

Gendered Barriers to Youth Political Participation: An Explorative Comparative Study of Peru and the United States

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale exploratory study examines how gender norms and media portrayals influence young people's expression in politics in Peru and the United States. By analyzing grey literature, TikTok political videos and campaign ads from the months before recent presidential elections, I find ongoing gender biases that affect how young people, especially young women and gender minorities, are seen and engaged with in political spaces.

The research shows that while digital activism and identity politics are more visible in the U.S., gender-related challenges and backlash still persist. In Peru, media tends to be more centralized and reflects traditional values, leading to more subtle exclusion and less visibility for marginalized youth defined here as young women, LGBTQ+ youth, and those from lower-income or rural backgrounds. By comparing these two contexts, this study shows that in the United States, youth visibility through figures like Kamala Harris and young female TikTok creators remains framed through emotional or inspirational narratives; while in Peru, videos supporting or undermining Verónica Mendoza illustrate how centralized media reinforces traditional gender norms.

These examples highlight the need for more inclusive media and political spaces that not only expand youth access but also counter gendered exclusion. The combined analysis demonstrates that despite differences in context, both countries reproduce gendered power hierarchies that limit political voice and visibility for young women and marginalized youth—thus pointing to future research and policy efforts focused on equitable media representation, the sociocultural replication or disruption of these hierarchies, and digital platform accountability.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has emerged as a central form of political expression, particularly among young people. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) have transformed how youth

engage with political issues, offering new tools for political activism and other forms of participation (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). However, while the empowering potential of these platforms is widely celebrated, the intersection of digital media representations and gender norms continues to shape and often restrict the political expression of young people, particularly young women and gender minorities. In this study, I use the term gender minorities to refer to LGBTQ+ youth, including those whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression does not align with traditional norms. In this study, I also primarily define youth as the ages of 15 and 29, consistent with SENAJU's (2021) definition of youth in the Peruvian context and broadly aligned with United Nations youth demographic categories. These groups frequently face online harassment, underrepresentation in political narratives, and algorithmic biases that limit their visibility—for example, TikTok's recommendation system often privileges content from established political figures while reducing exposure for lesser-known youth and minority creators (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020).

Existing scholarship has explored youth political expression in digital spaces and has documented the persistent gender bias in traditional political media coverage, such as the underrepresentation of women, the emphasis on their appearance over policy positions and the questioning of their leadership capabilities (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). However, little research has examined how both media representations and gender norms operate together to influence youth digital political expression or engagement across different socio-political contexts. Thus, there is a need for comparative research that focuses on how these dynamics unfold in both the Global North and South, acknowledging the diverse ways in which structural inequality and media culture interact across both regions.

This small-scale exploratory study addresses this gap by comparing how gender norms and media representations are reflected in youth digital political expression in Peru and the United States. While these countries differ significantly in terms of political institutions, cultural norms, media structures and modalities alongside gender equality indicators, both contexts reveal critical tensions between political empowerment through digital media and systemic exclusion. In other words, despite the promise of inclusion that digital media brings, both countries still exhibit significant barriers rooted in social and institutional gender norms that hinder the political agency of certain youth groups. In Peru, while media studies are well-established, the role of gender norms in shaping political expression remains understudied, especially in relation to youth. In contrast, the United States has seen growing attention to the gendered dimensions of media and politics, but comparative perspectives between the two countries remain limited, especially on these intersecting topics. For the purposes of this study, I define marginalized youth as young women, LGBTQ+ youth, and those from rural or low-income backgrounds, who often face compounded barriers to political visibility and expression. Thus, my research question asks: How do gender norms and media representations influence youth digital political expression in Peru and the United States?

Hypothesis

In this study, I hypothesize that young people in both Peru and the United States face gender-based barriers to digital political expression, shaped by the interaction between media representations and

traditional gender norms. However, I expected these barriers to manifest differently across national contexts depending on the role that media systems play within each country's political landscape. In the United States, where social media activism and identity politics are more prominent in mainstream discourse, I expected that youth may use digital platforms to challenge gender norms more openly, although they still face gendered backlash. As a contrast in Peru, where political media remains more centralized and often reflects traditional cultural values, I expected that youth—particularly women and gender minorities—may encounter more implicit exclusion and limited visibility in both traditional and digital media spaces. For instance, female candidates may receive less issue-focused coverage, with media narratives emphasizing personal traits or family roles instead of policy expertise, while LGBTQ+ youth are often absent from mainstream portrayals of political expression.

Aim

Through content analysis of social media posts and political ads alongside a synthesis of limited existing literature, this research aims to uncover shared and distinct patterns and/or challenges across both countries that demonstrate how media and gender intersect to influence youth political agency in both geographic locations.

METHODOLOGY

To address my research question, this study adopts a qualitative methodological approach grounded in three forms of content analysis. First, it conducts a textual analysis of relevant grey literature, including newspaper articles, magazine features and reports from universities and nonprofit organizations that address youth political expression and gender norms in Peru and the United States. Second, it analyzes TikTok content engaging with political issues in order to examine how gender is represented and negotiated at the intersection of these topics on the digital platform. Third, it examines one televised or digital campaign advertisement from each of the two final presidential candidates in both countries to assess how gender is portrayed in formal political messaging. Together, these three sources offer a triangulated approach to the analysis that provides both contextual depth and real-time insights into how media and gender norms influence youth political expression in each national setting.

To complete the literature review for this exploratory study, a systematic search was conducted using Google Scholar, focusing on academic peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and publications from both international organizations and government sources. Keywords used included “youth expression in politics,” “gender and media,” “Peru,” “United States” and “TikTok political content.” These literature sources serve as the theoretical basis for understanding the structural and cultural dynamics influencing youth digital political expression or engagement in both countries within this paper.

Content Analysis Scope and Selection Criteria

The digital media analysis focuses exclusively on TikTok to maintain focus and manageability on a popular platform with over 1.5 billion accounts globally. TikTok was selected due to its growing influence

among young users and its increasingly political content since its founding. The analysis is limited to videos published during the three months leading up to and the three months following the presidential elections in each country: August to October 2020 and November 2020 to January 2021 in the United States, and January to March 2021 and April to June 2021 in Peru.

Popular videos were identified based on visible engagement metrics, including views, likes and comments, alongside their relevance to political topics. The search was conducted using TikTok's search function to identify content based on relevant hashtags, keywords and engagement indicators. Video selection prioritized content that explicitly addressed political expression, gender or civic discourse, ensuring thematic alignment with the study's research question.

The final TikTok sample comprised five of the most popular politically relevant videos identified in Peru and five in the United States during the periods under study. In Peru, the selected accounts were @susanahiguchim, @soszavala, @jne.peru, @bup_sjl and @jovenesfp, while the U.S. sample included @nowthisimpart, @yahooneews, @lisaremillard, @mckennalightt and @phyofthepast. These accounts and their respective videos were selected based primarily on the popularity of the videos, measured through visible engagement indicators including views, likes and comments, while also meeting the study's thematic criteria concerning political expression, youth civic engagement or gender.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth, Digital Media and Political Participation

In recent years, digital platforms have significantly transformed the ways in which young people engage with politics, providing new avenues for expression and activism outside traditional institutional channels, such as voting booths or formal party membership. For example, Peruvian youth used TikTok trends to call attention to the Marcha Nacional protests in 2020, while in the United States, young activists popularized hashtags like #MarchForOurLives to mobilize peers against gun violence.

Theocharis and van Deth (2018) define 'political expression on social media as a set of non-traditional participatory acts, such as posting political opinions, sharing petitions or engaging in online campaigns. These acts expand the repertoire of political engagement beyond voting or formal party affiliation, enabling youth to shape political discourse on their own terms. TikTok, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) exemplify platforms that allow the blending of personal identity with political advocacy, amplifying the potential reach of youth voices.

However, these opportunities exist within media environments that are not neutral. Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) highlight that media coverage of women politicians often focuses on appearance rather than policy, questions their leadership capabilities, and frames them in ways that perpetuate gender stereotypes. These biases extend to social media, where algorithmic design and user behavior can reproduce inequities by amplifying certain voices while marginalizing others. In both Peru and the United

States, young women and gender minorities must navigate these biases while leveraging the same platforms for political expression, a dynamic that shapes the scope and impact of their participation.

Gender Norms and Media Bias

Persistent gender norms and biases in political communication reflect broader patterns of social inequality. The World Bank's (2025) Latin America and Caribbean Country Gender Scorecards show that women across the region face substantial disparities in education, economic participation and representation in leadership roles. For example, women perform two to three times more unpaid domestic work than men, limiting their ability to participate fully in political and civic life. These inequalities are compounded in media representation, where coverage often reflects and reinforces these gendered power imbalances. Chamberlain et al. (2025) demonstrate that civic education in Latin America produces different outcomes for boys and girls. Using data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, the authors find that while girls often value civic learning more highly, boys report higher levels of influence from such education, suggesting that gendered classroom interactions and broader social norms shape civic engagement differently. These findings are crucial for understanding how the political socialization of youth is shaped well before they enter formal politics or digital activism alongside how media depictions intersect with these early experiences.

Peru: Structural Context and Youth Engagement

In Peru, youth represent a significant demographic yet remain underrepresented in political decision-making. According to data from SENAJU (Secretaría Nacional de la Juventud), individuals aged 15–29 account for approximately 23.8 % of the total population, underscoring their major demographic presence (SENAJU, 2021). Despite this sizable share, USAID (n.d.) reports that young people in Peru face structural barriers such as limited access to decision-making spaces, insufficient political education, and a digital divide that disproportionately affects rural and low-income youth. Gender norms further limit participation for young women and LGBTQ+ youth, who experience both underrepresentation and targeted harassment in political and online spaces. The World Bank's (2025) regional data provide further insight into Peru's context, noting a persistent STEM gap, high adolescent pregnancy rates and a “reverse” gender gap in secondary completion where boys are less likely than girls to finish school. These factors influence not only educational outcomes but also the capacity for political engagement later in life. Cornejo-Paredes (2024) adds that Peruvian university students' online civic participation reflects broader societal inequities, with marginalized youth facing systemic obstacles to visibility and influence despite high levels of online engagement. Qualitative evidence from Perez Unzueta (2021) *Young People in Bicentennial Peru* underscores how grassroots youth leaders navigate these challenges. The report profiles diverse young activists, many of whom work to address gender-based violence, environmental issues and regional inequities. For these leaders, digital platforms offer opportunities to amplify their causes, but traditional media's centralization in Lima and persistent cultural gender norms limit national visibility. This suggests that while digital tools are vital for youth activism, they operate within a broader socio-political power structure that often constrains their impact.

United States: Context of Digital Activism and Gendered Backlash

In the United States, digital platforms are more deeply integrated into mainstream political culture and youth-led activism has gained visibility through movements such as March for Our Lives and climate justice strikes. Theocharis and van Deth's (2018) conceptualization of political expression is particularly relevant here, as U.S. youth often engage in issue-based activism that blends online and offline tactics (as when its organizers used social media to mobilize youth and translated that momentum into in-person marches and voter registration drives). Social media activism can serve as both an organizing tool and a public arena for debating gender norms and political representation. Nevertheless, gender bias remains entrenched. Van der Pas and Aaldering's (2020) findings on women's political media coverage apply to the U.S. context, where female politicians continue to be framed in gendered ways that undermine their credibility as political leaders. Young women and gender minorities face additional challenges online, including harassment and disinformation campaigns aimed at discouraging political participation—such as voting, contacting elected officials, or organizing peer-led advocacy campaigns. While digital activism in the U.S. may more openly confront gender norms, it is still shaped by intersecting structural and cultural power structures such as patriarchy, classism, and entrenched racial hierarchies that limit equitable participation elsewhere.

Comparative Perspectives and Gaps

Despite the growing body of literature on youth political expression and engagement, few studies compare how gender norms and media representations operate simultaneously across the Global North and South. In Peru, structural barriers and cultural norms limit visibility and influence, with traditional media playing a gatekeeping role (Perez Unzueta, 2021; USAID, n.d.; Cornejo-Paredes, 2024). Digital platforms provide an alternative avenue for political engagement and expression—for example, TikTok campaigns that allowed Peruvian youth to voice opinions during the 2021 elections outside mainstream media. These spaces, however, also remain shaped by algorithmic biases and unequal access to its users. In the U.S., while digital activism is more mainstream, gendered media framing and online harassment persist as barriers, particularly for women and minorities. Chamberlain et al.'s (2025) work on civic education offers a conceptual bridge between the two contexts, illustrating how early experiences with political learning are mediated by gender norms. Similarly, the World Bank's (2025) data on regional gender disparities provide a structural backdrop for understanding how media environments reflect and reinforce these inequalities in Peru. In the U.S. context, the Pew Research Center (2023) finds that a majority of Americans—especially women—believe there are too few women in high political offices, signaling analogous gendered limitations in political representation. Together, these sources reveal that while the manifestations of gendered barriers differ between Peru and the U.S., the underlying dynamics of exclusion are shared. Thus, I expected to see this pattern in the data included in my content analyses.

Relevance to the Present Study

The existing literature establishes three key points that inform this research. First, gender bias is structural and is reinforced culturally via both traditional and digital media. Second, youth digital political expression and participation is increasing but remains uneven, shaped by social norms and institutional practices established early in life. Third, TikTok offers a unique platform for visual and performative political expression. Here, visual refers to the platform's image- and video-based communication, and

performative captures the use of humor, dance, or role-play to convey political messages. Yet, it remains understudied in comparative analyses of gender and youth politics. By integrating a small-scale synthesis of grey literature and content analyses of TikTok content and political campaign advertisements from both Peru and the U.S., this study addresses the aforementioned comparative gap identified in the literature. It examines not only how gender norms and media representations shape youth political expression and engagement in each country but also how these dynamics intersect in digital spaces in ways that transcend national borders. The selected methodological approach builds on prior scholarship and institutional reports that address youth political expression, gendered media bias, and civic education in Latin America and beyond—thus, offering a clear and contemporary understanding of the chances and challenges young people face in their political lives (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018; Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2025; World Bank, 2025; USAID, n.d.; Cornejo-Paredes, 2024; Perez Unzueta, 2021).

RESULTS

Grey Literature & News Media

News media in Peru illustrates how female candidates are frequently framed through personal or symbolic narratives rather than substantive policy debates. For example, Sosa-Villagarcia and Cameron (2021) described Keiko Fujimori's 2021 campaign as a referendum on her father's constitutional legacy, underscoring how her candidacy was linked to family identity rather than her own political agenda. By contrast, post-election coverage centered on Pedro Castillo's ideological program, with Stuenkel (2021) analyzing his break from Peru's neoliberal consensus. These patterns resonate with broader scholarship: Atkinson (2021) notes that when women do appear in political coverage, the emphasis often shifts toward personal or emotional qualities rather than policy expertise. Together, these cases highlight a gendered dynamic in which male candidates are more likely to be portrayed as issue-focused, while women are represented in ways tied to family, history, or perceived character traits.

Similar dynamics appeared in the United States. Before the 2020 election, Ecarma (2020) reported that women's advocacy groups warned media executives against sexist and racist portrayals of Kamala Harris, reflecting concerns that her candidacy would be trivialized through identity-based framings. These fears were borne out during the vice-presidential debate, where The Washington Post (2020) emphasized Harris's tone and demeanor alongside fact-checks, illustrating how women politicians are scrutinized for style as much as for substance. Academic analyses confirm these patterns: Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) found that female politicians generally receive less issue-focused coverage than men, while Ross et al. (2012) document that women are more likely to be relegated to "soft news" contexts, undermining perceptions of their competence. In both contexts, women are framed through identity, personality, or affect, whereas men such as Biden or Pence are more consistently evaluated in policy terms.

Taken together, these cases reveal an important comparative insight: despite their distinct political and cultural landscapes, Peru and the United States share strikingly similar patterns in how traditional media frame women in politics. Across both countries, female candidates are disproportionately portrayed in

terms of family ties, emotional tone, or identity, while male candidates are cast as policy-driven actors. This comparative evidence underscores that gendered hierarchies in media representation transcend national boundaries. Moreover, these dynamics extend into the digital sphere: as Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) argue, platforms like TikTok provide new avenues for youth political expression but also risk reinforcing inequalities through algorithmic amplification. This intersection highlights the importance of examining both traditional and digital media to fully understand how gendered framings shape youth political expression and/or engagement across contexts.

Tables 1–4 present descriptive data from the TikTok dataset. Tables 1 and 3 focus on popularity metrics (views, likes, comments), while Tables 2 and 4 more so present findings analyzing thematic framing, gender representation and tone in political videos from Peru and the United States.

Table 1: Popularity of Political TikTok Videos in Peru

Country	Title / Brief Description	Publication Date	User	Views	Likes	Comments
Peru	This 6th of June we are all Keiko	06/04/2021	@susanahiguchim	927,000	82,700	0 (comments disabled)
Peru	Don't vote for Verónica	03/07/2021	@soszavala	451,100	31,000	2,147
Peru	Your vote has power	02/25/2021	@jne.peru	162,000	26,900	1,028
Peru	Open call by Pedro Castillo	03/25/2021	@bup_sjl	487,500	19,300	1,072
Peru	I am Keiko, and you?	03/23/2021	@jovenesfp	8,191	551	317

Table 2: Themes and Gender Representation in Political TikTok Videos in Peru

Country	Title / Brief Description	Main Theme	Gender Representation	Tone	Tone of Top 3 Comments
Peru	This 6th of June we are all Keiko	Keiko Fujimori's mother calls on youth to support her daughter in the 2021 runoff election, framing it as a decisive year for Peru.	The video emphasizes female leadership through a mother's endorsement of her daughter as the presidential candidate.	Emotional, motivational	Comments were disabled on this video, so audience reception could not be assessed.
Peru	Don't vote for Verónica	The video urges youth not to vote for Verónica Mendoza by using dance and popular TikTok trends.	The political message is delivered through youth interaction.	Political	The top comments reflected polarized reception: one defended Verónica Mendoza's proposals and criticized the video's misrepresentation, another expressed strong support for Rafael López Aliaga ("Vamos Porky"), and a third used a sarcastic quote attributed to Winston

					Churchill to delegitimize leftist candidates such as Pedro Castillo.
Peru	Your vote has power	It calls for youth voting awareness through the use of trends and humor.	The video maintains a neutral stance, encouraging youth participation.	Sarcastic, humorous	The most liked comments expressed skepticism toward electoral institutions and political options: one accused the National Jury of Elections (JNE) of corruption, another endorsed right-wing candidates Rafael López Aliaga and Hernando de Soto as the only viable choices, and a third criticized the JNE for repeatedly presenting corrupt candidates.
Peru	Open call by Pedro Castillo	Pedro Castillo makes an open call to support his candidacy, directly	The content reinforces the stereotype that “men are the future.”	Serious	The top comments were strongly supportive of Pedro Castillo:

		targeting Peruvian youth.			one expressed direct endorsement, another enthusiastically declared him the winner of the debate while using campaign symbols such as the pencil, and a third highlighted the need for greater education among youth, framing Castillo as a teacher who could lead this effort.
Peru	I am Keiko, and you?	The video encourages voting for Keiko Fujimori, the main female candidate in the election.	The video focuses on a female candidate as the central figure.	Motivational	The most liked comments were unsupportive of Keiko Fujimori's candidacy: one expressed a preference for Rafael López Aliaga, another mocked Keiko with a derogatory play on her initial, and a third celebrated López Aliaga ("Porky") with repeated

					campaign wave emojis.
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Table 3: Popularity of Political TikTok Videos in the USA

Country	Title / Brief Description	Publication Date	User	Views	Likes	Comments
USA	Kamala Harris accepting VP nomination	08/19/2020	@nowthisimpact	615,000	64,000	976
USA	Obama on youth vote importance in Pennsylvania community meeting	10/22/2020	@yahoonews	338,700	13,300	516
USA	Explains voting requirements, engages Gen Z	09/22/2020	@lisaremillard	141,600	17,200	433
USA	Storytime: why youth trust Biden	10/28/2020	@mckennalight	74,100	22,100	400
USA	Explains voting responsibilities to motivate youth	10/26/2020	@phyofthepast	12,400	1,850	16

Table 4: Themes and Gender Representation in Political TikTok Videos in the USA

Country	Title / Brief Description	Main Theme	Gender Representation	Tone	Tone of Top 3 Comments
USA	Kamala Harris accepting VP nomination	Kamala Harris is presented as a female figure in politics, with the ad emphasizing service to others as a source of meaning.	The video highlights female representation in politics through Kamala Harris.	Inspirational	The most liked comments overwhelmingly expressed support for Kamala Harris and the Democratic ticket: one pledged to vote for Biden/Harris, another celebrated Harris with enthusiastic praise, and a third conveyed pride and encouragement for her candidacy.
USA	Obama on youth vote importance in Pennsylvania community meeting	Barack Obama highlights voting as the key to making things better.	The ad features an adult male political figure, Barack Obama.	Inspirational	The top comments reflected mixed reception: one nostalgically praised Obama while criticizing Trump, another expressed skepticism about the

					inspirational quality of the message, and a third defended Obama's supporters by framing negative reactions from Trump voters as stemming from fear.
USA	Explains voting requirements, engages Gen Z	The video provides education on voting requirements, specifically targeting members of Gen Z.	The explainer is delivered by a young woman.	Informative	The most liked comments were motivational and supportive of civic engagement: one expressed pride as a newly naturalized citizen preparing to vote, another emphasized voting as a civic right and responsibility, and a third encouraged early voting and explicitly supported the Democratic Party.
USA	Storytime: why youth trust Biden	The creator establishes an emotional connection	The emotional storytelling is presented by a young woman.	Emotional	The top comments combined encouragement

		between youth and Joe Biden.			and humor: one called on viewers to go vote, another used satire by suggesting lowering the voting age to seven, and a third praised the parents of the youth featured for fostering civic values.
USA	Explains voting responsibilities to motivate youth	The video educates and motivates young people to take responsibility in voting.	The motivational message is created and shared by a young woman.	Motivational	The top comments reflected varied perspectives: one emphasized civic participation by noting they had voted by mail, another expressed frustration over Guam residents' inability to vote in U.S. presidential elections, and a third used humor to point out being underage and thus ineligible to vote.

The TikTok dataset for the United States comprised five political videos published during the three months before and the three months after the 2020 presidential election. The most viewed video, Kamala

Harris Accepting VP Nomination (615,000 views), highlighted female representation at the national level and had an inspirational tone. The second most viewed video, Obama on Youth Vote Importance in Pennsylvania Community Meeting (338,700 views), featured a male political leader and former president emphasizing civic responsibility. Explains Voting Requirements, Engages Gen Z (141,600 views) and Storytime: Why Youth Trust Biden (74,100 views) centered on young women delivering informative or emotional content. The final video, Explains Voting Responsibilities to Motivate Youth (12,400 views), also featured a young female creator encouraging active participation. Each video's main theme, gender representation, and tone are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. Audience reactions in the most liked comments were generally supportive of civic engagement and Democratic candidates, frequently praising Kamala Harris and encouraging participation, though some also reflected humor, skepticism, or frustration over voting restrictions.

Political Campaign Advertisements

The analysis of televised or digital campaign advertisements further reflects the intersection of media strategies and gender representation. In the small Peruvian sample, Pedro Castillo's campaign ad prominently positioned him in rural settings, using visual symbols of traditional masculinity such as agricultural work and community leadership. Female figures appeared in supportive roles, often in domestic or community contexts rather than as central political actors. However, Keiko Fujimori's ad leaned toward personal narrative and character—highlighting resilience and family-oriented values—rather than policy depth, consistent with patterns identified in Atkinson (2021) and Ross et al. (2012) regarding female candidate coverage. It is worth noting that, unlike the externally produced coverage discussed elsewhere in this study, this ad reflects a self-representation strategy chosen by Keiko Fujimori's own campaign, even as it echoes similar gendered emphases on personal narrative over policy. In contrast, Pedro Castillo's campaign spot emphasized imagery of rural labor and community leadership, presenting him as an authoritative, tradition-rooted figure rather than articulating detailed policy proposals.

In the United States, Kamala Harris's campaign ad integrated personal history with political vision, combining images of her prosecutorial work and community service with broader themes of equality and opportunity. The ad balanced personal narrative with policy goals, which aligns with Van der Pas and Aaldering's (2020) observation that high-profile female candidates may receive more issue coverage than lower-profile women, though still intertwined with personal framing. Joe Biden's ad targeting youth emphasized unity and the moral stakes of the election, with female figures present in the ad but largely as part of broader crowds or in community roles.

Patterns Among Cases

When comparing Peru and the U.S., three patterns emerge: engagement disparities by gender representation and framing differences alongside platform affordances and political voice.

In Peru, videos featuring male political figures or male-centered narratives attracted significantly higher engagement than those supporting female candidates. In the U.S., high-engagement videos prominently featured Kamala Harris, while youth female creators often produced content framed as informative or emotional. However, it is important to note that male political figures—such as Barack Obama in campaign-related videos—also relied on emotional appeals, though these are more often perceived by audiences as authoritative. This suggests that differences in reception may stem less from the actual use of emotion and more from gendered perceptions of what constitutes political authority.

Female political actors were more often associated with personal narratives or emotional appeals, while male political actors were framed in terms of authority, leadership and policy. In Peru, even anti-Verónica videos were framed through humor and trends, undermining the seriousness of female candidacy indirectly. In the U.S., Harris's inspirational framing contrasted in tone—hers more emotional and inspirational, his more civic and serious—with Obama's emphasis on responsibility, underscoring this gendered distinction.

TikTok's creative and informal affordances enabled youth, especially women, to express political views through humor, storytelling, and popular culture (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). However, algorithmic visibility favored established figures and authority-driven messaging. Importantly, in both cases, political appeals to youth were notably mediated by adults rather than youth addressing each other, illustrated by Susana Higuchi in Peru and Obama in the U.S.

DISCUSSION

Significance of the Results

The results of this small exploratory study highlight how gender roles and generational hierarchies intersect in shaping youth political expression and engagement on TikTok. Although digital platforms provide spaces for alternative forms of engagement, the findings show that these spaces are not fully democratizing. In Peru, political content was dominated by male-centered narratives, with the most engaging videos reinforcing traditional masculine leadership. When women appeared, such as in the video concerning Susana Higuchi's endorsement of Keiko Fujimori or the video targeting Verónica Mendoza, their representation was either framed negatively—as in the dance-trend video mocking Mendoza's candidacy—or mediated through an adult figure calling on young people to participate, as with Higuchi's appeal on her daughter's behalf, rather than presented directly by youth themselves. This reliance on adult authority underscores the persistence of paternalistic approaches to youth engagement, where political legitimacy is constructed through older and/or male voices rather than directly through young women's perspectives.

In contrast, the United States dataset displayed greater visibility of female figures and youth creators, particularly young women producing explanatory or motivational content. Videos featuring Kamala Harris or youth influencers highlighted how personal storytelling and emotional appeals could attract engagement and provide accessible entry points for political education. Nevertheless, these representations often emphasized personality, inspiration or humor over substantive policy discourse. While this differs from Peru's male-dominated narrative, it still reflects gendered patterns in which women and young people gain visibility through effective modes of communication rather than authoritative, policy-driven ones.

Collectively, these patterns indicate that despite the participatory promise of TikTok, political communication continues to reproduce entrenched hierarchies. In Peru, adult and male voices dominate, sidelining direct youth-led political expressions and/or narratives. In the United States, although female visibility is stronger, representation often remains tied to gendered and generational expectations that

frame young women primarily as emotional storytellers, a framing that undervalues their authority as political actors even though emotional narratives can also serve as a powerful source of credibility and trust. These findings complicate assumptions about digital media as equalizing forces and call for more critical attention to how engendered cultural norms and platform dynamics constrain youth political agency.

Support for the Hypothesis

The hypothesis that youth in Peru and the United States encounter gender-based and generational barriers in political expression and/or engagement, shaped by media representations, is supported by the findings. In Peru, the reliance on adult-centered appeals and the dominance of male figures confirms that youth, particularly young women, are often excluded from political narratives or portrayed through reductive lenses. The negative framing of female candidates and the lack of direct youth protagonism in high-engagement videos illustrate how entrenched cultural norms intersect with digital media to reproduce exclusion. In the United States, the hypothesis is reinforced by the prominence of women such as Kamala Harris and the engagement of young female creators, paired with the persistence of gendered framing. While these actors enjoy greater visibility than in Peru, their political expressions are still shaped by expectations that emphasize emotional or motivational content over authoritative and concrete policy discourse. This demonstrates that even in a more open and diverse media environment, systemic patriarchal constraints limit the full political legitimacy of young women. Thus, across both contexts, the findings confirm that digital platforms both expand opportunities for youth engagement and simultaneously replicate long-standing cultural hierarchies. Gender and age continue to mediate who is seen as legitimate in political spaces, shaping how youth and particularly young women, can participate and be recognized in the digital public sphere.

Consistency with Other Studies

The findings resonate closely with existing scholarship on gender and political media coverage. Van der Pas and Aaldering's (2020) work on gender bias in political journalism is reflected in both the traditional and digital media patterns observed here. Their finding that women politicians are more likely to be framed through appearance, personality or family roles rather than policy expertise is evident in the Peruvian and U.S. data. Similarly, Ross et al. (2012) documented women's frequent relegation to "soft news" coverage, which aligns with the emotional and personal narrative framing found in this study's TikTok and campaign ad analyses.

Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik's (2023) research on digital youth political engagement through TikTok complements this study's observations about platform affordances and algorithmic bias. The ways in which TikTok's content moderation and recommendation algorithms tend to favor dominant gender norms explains the differential visibility and engagement observed in the political videos analyzed. Moreover, the structural gender inequalities in political expression highlighted by World Bank (2025) and USAID (n.d.) contextualize the media dynamics, illustrating that media representation both reflects, challenges, and reinforces broader social inequalities. Chamberlain et al. (2025) add an important layer by demonstrating how early civic education experiences, mediated by gender norms, shape political

socialization, linking formative experiences to later media engagement patterns observed among youth. Overall, the study extends and confirms these theoretical insights through a small-scale comparative, mixed-media approach that foregrounds youth political agency within intersecting socio-cultural and technological frameworks.

Limitations of The Study

Although this study offers valuable insights, there are some generalizability limitations to consider. First, the TikTok content analysis only looks at a small sample of videos (n=10) over a short time period (three months before and after the presidential elections) which might not fully capture the broader scope of youth political expression, engagement, and how gender dynamics change over longer times. Political content outside election seasons or focused on other topics, for example, could show different trends. Second, the study uses a qualitative content analysis approach, which provides a rich and detailed understanding but makes it harder to generalize the findings to all youth or media content. In the future, adding quantitative data like surveys or large-scale engagement metrics could help balance this and give a wider picture. Third, the focus on just two countries (Peru and the United States) means the results may not apply everywhere. Both countries have very different political histories, media landscapes and cultural norms. So, more research in other regions, both in the Global North and South, would be important to get a fuller understanding of this social process. Finally, since the study relies on publicly available social media posts, there's a risk of bias: viral or highly visible content tends to dominate, which means less popular but still important voices (especially from marginalized or rural youth) might be overlooked. A video with far fewer views or comments could still have an equally meaningful impact on digital political expression or broader political participation for the limited youth audience that does encounter it, even though that impact would not be captured by an engagement-based sampling approach.

Next Steps and Future Research

Building on these findings, future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis with interviews, surveys and/or ethnographic studies to explore youth political expression more holistically. Including young political actors' perspectives could illuminate the strategies they use to resist or conform to gendered media expectations. Expanding temporal scope beyond electoral cycles would provide a more nuanced understanding of how gender norms and media representations evolve over time, including during non-election periods and in relation to emerging political issues. Further investigation into the role of algorithmic design on platforms like TikTok is also crucial. Research could focus on how recommendation systems central to social media algorithms shape visibility for marginalized youth and the potential for platform interventions to mitigate bias. Comparative studies involving additional countries in both the Global North and South would enrich understanding of cultural and institutional factors influencing gendered political representation in youth media. This would help identify more global trends versus context-specific phenomena. Future work could also draw more explicitly on transnational feminist theory, which examines how gendered norms and inequalities are produced and contested across national borders rather than within a single country in isolation, attending to how local media narratives are shaped by transnational structures of power such as colonialism, capitalism, and migration (Enns et al., 2021). Finally, applied research exploring educational and policy interventions aimed at increasing

young people's, especially young women's and gender minorities', political engagement and media literacy could have practical benefits. Developing tools and frameworks to empower youth in navigating and reshaping political media landscapes remains a critical challenge for scholars and practitioners alike.

CONCLUSION

This small-scale exploratory study reveals that gender norms and media representations continue to shape youth political expression in both Peru and the United States, limiting the visibility and agency of young women and gender minorities in different but related ways. Despite the potential of digital platforms to expand political engagement, persistent biases in traditional media and online reinforce stereotypes and unequal participation. These findings highlight the importance of addressing cultural and media-driven barriers to create more inclusive political spaces and they suggest that similar dynamics may exist in other countries with entrenched gender norms. For the general public, this research underscores the need for critical awareness of how gender influences political narratives and expression alongside the value of fostering equitable media representation to empower all youth in democratic processes.

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