, but rather provisions that reflect the social imagination of the interlocutors. The study revealed a large margin of freedom in expressing opinion and accepting differences, which made Facebook a space for

representing social and political life and self-expression.

**Third study:** This study (2017 ،بن بوزيان) aimed to analyze the possibility that Facebook could lead to the emergence of a new virtual public space.

The categories of analysis were divided into two parts. The first section includes the categories of publications, which are: the category of actors, the category of subject evaluation, and the category of interpretations. The second section included the categories of comments, which are: the category of trend towards the official public space represented in the media and government institutions, the argumentation category and the category of trend towards opponents of the finance law.

Among the most important results: the absence of argument between the participants in discussing and the contentment of expressing an opinion in support or opposition, which led to the social networking sites' lack of serious and purposeful discussion.

**Fourth study:** The research paper (2015 ،حمزة) addressed the problem of the virtual public space, based on the argument that defends the ability and empowerment of the new media to revive the Habermasian model of public space. This model is based on debate and rational arguments, free of any ideological influences. The study concluded some characteristics of the Algerian virtual public space on the Facebook network, most notably are: The public space is fragmented into introverted groups that are predominantly antagonistic and hostile in dealing with issues of public concern, the absence of criticism, serious rational debate, the dominance of labor vocabulary, treason and symbolic violence.

**Fifth study:** This study (Graham, 2010) aimed to examine the political discourse within the reality TV forum. The purpose of this is to examine its democratic quality in light of a set of standard conditions for the public sphere, such as rationality, coherence and reciprocity. The study applied content analysis and concluded that a quarter of the publications were involved in political discussions that responded to the conditions of

deleberation.

**Sixth study:** The study (Schneider, 1997) sought to test virtual discussions in the newsgroup by analyzing the conversations according to four criteria: equality, diversity, reciprocity and coherence. The study involved analyzing the content of a set of conversations on the Usenet Newsgroup website. The study conclude that the public sphere created by participants in the Usenet newsgroup is diverse and reciprocal, but there a lacks of equality and coherence.

**Commentary on studies:** Our study intersects with previous studies as it studies the virtual public space. It also adopted the method of content analysis by analyzing the discussions and interactions of users with public issues characterized by the political dimension.

It is noted that the Algerian studies intersect with our study, as it was concerned with the virtual public space in Algeria, and specifically the same space under study, which is the Facebook pages. We also noted the availability of studies on the criterion of justification. The results were close with regard to the lack of serious and rational discussions in the virtual public space in Algeria and its tendency for self-expression.

The results also included the emergence of the hostile character and its tendency towards issuing judgments, exchanging accusations and symbolic violence. However, the Algerian research did not study other criteria that could reveal the characteristics of virtual discussions, such as the participants' association with the original topic of discussion, as well as the involvement of other participants in the discussion around one idea instead of individual participations that often reflect only one opinion. While the involvement of a group of participants in the discussion enhances the invocation of arguments in order to support the stated positions and opinions. This is what was included in the foreign studies

that gave virtual discussions another perspective through which the study tried to adapt new criteria for describing and evaluating discussions in the virtual public space.

## 2. Theoretical framing of the study

With the spread of social media, interest has emerged about the possibility of this latter to contribute to the creation of a public space. Many opinions went to say that the relationship of social media with the public space is the empowerment that networks provide for a large number of citizens to participate in discussions and put forward issues of public concern. Thus, discussions have become the core of most online social platforms and a topic worthy of attention and study.

Although Habermas' work represents a starting point for understanding and analyzing virtual discussions. It constitutes a theoretical and methodological difficulty. According to the Habermasian view of public space, the discussion is subject to a set of deliberative criteria such as rationality, honesty, respect and equality. These criteria are considered as well-established for deliberation aimed at achieving consensus and understanding. Habermas also links the discussion in the public space with the strength of the argument, regardless of the social level of the participants (ملكاوي، 2013، ص17). However, this perspective does not take into account the interactive characteristics of online discussion, as required by the nature of social media. For this reason, another group of researchers believes that it is necessary to adapt new criteria and models for evaluating virtual discussions to suit the characteristics of the virtual space.

In this context, Dahlberg designed a three-model classification as a framework for analyzing the characteristics of discussions in Internet societies, which are: the liberal individual model, the societal model and the deliberative model (Dahlberg, 2001, p158). Freelon attempted to present a set of characteristics for each model, whereby the liberal individual model includes all characteristics of online discussion that contain personal

expression. While the communitarian model supports public places on the Internet that are predominantly communal and develop social cohesion above any interest or fulfillment of individual desires. As for the last model which is the deliberative model that stems from Habermas' philosophy on the rational, critical argument and focus on the general issue and equality. The following table represents the three models and the characteristics of each model (Freelon, 2010, p 1178).

**Table 1.** The three models for analyzing the characteristics of discussions in Internet

| Model | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| Liberal individualist | Monologue, Personal revelation, Personal showcase, Flaming. |
| Communitarian | Ideological fragmentation, Mobilization, Community language, Intra-ideological questioning, Intra-ideological reciprocity. |
| Deliberative | Rational-critical argument, Public issue focus, Equality, Discussion topic focus, Inter-ideological questioning, Inter-ideological reciprocity. |

Source: Freelon, pp. 1178, 2010.

On the other hand, many researchers are working to push studies related to discussions in the virtual public space towards new directions. The deliberative perspective constitutes a reference for many studies, as it is divided into two types. The first type stems from the works of Habermas and considers that the discussion is deliberative if it is characterized by rationality and is based on logic, arguments and evidence, honest, respectful and oriented towards consensus or at least to mutual understanding. As for the second type, it is based on more empirical foundations and appreciates alternative forms of communication and includes criteria that slightly reduce the ideal criteria and allow for plurality and difference (Borge Bravo et al., 2019, p 5673), which is the type that we relied on in this study. According to the questions of our study, which seeks to reveal the characteristics of virtual discussions in the virtual public space in terms of: (1) the method of justification in the discussions, (2) the coherence of the discussions with the original topic,

and (3) the participants' involvement in responding to each other's claims, we chose three criteria for deliberation, which are Justification, coherence, reciprocity. In the following section we give an explanation of each criterion.

## 2.1 Justification

The methods of justification represents the forms and style adopted by the participants in the discussion, including the way people are able to express the reasons for their own views and those of others (Stromer-Galley, 2014, p5).

As the justification criterion indicates that citizens owe each other a justification or giving of reason in order to allow accountability and achieve constructive and just outcomes. According to some authors, justification must be rational and morally grounded. Jensen distinguishes between two types of arguments: internal arguments, which include views and suggestions, and external arguments, which include facts and figures (Kies, 2010, p46).

## 2.2 Reciprocity

The process of discussions represents a communicative process that takes place through the interaction of individuals with each other. Chomsky sees that this process does not stop at the exchange of information only, but requires the presence of real communication. The ability to express and exchange opinions is not sufficient to form a public space, but the reasons must be provided for those opinions. It also requires continuous interaction with others in the discussion (Stromer-Galley, 2014, p5). This is what is known as reciprocity, and it can be said that reciprocity is a prerequisite for deliberation and it reflects the existence of a real discussion (Borge Bravo et al., 2019, p 5675).

Graham defines it as "receiving through listening or reading the claims of others and providing responses about them" (Graham, 2010, p31). In which participants seek to respond to the claims of previous participants by employing evidence and arguments capable of establishing or denying an opinion that allows the discussion to continue. For

Schneider, reciprocity refers to "the idea that people engage in conversation with one another, and that their messages are reflected and discussed by others". He also mentions that the participants' failure to listen and interact with each other results in a mere monologue (Kies, 2010, p44).

Nasr Al-Din Al-Ayadi sees that this type of communication is the result of the "homophily" phenomenon of autism. That phenomenon does not encourage dialogue and discussion and pushes participants to social media to delete those with a dissenting or opposing opinion,  as it encourages introversion and isolation (العياضي، 2017).

## 2.3 Coherence

According to Graham, Coherence refers to the focus and commitment of participants to the main topic of discussion (Graham, 2010, p31). According to Schneider, coherence requires that participants remain connected to the topic at hand (Schneider, 1997, p75). The coherence assessment is very important in determining the quality of discussions. As the debaters moved away from the main topic of discussion, opinions changed and took a different path than the imposed path. The lack of coherence also reveals the participants' lack of interest in the topic and their desire to impose their own agendas.
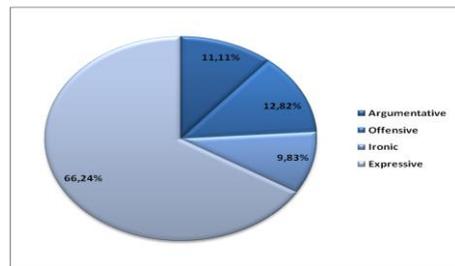
## 3. Data analysis and interpretation

## 3.1 Comments

**Table 2.** Justification method included in comments     **Fig.1.** Justification method included in comments

| Justification | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Argumentative | 26 | 11.11% |
| Offensive | 30 | 12.82% |
| Ironic | 23 | 9.83% |
| Expressive | 155 | 66.24% |
| **Total** | **234** | **100%** |



We note from the table that the predominant method in the participants' comments is the expressive method, with a percentage of 66.24%. The most of the comments were

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recorded as mere expressions of opinions and suggestions that are not subject to any justification or support from the sources. This confirms the results of previous studies that concluded that the virtual public space represented on Facebook pages in Algeria represents a space for expression and opinion.

However, these views lack arguments, which make them just superficial opinions that do not feed critical debate. It was also recorded that the offensive style was present with a percentage of 12.82% and the ironic style with a percentage of 9.83%. These are two methods that participants resort to as a way to undermine the other party or overcome it when there is no argument. We noticed the use of accusations, and obscene words that reflect the presence of "flaming", which refers to hostile intentions, expressions, insults, and negative feelings that suppress opinions (Alonzo & Aiken, 2004, p205).

This characteristic is one of the most prominent manifestations of virtual interaction and is often linked to motivational and emotional factors through which participants seek personal satisfaction by harassing others (Freelon, 2010, p1179). Many studies have suggested motives that generate these offensive expressions in virtual discussions. For example, the motive may be the subject of discussion, or hiding behind the feature of anonymity, and the geographical distance that makes participants submit to verbal aggression towards others without fear (Alonzo & Aiken, 2004, p206).

On the other hand, we find that the argumentative method recorded a rate of 11.11%. This result reflects the participants' lack of the argumentative method based on the exchange of arguments and proofs, and their lack of political or legal backgrounds to justify their opinions. The reason for this may be due to the weak critical and analytical level of the participants, especially since the page under study is a public page and includes many followers of different educational, cultural and ideological levels. Researcher Maryam Darban confirms this in her study that a large segment of citizens are unable to understand

the articles of the constitution because of specialization or educational level ( ضربان، 2020، ص5).

**Table 3.** Interacting with comments

| Interaction | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Existence of interaction | 39 | 16,67% |
| Absence of interaction | 195 | 83,33% |
| **Total** | **234** | **100%** |

**Fig.2.** Interacting with comments
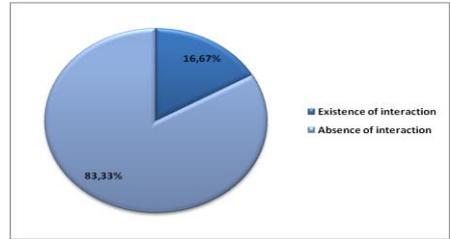


We note from the table that the presence of interaction with comments, where the percentage of responses was estimated at 16.67%. This is a small percentage compared to the rest of the comments that did not receive any interaction (replies), which amounted to 83.33%. We explain this result that most of the participants were busy writing their own comments and expressing their opinions as confirmed by the percentage obtained in the justification style category within the expressive style.

This result also reflects the absence of a real discussion based on the exchange of opinions and arguments. According to Dahlberg's models, these results reflect the monologue feature that expresses contributions that lack reciprocity, response and interaction that would enhance and continue discussions. According to Kies, the absence of reciprocity indicates that the participants do not listen to each other but only express their opinions, which in his view constitutes a dialogue of the deaf (Kies, 2010, p45).

**Table 4.** Relevancy of comments to the main topic

| Relevancy | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Comment related to the published topic | 68 | %29.06 |
| Comment not related to the published topic | 166 | %70.94 |
| **Total** | **234** | **%100** |

**Fig.3.** Relevancy of comments to the main topic
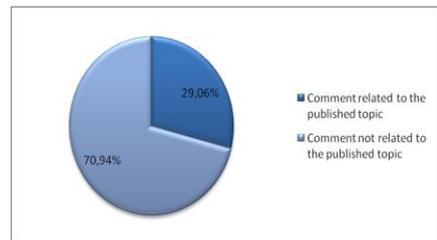


We note from the table that the percentage of comments that matched the topic of the

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publication posted by the page was estimated at 29.06%. This is a small percentage compared to the percentage of comments that did not adhere to the topic of the publication, estimated at 70.94%. This means that the cohesion criterion was not strong. We explain this by the presence of other topics that aroused the participants' interest more than the topic included in the post. And due to the presence of a discrepancy between the two percentages, we analyzed the content of coherent and incoherent comments in terms of more visible topics.

**Table 5.** Most popular topics in comments

| | Topic | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Coherent comments | Mandate and power of the President | 47 | %20.09 |
| | Duty and Power of Parliament | 10 | %4.27 |
| | Create a vice president position | 11 | %4.70 |
| Incoherent comments | Language | 76 | %32.48 |
| | Army | 6 | %2.56 |
| | Citizenship requirement to hold high positions in the state | 4 | %1.71 |
| | General dissatisfaction with the constitution | 38 | %16.24 |
| | Other | 42 | %17.95 |
| **Total** | | **234** | **%100** |

**Fig.4.** The topics most viewed in comments
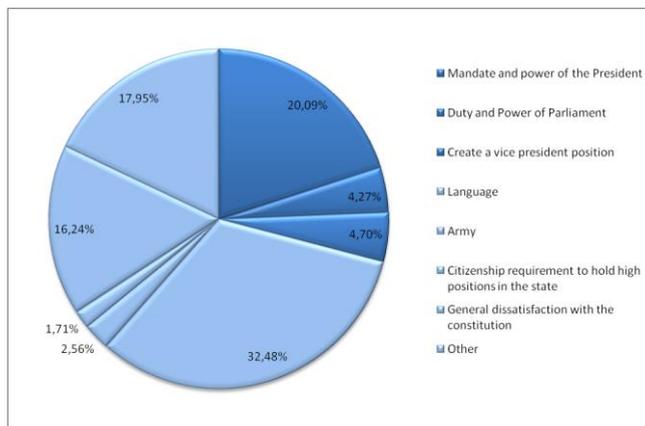


We note from the table that the coherent comments were mostly about the mandate

of the president and his powers, with a percentage of 20.09%, followed by the creation of the position of vice president with a percentage of 4.70%, and then the mandate of Parliament by 4.27%, which are two similar percentages. These results reveal that the issue of the presidential term occupied the highest percentage among the coherent comments. Especially since the issue of the presidential term has witnessed many changes in the previous Algerian constitutions, in terms of its duration and the possibility of renewal (كردي، 2018، ص59). The last change of the presidential term was in 2016 within the amendment of the constitution, that accordingly it was redefined to become renewable only once and for a period of five years. This made the participants make comparisons between the two amendments and express their expectations about the possibility of amending the constitution in a way that would allow the renewal of the mandate more than once. These fears come against the background of the partial constitutional amendment in 2008, which established the possibility of electing the president for more than two terms, after amending the text of Article 74 (ص60، 2018، كردي).

We also note that the incoherent comments included the subject of the army with a percentage of 2.56%, the nationality condition for holding high positions in the state by 1.71%, and the language by 32.48%. Although, these topics were not included in the post under study but they appeared in the participants' comments. We explain this that the participants were informed in advance of the most important contents of the draft especially that the draft amendment to the constitution contained many amended articles. These latter quickly spread on social media sites as soon as it was announced. Maryam Harban indicates that social networking sites have created a polarization that has focused attention on a limited number of articles, such as the demarcation of the Amazigh language, the exit of the army, and the creation of the position of vice president (ضربان، 2020، ص6), which constituted a wide debate among the users.

It appears here that the greatest interest was given to the language, as this topic appeared repeatedly in the comments of many participants, with a percentage of 32.48%. The language is a component of the Algerian identity, and it should be noted that the subject of language was included in one of the articles of the draft amendment to the constitution. It stipulated the demarcation of the Amazigh language as an official national language that cannot be modified. As a result, public opinion was divided between supporters and opponents. Although, the debate over the Amazigh language is not new, the focus of attention around it has intensified the controversy through social media. Especially, after it was addressed by news pages and the pages of political parties in Algeria, which made it the focus of attention and controversy among Facebook users. Maryam Darban describes it as a trap of sharp mass polarization, which is capable of producing a discussion based on mutual exclusion, especially when it comes to identity, and this leads to a split in public opinion (ضربان، 2020، ص16).

On the other hand, we note 16.24% of the comments included an expression of their dissatisfaction with the constitution in general without addressing any topic. This result reflects their prior opposition to the draft constitution in general without expressing any desire to discuss it. The category "other" recorded a rate of 17.95%, and it included comments about Corona's news, jokes and promotion of pages. The owners of these comments seek to draw attention and receive likes and confirm their lack of interest in the published topic in the first place.

**3.2 Responses to comments**

The researchers point out that reciprocity reflects the existence of a genuine discussion based on the exchange of claims between participants. An evaluation of the reciprocity criterion revealed 39 comments, resulting in 224 written responses. We analyzed these responses as a second level in order to reveal the justification nature involved and

whether reciprocity really enhances the presence of arguments.

Table 6. Justification method involved in responses

| Justification | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Argumentative | 10 | 4.5% |
| Offensive | 92 | 41.1% |
| Ironic | 33 | 14.7% |
| Expressive | 89 | 39.7% |
| **Total** | **224** | **100%** |

Fig.5. Justification method involved in responses
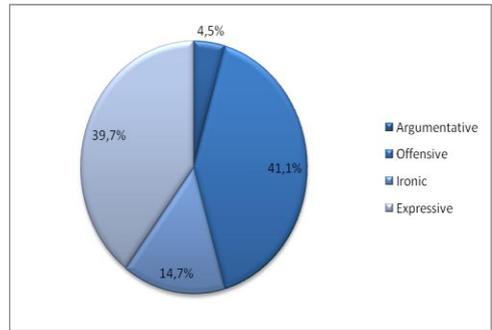


We notice from the table that the offensive style came first with 41.1%, followed by the expressive style with 39.7%, followed by the ironic style with 14.7%, and the argumentative style recorded a small percentage estimated at 4.5%. These results reveal to us that the reciprocity activated in the 39 comments did not enhance the presence of arguments and proofs while responding to the allegations of others. In contrast, it stimulated more the exchange of accusations and questioning of affiliation and identity, which is reflected in the proportion of the offensive style that was dominated on the responses. We explain this by the existence of a topic of wide controversy which is language. We noticed that reciprocity was more active in the comments that were commented on the language, as there were 23 comments out of 39, six of them were originally offensive style. This leads to increase the tension of communication and its dependence on the aggressive nature through the use of obscene words and accusations. This method reflects the culture of exclusion and lack of recognition of the other among the participants and confirms once again the existence of the aforementioned " Flaming " characteristic.

As for the argumentative method, it recorded a small percentage estimated at 4.5%. These results reveal to us that reciprocity was activated for a greater exchange of accusations and turning the discussion into an exchange of words and insults only. Jensen describes this

type of reciprocity as an exchange or a negative interaction that negatively affects the discussion and makes it more personal and aggressive (Jensen, 2003, p361).

## 4. Results

- The virtual discussions on political issues lack the argumentative method based on the arguments, as the proportion of the argumentative method was estimated at 11.11%. This result reveals the weak critical and analytical level of the participants and their lack of political or legal backgrounds to justify their opinions. Participants resort to the offensive method as a way to suppress opinions and imposing oneself in the absence of arguments capable of addressing the opinions of others.

- The virtual space under study is a space for expressing superficial opinions devoid of any argument, as the expressive style occupied the largest.

- Virtual discussions on political issues are dominated by the character of personal talk (monologue), as a result of the lack of reciprocity and response in the comments. The reciprocity was absent from 195 comments out of 234 comments, with an agreement rate of 83.33%. It reflects the participants tendency not to engage in other participants discussions or respond to their comments, to avoid engaging in serious discussions, and their tendency to create their own comments.

- The lack of coherence in the comments reflects the participants' lack of commitment to the original topic published by the page, and their agendas were imposed by commenting on other topics that aroused their interest more than the topic presented in the post.

- The reciprocity that was recorded in 39 comments produced 224 written responses. The study revealed that the proportion of argumentative style in these responses was estimated at 4.5%. This is a weak percentage indicating that the recorded responses did not stimulate the existence of serious argumentative discussions. Rather, it

increased tension and confrontation, and the participants attacked each other by exchanging accusations and insults.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the empowerment provided by modern internet technologies through the formation of a virtual public space capable of embracing public discussions and encouraging individuals to participate and engage in discussion of political issues, nothing confirms or guarantees the quality of these interactive discussions. Our study made an attempt to describe and evaluate the quality of virtual discussions on El Biled journal Facebook page by revealing its characteristics, based on three criteria: justification, reciprocity, and coherence.

The results showed that the virtual discussions under study lack these criteria. Cohesion was recorded in a small percentage, which leads us to the fact that the presence of a large number of comments does not reflect their quality in terms of their coherence with the original topic. Therefore, the coherence analysis is one of the important criteria that must be ascertained. The justification lacks arguments and that is consistent with the previous results of studies and confirms the hostile and superficial nature of the participants in their handling of political issues in the virtual public space in Algeria. Especially since the space under study is a space that includes the various segments of society in which the cultural and educational levels vary.

On the other hand, the study found a lack of reciprocity with the comments, as interaction was absent in most of the comments, and this indicates that the participants avoided engaging in serious discussions. For the comments that recorded responses, they were dominated by the offensive and expressive style in the absence of the argument.

This study constituted an attempt to describe the virtual discussions from an interactive point of view. However, the characteristics of virtual discussions are not limited only to the three criteria studied, which make us look forward to the inclusion of other

criteria to reveal more characteristics in future research.

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