# Political Communication in Times of Spectacularisation: Digital Narratives, Engagement, and Politainment

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Edited by Salvador Gómez-García, Rocío Zamora, and Salomé Berrocal

# Table of Contents

# Table of Contents

Editorial

# New Frontiers for Political Communication in Times of Spectacularization

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**Abstract**
Political spectacularization is a broad global phenomenon challenging contemporary digital political communication under new features that define interactive digital narratives. In this sense, the use of politainment formulas in digital contexts to reconnect the electorate with political leaders and institutions through a more direct and interactive communication deserves further understanding of its implications on the devaluation of political information and the loss of democratic quality. This thematic issue sheds some light on how the spectacularization of political communication, which increasingly takes place in online contexts, affects and is affected by these processes, where entertainment is crucial to engage citizens. In this editorial, we provide a short overview of how research on politainment has started to shift its attention away from traditional media toward the wide array of lenses of politainment among digital platforms. The articles in this thematic issue reflect this shift but also show its consequences in terms of political engagement. Finally, we outline further research steps, which should establish a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the complex relationship between political communication, entertainment, and new digital communication formulas, which is crucial to advance knowledge in the field.

**Keywords**
digital narratives; digital persuasion; disintermediation; gamification; ideological polarization; online campaigns; politainment; political communication; political engagement; social media

**Issue**
This editorial is part of the issue "Political Communication in Times of Spectacularisation: Digital Narratives, Engagement, and Politainment" edited by Salvador Gómez-García (Complutense University of Madrid), Rocío Zamora (University of Murcia), and Salomé Berrocal (University of Valladolid).

## 1. Introduction

The increasing complexity of the challenges faced by societies today highlights the critical importance of political communication research (Lawrence, 2023). In response to these concerns, we recognize the value of engaging in rigorous analysis of high-quality research published in respected journals, such as *Political Communication*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Political Communication Research*, among others. Drawing upon the rich and diverse literature in these journals, our aim is to provide a platform for researchers to explore political communication through a media per-spective, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of *politainment*.

Through this process, we have been impressed by the quantity and quality of the proposals we have received, which demonstrate its interest and a wide range of perspectives and approaches. Notably, some submissions have offered new insights into the evolving landscape of media consumption, including the continued presence of politainment in traditional media and established social media platforms (such as Twitter and YouTube), as well as the emergence of new platforms that are capturing the attention of political actors, such as TikTok and Instagram.

Moreover, we are fortunate to have received submissions that enrich politainment phenomena with different perspectives, such as the role of audiovisual fiction, music, and digital games in shaping political communication. Together, the contributions in this thematic issue offer a comprehensive and dynamic snapshot of the intersection between political communication and entertainment.

## 2. Articles Included in the Thematic Issue

Humanes and Valera-Ordaz (2023) kick off this thematic issue by addressing the gap in the literature on selective exposure between ideology, vote, and media consumption by employing longitudinal analysis of three media types (television, radio, and newspapers) and exploring the variables that influence news choices (ideology or partisanship). Their findings provide strong evidence for the need to expand the boundaries of research in this area through the use of less commonly employed techniques.

Keeping with the previous theme, but jumping to the prevalence of social networks and platforms, we can find research that establishes their role in political communication. Martin Echeverría (2023) explores how social media users in Mexico engaged with political advertising during the 2021 federal campaigns. He identifies the importance of individual connections in capturing users' attention and forming their attitudes toward political content. He also highlights a discrepancy between citizens' information needs and the political content provided by the platforms and discusses the active role that users play in controlling political content. Overall, the study offers valuable insights into the user experience of political advertising on social media in Mexico.

The prevalence of these phenomena can be found in several articles that develop specific cases. Di Nubila, Ballesteros-Herencia, Etura, and Martín-Jiménez (2023) discuss how politicians—in this case, Brazil's former president Bolsonaro—leverage digital platforms to communicate with their voters and undermine traditional media. The use of these platforms has not only been a powerful tool for promoting populist ideologies but has also been linked to the spread of disinformation and the incitement of hate attacks against democratic institutions in Brazil. This populist concern is followed by Grapă and Mogoș (2023) in their analysis of George Simion and his use of politainment to gain visibility, especially through scandalization and tension against corrupt political elites. The authors state that Simion's multimodal performance reveals that his populist communication strategies are similar to other populist discursive approaches, but are adapted to the unique characteristics of Romania, an Orthodox Eastern European former communist country with Romanian-speaking populations living outside the current borders.

Two articles focus on Twitter to shed light on the engagement of politainment producers and the consequences of infotainment journalism in Spain. Berrocal-Gonzalo, Zamora-Martínez, and González-Neira (2023) studied tweets related to Spanish television programs covering the 2019 general elections and found that politainment programs achieve greater engagement when they include audiovisual documents, contain soft news, and introduce mentions, but not when they use colloquial language. The study emphasizes the need for further research on the consequences of spectacularized political information and its potential for establishing a frivolous or superficial perception of politics in the audience. Following this trail, Reguero-Sanz, Berdón-Prieto, and Herrero-Izquierdo (2023) analyzed the reactions on Twitter to "Ferresgate" and discussed how verbal aggressiveness and hate speech on social media can also target journalists. The study found that hate speech represented a low percentage of the tweets analyzed. So, further research is needed to determine whether this is a consequence or a media sign of the current time.

Another sign of the current time comes from the new platforms that emerge and their utilization within the realm of politainment. The significance of Instagram as a political tool (Ekman & Widholm, 2017) offers new insights regarding its contribution to the phenomenon of spectacular narratives in the Ukrainian war. Plazas-Olmedo and López-Rabadán (2023) conducted an analysis of how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky employs Instagram in his digital communication strategy. This approach to spectacularization involves the meticulous staging and professional production of videos that strategically combine amateurism with international resources such as subtitles.

There is no doubt that among the different platforms, TikTok is the one that arouses the greatest academic interest as the fastest-growing application among young people. This is the assumption of Cervi, Tejedor, and Blesa (2023) where they examine the use of TikTok in the last presidential elections in Peru. They found that most of the candidates tend to use it as a unilateral tool for promotion, displaying a top-down communication style with almost no deliberative nor participative intentions. The findings confirm that keeping up with new cultural and technological innovations seems to be unfinished business for most Peruvian politicians. This scope is reinforced by Zamora-Medina, Suminas, and Fahmy (2023) when they discussed the TikTok singularity in Spain and Poland, and its contribution to a political personalization approach. Their findings reinforce political actors in these countries are not exploiting the full potential of TikTok's affordances and continue broadcasting their messages largely using traditional communication practices. So, political personalization on TikTok is far from being considered as part of their digital persuasion strategy. Finally, González-Aguilar, Segado-Boj, and Makhortykh (2023) examine how right-wing populist parties and politicians use TikTok to convey their ideology and values. In this sense, this research highlights how the use of humorists and entertaining videos reached higher

engagement and concludes that TikTok might contribute to downplaying the most controversial issues of the populist right.

The articles comprising this issue confirm the wide array of lenses of politainment that have burst beyond traditional lines or popular platforms, exploring new limits and frontiers. In this sense, Quevedo-Redondo, Rebolledo, and Navarro-Sierra (2023) analyze how music has been used as a tool for soft power by Spanish political parties and candidates during election campaigns. In their research, they question the level of awareness of the parties when compiling their Spotify playlists but offer a valuable contribution about how a digital music service has been used for electoral campaigning. Another perspective is introduced by Chicharro-Merayo, Gil-Gascón, and Baptista (2023), who examine the symbolic construction of politics in Spanish and Portuguese political television series. The article highlights the importance of politainment in the blending of politics and entertainment in media content and concludes that politics-based TV series produced in recent years in Spain and Portugal reflect the people's weariness and political disaffection.

Finally, game studies make their own approach to politainment in two stances. The first one by de la Cruz, de la Hera, Gómez, and Lacasa (2023) explores how political marketing and electoral propaganda were embedded in a popular video game—Fortnite—during the 2020 US presidential elections. The study points out the lack of understanding of the persuasive potential of the game in political strategies but concludes that procedural persuasion and textual persuasion were the most prominent feature used in Joe Biden's campaign in Fortnite to convey the political agenda of the campaign. The second one by Gómez-García and de la Hera (2023) offers an approach to how online mass media outlets use political newsgames to inform contemporary societies. The research found four distinct functions of digital games when covering political events: analytical reportage, commentary, critical scrutiny, and representation. As the authors conclude, by using newsgames, media outlets can engage audiences in a more interactive and immersive way, potentially increasing their impact as political actors in democratic polities.

## 3. Looking Ahead

The articles presented in this thematic issue point to four central trends in the field of political communication which are related to politainment phenomena. First, the expansion of spectacularized politics will continue. Accordingly, spectacularized politics leads to a greater fragmentation of society and contributes to an increasing distrust of the political system.

Second, digital narratives used to convey political information will continue to evolve, with a greater focus on interactivity and user participation in the creation of stories (Ryan, 2016). Technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, will have a significant impact on digital narratives, offering new possibilities for user immersion and experience.

Third, information disintermediation will continue to grow, driven by technological development and changes in prosumer behavior (Benkler, 2006). In consequence, content production will be decentralized, and this fact could have an impact on the content diversity and the quality of political information available online.

Fourth, the presence of automatization and the irruption of artificial intelligence can be glimpsed. AI and machine learning systems will be used to collect and analyze user data, with the aim of offering more personalized and relevant content and services to achieve greater engagement (Marconi, 2020).

Overall, these mentioned tendencies need a deep critical reflection, given their ethical and social implications. Spectacularized politics in the media and the internet is a complex phenomenon with serious implications for democracy. Likewise, it is important to consider the consequences of digital disintermediation, including issues such as data privacy and algorithm control. Accordingly, it is necessary to find a balance between the freedom of content production and distribution and the maintenance of quality in journalism (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013).

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Article

# Partisanship, Ideology, and Selective Exposure: A Longitudinal Analysis of Media Consumption in Spain (2008–2019)

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## Abstract
The literature on selective exposure has shown that ideology and voting govern media consumption decisions, but longitudinal studies are still scarce. To fill this gap, this work analyzes: (a) whether selective exposure guided by ideology and partisanship to three media types (television, radio, and newspapers) is a stable phenomenon in Spain (2008–2019) as expected from a polarized pluralistic media system; and (b) which variable has the strongest effects on news choices (ideology or partisanship). Multinomial logistic regressions are carried out using data sources from six post-electoral surveys conducted by the Center for Sociological Research in the last six Spanish general elections (2008–2019). As dependent variables, we consider the four most important preferred media outlets for each media type, and as independent variables, we include the vote in general election and ideology. Moreover, interest in politics, gender, age, education, and social class are included as control variables, too. Findings show strong evidence that selective exposure based on ideology and partisanship is a well-established phenomenon in Spain for the three media types during the 11 years. Results also show that the effect of partisanship is always stronger than that of ideology for the three news media types. We conclude that selective exposure in Spain needs therefore to be conceived as partisan selective exposure.

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## 1. Introduction

The classic hypothesis of selective exposure suggests that individuals expose themselves to the media in search of messages that confirm their attitudes and avoid those that contradict them (Steppat et al., 2022; Stroud, 2008). Although this argument has been discussed by experts such as those who claim that there is only de facto selectivity (Freedman & Sears, 1965), experimental research has provided a more nuanced and complex picture of political selective exposure, showing that it only occurs under certain conditions (Meffert et al.,

2006). In this sense, the multiplication and fragmentation of media systems over the past few decades have led the classic hypothesis of selective exposure to be adapted to new forms of media consumption (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010).

One of the topics regarding which selective exposure has been corroborated most strongly has been its application to the consumption of political information. The growth of less objective and more politically biased journalism has generated more evidence that shows that party-specific selective exposure is increasing (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), particularly in more

polarized media contexts (Bos et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2020; Skovsgaard et al., 2016). Most studies have used cross-sector data, but very few analyses consider how selective exposure evolves over time through longitudinal approaches.

Over the past two decades, the number of media outlets through which Spaniards receive political information has increased, giving each person more power when it comes to choosing the sources of information that are available to them, and creating niches around ideological and political predispositions (Humanes, 2014; Martín-Llaguno & Berganza-Conde, 2001; Valera-Ordaz & Humanes, 2022). However, scholars have not considered whether ideology or party affinity is the variable that best explains media selection from a longitudinal perspective. This long-term vision is especially crucial given the major transformation of the Spanish party system—which shifted from a well-established two-party system to a multi-party system in 2015—and the effects of digitalization on the media system: the emergence of digital newspapers, the dramatic increase in supply, and the transformation of media consumption habits. Thus, analyzing selective media exposure using a broad time frame allows us to verify whether media consumption driven by political attitudes is a structural feature of Spanish audiences' behavior regardless of the political context and changes in opportunity structures derived from information environments (Skovsgaard et al., 2016). Based on this evidence, this study focuses on selective exposure to political information through three types of media (radio, television, and the print press) in Spain over a period of 11 years, addressing two objectives: (a) whether selective exposure guided by ideology and party affiliation is a stable phenomenon in Spain, as would be expected in a polarized pluralist media system; and (b) which variable—ideology or party affinity—has the strongest impact on news choices.

## 2. Theoretical Approach

### 2.1. Longitudinal Perspective on Selective Exposure

One of the limitations of the research on selective exposure is the lack of longitudinal studies that address continuities or changes in news consumption in different media (Karlsen et al., 2020). While some authors have shown that ideologically guided selective news consumption has increased over the past few decades, few studies introduce time as an explanatory variable, as most are based on cross-sector data.

As Strömbäck et al. (2013, p. 416) have stated, "people's news consumption cannot be explained by individual-level factors only…because changes in the media environment affect individual-level factors." Furthermore, it is important not to assume that relationships between media consumption and other variables are stable, as they change over time (Strömbäck

et al., 2016). In this sense, Dahlgren et al. (2019) state that one must address how changes in media environments have made it easier for people to seek out and selectively expose themselves to information that aligns with their attitudes and how this influences the political polarization of attitudes (Levendusky, 2013a).

The study of Garrett et al. (2013) showed that the use of political news sources aligned with one's own attitudes correlated to the use of discrepant media, and this pattern remains stable over time and across different online media outlets. Strömbäck et al. (2013), using surveys from 1986 and 2010 with data on media use on different platforms, found that news consumption in Sweden has become more polarized among both individuals who seek out news and those who avoid them over time.

In the US, Rodriguez et al. (2017) corroborated the increase in party-aligned and ideological selective exposure between 2000–2012. The most ambitious longitudinal study was conducted by Dahlgren (2019), who analyzed which political preferences (ideology, party affinity, or political interest) drove selective exposure to public media between 1986–2015 in Sweden. He showed that ideology and interest in politics are stable variables over time for explaining selective exposure, while party support for extra-parliamentary organizations explains a major drop in the use of public service news during the period.

In the case of Spain, no studies have been conducted that would introduce the longitudinal perspective. To contribute to this lack of longitudinal studies, we propose the following hypothesis:

> H1: Ideology and party identification are stable predictors of selective exposure to the media (print press, radio, and television) over time.

### 2.2. Partisan Selective Exposure to Political Information

Selective exposure to political information can be guided by ideological approaches or by interest in politics (Skovsgaard et al., 2016). However, most empirical evidence refers to the consumption of politically oriented media (Camaj, 2019; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Messing & Westwood, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2017; Stroud, 2010), especially in polarized political and media contexts (Bos et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2020; Skovsgaard et al., 2016), where individuals tend to select the media outlets that align with their ideology, leading to what is known as partisan selective exposure (Garrett & Stroud, 2014).

In Spain, various studies conducted over the past two-plus decades have shown that media use is politically oriented (Martín-Llaguno & Berganza-Conde, 2001). More recently, Humanes (2014) found a clear connection between political positions and selective media consumption. The print press is the political and electoral news media outlet that is most conditioned by the effect of selective exposure due to political orientation.

The relationship is stronger with voting recall than ideology. The news use of broadcast media outlets, though also coherent with the process of selective exposure, shows less consistent results than those obtained based on newspaper consumption. For their part, radio stations align more with the trend toward selective exposure to the print press than television does.

The study conducted by Valera-Ordaz (2018, 2022) explored the importance of positions on the center-periphery axis as predictors of media preferences in the case of the media in Catalonia. Using data from the Center for Sociological Research (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, hereafter CIS) post-electoral study for the 2015 autonomous elections, the results showed that the national identification variables, support for independence, and nationalism are the most important factors for explaining the preference for regional TV and radio stations. However, the pattern did not repeat in the case of the print press. While the indicators related to nationalist sentiment also have a strong explanatory capacity, the left-right ideological axis determines the selection of the newspaper that one reads for informational purposes.

Valera-Ordaz and Humanes (2022) found that ideological-party orientations are clearly the most important variables that govern selective exposure, especially for the digital press and radio, in addition to signaling an important trend toward selective avoidance of news media perceived to be ideologically incongruent.

However, none of these studies have tested which of the two variables—ideology or party affinity—has more weight when it comes to explaining the selection of political information. The Spanish media system fits the polarized pluralist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which is characterized by a high level of political parallelism, external pluralism, and an underdeveloped press market. Furthermore, the audience is ideologically polarized, and the journalistic profession combines opinion reporting style with weak professional autonomy due to a dependence on political and economic systems (Humanes et al., 2013; Humanes & Roses, 2018; López-Rabadán & Casero-Ripollés, 2015).

Based on this background we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Party identification has more important effects than ideology as a predictor of selective exposure for all media types (print press, radio, and television).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Data Sources and Temporal Framework

This study is based on a classic source of data for analyzing selective exposure: post-electoral surveys. While post-electoral surveys are susceptible to post-hoc rationalizations on the part of survey respondents, their benefits are worthy of highlighting. These include evaluating the phenomenon of selective exposure in an environment that is not simulated or manipulated by researchers and using representative samples that allow the results to be generalized to the entire population.

Specifically, we used post-electoral studies conducted by the CIS after the last six general elections in Spain, which were held between 2008–2019 (Table 1).

This 11-year period covers six elections and includes the process by which Spain's two-party system became a multi-party context. While the 2008 and 2011 elections took place in the context of a consolidated two-party system—with the Partido Popular (PP) and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) as the only forces with any real chance of forming a government, the other four elections (December 2015, June 2016, April 2019, and November 2019) were characterized by the emergence of new political groups (Unidas Podemos, hereafter UP, and Ciudadanos after 2015; and VOX after 2019) and by a much more politically fragmented context. This is therefore an appropriate period for observing whether selective exposure to different types of media is a stable behavior that has taken root among Spanish audiences beyond the political context.

### 3.2. Research Technique and Variables

We proposed conducting a multivariate analysis based on multinomial logistic regression given the categorical and multiple nature of our dependent variable: the preferred media outlet for consuming political information.

We used the three media consumption questions that post-electoral surveys contain as the dependent variable. They are: Which newspaper/radio station/television channel do you prefer for following political and electoral information during the campaign? Unfortunately, the surveys did not account for the preferred digital outlets, so we could not include this element in the analyses. These are open questions, and

**Table 1.** Data sources.

| General elections | Number of CIS study | Sample |
|---|---|---|
| November 10, 2019 | 3269 | 4,804 |
| April 28, 2019 | 3248 | 5,943 |
| June 26, 2016 | 3145 | 6,175 |
| December 20, 2015 | 7715 | 6,242 |
| November 20, 2011 | 2920 | 6,082 |
| March 9, 2008 | 2757 | 6,083 |

the respondent is allowed to respond spontaneously, providing their favorite source in each of the three formats. To limit the multinomial regression analysis—which requires a limited number of categories for the dependent variable and high sample sizes (Cea d'Ancona, 2005)—we have limited ourselves to the four most populated response categories for each type of media outlet (Table 2).

In the case of newspapers, *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, and *ABC* are the four national publications with the highest rates of penetration among gen-

eral information newspapers. They dominate the written press market in Spain (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2020). For their part, the four radio stations mentioned most frequently by survey respondents during the 11-year period were Cadena SER, COPE, Onda Cero, and RNE. Together, they represented 75.3% of the market share in 2019 (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2020). The four TV stations selected for the analyses were TVE1, Antena3, Telecinco, and La Sexta. The first three were always among the four most frequently mentioned by

**Table 2.** Operationalization of concepts.

| Concept | Operationalization | Variables |
|---|---|---|
| | Dependent variables | |
| Preference of media consumption | Preferred media outlet to follow political and electoral information during the campaign | 1. Newspaper (*El País*, **El Mundo**, *La Vanguardia*, and *ABC*) |
| | | 2. Radio station (SER, COPE, Onda Cero, and **RNE**) |
| | | 3. Television channel (TVE1, La Sexta, Antena3, and **Telecinco**) |
| | Independent variables | |
| Party identification | Vote in the last general elections | PP |
| | | PSOE |
| | | VOX (only in 2019) |
| | | **Ciudadanos** (from 2015 onwards) |
| | | UP (from 2015 onwards) |
| | | **Unión Progreso y Democracia** (only in 2008 and 2011) |
| | | Izquierda Unida (only in 2008 and 2011) |
| Ideology | Ideological self-placement scale (1–10) | Left (1–4) |
| | | **Center (5–6)** |
| | | Right (7–10) |
| Time | Year | Year (continuous) |
| | Control variables | |
| Political interest | Interest in the campaign | Interest in the campaign |
| Age | Age | Age (continuous) |
| Social class | Subjective social class | Upper class |
| | | **Middle class** |
| | | Lower class |
| Educational level | Educational level | Primary education |
| | | **Secondary education** |
| | | High education |
| Gender | Gender | Woman (reference group) |

Notes: The reference category for vote recall is Ciudadanos beginning in 2015, but it did not have a presence in previous elections, so it cannot be used in the regression models for 2008 and 2011. The solution is to use Unión Progreso y Democracia for 2008 and 2011 given that it occupies the same political space and shows a significant association with the more central ideological positions on the scale (5–6). This is reflected in the calculation of the standardized residuals in 2008 and 2011. Reference categories for each variable are indicated by in bold.

survey respondents during the 11-year period. This is not the case for La Sexta, which had a smaller showing in 2008 (placing fifth behind Cuatro) because it was founded in 2005 and took a few years to outperform Cuatro in terms of audience size. However, we decided to include La Sexta in the analyses to be able to compare the results over time. The four channels chosen had 42.9% of the market share in 2019 (Barlovento Comunicación, 2019).

We included ideology in the left-right cleavage and party identification as independent variables. The positions on the left-right axis are operationalized using a 10-point scale that is recorded as three variables: *left* (1–4), *center* (5–6), and *right* (7–10). Party identification is operationalized as vote recall in the last general elections. The regression models only include national parties with the highest parliamentary representation during the period analyzed (2008–2019). These are the PP and PSOE based on all elections, Izquierda Unida and Unión Progreso y Democracia in 2008 and 2011, and Ciudadanos and UP in 2015 and thereafter. VOX was added for the two elections held in 2019.

Furthermore, we added time—operationalized as continuous—as an independent variable in order to contrast H2, offering a single regression model for each media type. This allows us to observe which variable has the most important effects on media preferences—ideology vs. party identification—comparing the size of the coefficients.

Finally, we introduced control variables that are related to socio-demographic attributes, which are also associated with media consumption (Cardenal et al., 2019). These include age, education level, gender, social class, and interest in politics, which also have a notable influence on news consumption decisions (Skovsgaard et al., 2016; Valera-Ordaz & Humanes, 2022).

Multinomial logistic regression requires setting up a dependent variable category outside of the model that acts as a "reference group" regarding which one can compare the effects of the independent variables that the model specifies (Cea d'Ancona, 2005). Given that our purpose is to analyze the scope of selective exposure guided by ideology and vote, we chose to select as a reference a media outlet for each format that is relatively uninfluenced by our variables of interest or, to put it differently, influenced by the center of the ideological spectrum: Telecinco in the case of television, RNE for radio, and *El Mundo* for the print press. The latter was the most difficult to choose given that the print press is the media form that is most significantly segmented by ideology and vote (Humanes, 2014; Valera-Ordaz & Humanes, 2022). The same logic applies to the rest of the independent and control variables, and the most central categories are selected when possible as reference groups (in bold in Table 2).

In total, 18 multinomial logistic regression models are specified (three for each election, and one for each type of media outlet). These include anti-logarithmic coefficients that should be interpreted as follows: when

the value is greater than 1, it indicates a positive association (the interest variable increases the likelihood of the event) and when its value is less than 1, we are looking at a negative association (the likelihood of the event decreases). The results should always be interpreted in relation to the reference category. Three more models are added to these (one per media type) that include time as an independent variable.

## 4. Results

In the case of the print press, the results show that both ideology and vote are significant predictors of exposure to newspapers (Table 3). For example, those who have a right-wing ideology were more likely to prefer *ABC* (compared to *El Mundo*) in 2011 and 2019. Furthermore, those who voted PP were three to five times as likely to read *ABC* (compared to *El Mundo*) in 2015 and April 2019, respectively, and that same year voting VOX tripled the likelihood that one would choose *ABC* over *El Mundo*.

The differences are also notable regarding other newspapers. Those who have more left-leaning positions are much more likely to prefer *El País* (compared to *El Mundo*) in 2011 and April 2019, and voting PSOE is a significant predictor of exposure to *El País* throughout the entire time analyzed. In fact, voting PSOE increased the likelihood of preferring *El País* (to *El Mundo*) three to 36 times depending on the year. In 2015 and 2016, voting UP also increased the likelihood of reading *El País* instead of *El Mundo* significantly, though that was not the case in 2019. Furthermore, voting PP significantly reduced the likelihood of reading *La Vanguardia* vs. *El Mundo* in 2011 (the 2011 regression model had to be completed with Vote PSOE as the reference category for statistical reasons) and 2016, while voting PSOE increased it in 2008, 2016 and April 2019, and voting UP did so in 2016 and April 2019.

In summary, exposure to Spanish newspapers is clearly influenced by ideology and vote, which emerge as significant predictors of newspaper consumption, controlling for age, gender, education, social class, and interest in politics.

Furthermore, the specified models explain between 21%–42% of the variance.

Table 4 shows that ideology and voting also have a significant influence on television preferences. Respondents who identify as leftists were less likely to watch Antena3 (vs. Telecinco) in 2008 and 2015. The same is true of those who voted Izquierda Unida in 2008, UP in November 2019, and PSOE voters in practically all the temporal points analyzed (except for 2011 and 2016). All of them are less likely to choose Antena3 (vs. Telecinco) to get information about the campaign.

For their part, those who identify as leftists were more likely to consume La Sexta (vs. Telecinco) in 2019. This was also true for UP voters beginning in 2015. Both variables increase the likelihood of consuming this television station. Furthermore, PP voters (in December 2015

**Table 3.** Multinomial logistic regression models for print press preferences (reference category *El Mundo*).

| | March 2008 | November 2011 | December 2015 | June 2016 | April 2019 | November 2019 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *ABC* | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 0.122* | 1.079 | 0.137** | 0.051*** | 0.109** | 0.06 |
| Age | 1.029** | 1.012 | 1.01 | 1.035** | 1.014 | 1.021 |
| Low class | 1.015 | 0.23 | 0.95 | 0.851 | 1.122 | 0.399 |
| High class | 0.917 | 0.82 | 0.761 | 1.733 | 0.681 | 2.41 |
| Left | 0.455 | 0.468 | 0.407 | 2.99 | 0.455 | 8.449 |
| Right | 1.796 | 2.429** | 1.387 | 0.856 | 1.441 | 9.91* |
| Political interest | 0.468* | 0.763 | 0.918 | 0.699 | 0.968 | 0.834 |
| Female | 0.967 | 1.166 | 1.363 | 0.815 | 1.302 | 1.446 |
| Primary education | 0.677 | 0.848 | 1.192 | 0.516 | 2.633 | 0.621 |
| High education | 0.6 | 0.489* | 0.533* | 0.701 | 0.717 | 0.725 |
| Izquierda Unida vote | — | 0.553 | — | — | — | — |
| PP vote | 1.057 | 0.215* | 3.511** | 2.203 | 6.524*** | 0.597 |
| PSOE vote | 6.723* | — | 3.169 | 0.753 | 2.482 | 2.506 |
| UP vote | — | — | 4.671 | 0.145 | 3.489 | — |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 3.399* | — |
| *El País* | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 1.013 | 3.701* | 0.879 | 0.525 | 0.644 | 0.639 |
| Age | 0.991 | 1.013 | 0.994 | 1.012 | 0.997 | 1.008 |
| Low class | 1.125 | 0.616 | 0.802 | 1.324 | 2.043* | 0.051 |
| High class | 1.156 | 0.645 | 0.866 | 0.51* | 1.158 | 0.358 |
| Left | 1.534 | 3.78** | 2.053 | 2.007 | 3.475** | 6.853 |
| Right | 0.694 | 0.61 | 0.587 | 0.621 | 1.135 | 0.431 |
| Political interest | 1.146 | 0.593 | 1.597 | 0.862 | 1.295 | 1.46 |
| Female | 1.267 | 1.279 | 1.295 | 1.533 | 1.21 | 1.644 |
| Primary education | 1.208 | 1.261 | 1.184 | 0.612 | 1.484 | 0.056* |
| High education | 1.335 | 1.039 | 0.746 | 1.327 | 1.016 | 1.805 |
| Izquierda Unida vote | — | 0.681 | — | — | — | -- |
| PP vote | 0.288** | 0.077*** | 0.629 | 0.425** | 0.65 | 0.16 |
| PSOE vote | 12.555*** | — | 6.216*** | 4.669*** | 2.934** | 36.513* |
| UP vote | — | — | 5.91*** | 3.65** | 2.497 | — |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 0.958 | — |
| *La Vanguardia* | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 0.132 | 0.251 | 0.127* | 0.136* | 0.821 | 0.023 |
| Age | 1.005 | 1.014 | 1.016 | 1.009 | 0.966** | 1.06 |
| Low class | 1.653 | 0.871 | 1.08 | 0.877 | 1.613 | 0.07 |
| High class | 0.276 | 1.376 | 1.775 | 0.258 | 1.576 | 0 |
| Left | 0.555 | 2.154 | 1.347 | 1.425 | 1.401 | 1.279 |
| Right | 0.438 | 1.657 | 0.737 | 3.65 | 3.634 | 1.056 |
| Political interest | 0.401* | 0.514 | 0.517 | 0.595 | 0.399* | 4.572 |
| Female | 0.844 | 1.956 | 1.504 | 1.115 | 1.52 | 0.103 |
| Primary education | 1.455 | 1.754 | 2.057 | 1.508 | 7.621** | 0.029 |
| High education | 1.015 | 0.88 | 0.532 | 0.579 | 0.618 | 0.337 |
| Izquierda Unida vote | — | 2.274 | — | — | — | — |
| PP vote | 0.808 | 0.191* | 0.37 | 0.097** | 0.373 | 0.087 |
| PSOE vote | 32.094** | — | 2.257 | 4.403* | 7.635** | 69.744 |
| UP vote | — | — | 3.805 | 6.496* | 8.075** | — |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 0.244 | — |
| *N* | 721 | 638 | 592 | 599 | 603 | 109 |
| McFadden R2 | 0.307 | 0.271 | 0.23 | 0.235 | 0.216 | 0.421 |

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

**Table 4.** Multinomial logistic regression models for television preferences (reference category Telecinco).

|  | March 2008 | November 2011 | December 2015 | June 2016 | April 2019 | November 2019 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Antena3** | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 5.259** | 2.797** | 3.035*** | 2.507** | 2.485** | 3.97** |
| Age | 0.992* | 0.994 | 0.999 | 1 | 1.006 | 1.006 |
| Low class | 0.853 | 0.785 | 0.839 | 0.898 | 0.947 | 0.997 |
| High class | 1.078 | 1.1 | 1.556 | 1.12 | 1.072 | 0.837 |
| Left | 0.66* | 0.682 | 0.575** | 0.662 | 1.056 | 1.315 |
| Right | 1.043 | 1.222 | 1.252 | 1.038 | 1.011 | 1.179 |
| Political interest | 1.01 | 1.313* | 1.183 | 1.062 | 1.29 | 1.077 |
| Female | 0.869 | 0.686** | 0.535*** | 0.497*** | 0.409*** | 0.389*** |
| Primary education | 1.386* | 0.738 | 0.814 | 0.669* | 0.416*** | 0.446** |
| High education | 1.061 | 1.886** | 1.997*** | 2.347*** | 1.94*** | 1.888* |
| Izquierda Unida vote | 0.267* | 1.008 | — | — | — | — |
| PP vote | 0.619 | 1.37 | 0.965 | 1.031 | 1.186 | 0.625 |
| PSOE vote | 0.267* | 0.691 | 0.561* | 0.717 | 0.477** | 0.257*** |
| UP vote | — | — | 0.664 | 0.817 | 0.716 | 0.342* |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 0.858 | 0.686 |
| **La Sexta** | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 0.261 | 0.37 | 0.275*** | 0.357** | 0.279*** | 0.407 |
| Age | 0.998 | 1.008 | 1.022*** | 1.019*** | 1.021*** | 1.02** |
| Low class | 1.034 | 1.123 | 0.996 | 1.2 | 1.064 | 0.905 |
| High class | 0.955 | 0.961 | 1.752 | 1.389 | 1.19 | 1.079 |
| Left | 1.488 | 1.238 | 1.441 | 1.049 | 1.705* | 2.704*** |
| Right | 0.364* | 1.184 | 0.82 | 0.96 | 0.679 | 1.41 |
| Political interest | 1.772*** | 1.285 | 2.655*** | 2.327*** | 2.231*** | 2.422*** |
| Female | 0.546*** | 0.465** | 0.526*** | 0.401*** | 0.297*** | 0.239*** |
| Primary education | 0.532*** | 0.264*** | 0.621* | 0.525** | 0.623* | 0.576* |
| High education | 1.492* | 1.321 | 2.588*** | 3.322*** | 2.823*** | 3.813*** |
| Izquierda Unida vote | 2.595 | 3.452* | — | — | — | — |
| PP vote | 0.986 | 0.502 | 0.277*** | 0.255*** | 0.784 | 0.41 |
| PSOE vote | 1.933 | 1.284 | 0.917 | 1.218 | 1.466 | 0.913 |
| UP vote | — | — | 3.096*** | 4.827*** | 6.217*** | 3.261* |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 0.443 | 0.306* |
| **TVE1** | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 1.015 | 1.306 | 0.529* | 0.672 | 0.878 | 1.276 |
| Age | 1.028*** | 1.029*** | 1.024*** | 1.021*** | 1.022*** | 1.019** |
| Low class | 0.939 | 0.982 | 1.01 | 1.04 | 1.021 | 1.043 |
| High class | 1.115 | 0.911 | 2.383** | 1.645 | 1.662 | 1.57 |
| Left | 1.062 | 1.01 | 1.044 | 0.639 | 0.917 | 1.509 |
| Right | 0.924 | 1.075 | 1.205 | 1.029 | 0.86 | 1.025 |
| Political interest | 1.046 | 1.198 | 0.971 | 1.105 | 1.072 | 0.959 |
| Female | 0.807* | 0.597*** | 0.553*** | 0.521*** | 0.457*** | 0.416*** |
| Primary education | 1.142 | 0.649** | 0.875 | 0.891 | 0.729 | 0.794 |
| High education | 1.098 | 1.764** | 1.942** | 2.592*** | 2.188*** | 3.038*** |
| Izquierda Unida vote | 0.434 | 1.514 | — | — | — | — |
| PP vote | 0.526 | 1.009 | 1.897** | 1.405 | 1.139 | 0.885 |
| PSOE vote | 0.496 | 1.088 | 0.703 | 0.68 | 0.78 | 0.503 |
| UP vote | — | — | 0.52* | 0.973 | 1.034 | 0.558 |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 0.683 | 0.8 |
| *N* | 2894 | 2460 | 2198 | 2055 | 2282 | 1318 |
| McFadden R2 | 0.086 | 0.075 | 0.158 | 0.15 | 0.115 | 0.131 |

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

and June 2016) and VOX voters (in November 2019) were less likely to choose this station. As such, we are looking at both selective media exposure based on political reasons and the phenomenon of selective avoidance through which some ideological groups avoid consuming media that they perceive to be ideologically distant (Garrett et al., 2013).

In the case of TVE1, however, there are less significant differences compared to Telecinco. Voting PP increased the likelihood of preferring TVE1 over Telecinco only in 2015. Voting UP decreased that likelihood. However, there are no differences based on the positions on the left-right axis. This is because the ideological composition of Telecinco and TVE1 audiences are similar.

But the political variables are not the only ones that explain the population's television preferences. Socio-demographic attributes do so as well. Older adults prefer to watch TVE1 and La Sexta over Telecinco. Women prefer Telecinco a great deal and are less likely to consume La Sexta, Antena3, and TVE1. Those with higher levels of education tend to consume La Sexta, Antena3, and TVE1 more intensely (compared to Telecinco) and those who state that they are interested in politics are much more inclined to watch La Sexta.

These results are partly due to the type of content that television stations offer. While Telecinco focuses on entertainment, La Sexta offers many more formats related to politics as both information and politainment (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2014). In this sense, programs like "El Intermedio" could generate selective exposure with their satirical news format, as studies conducted in other contexts have found (Stroud & Muddiman, 2013). Furthermore, it is necessary to note that the goodness-of-fit of the regression model is lower in the case of television than in the print press. The model explains only between 8.6–15.5% of the variance.

The results for radio suggest that ideology and vote are also significant predictors of exposure, especially in the cases of COPE and SER (Table 5). Having a right-wing ideological orientation doubled (in November 2011 and December 2015) or even tripled (in April 2019) the likelihood of listening to COPE (vs. RNE) for political information. Furthermore, PP voters were between three and six times more likely to consume COPE (vs. RNE) in 2011 and 2019, respectively, while being a PSOE or UP voter significantly decreased the likelihood of exposing oneself to that station in April 2019. The importance of the vote is very limited in the case of Onda Cero, and ideology does not show a significant effect. In the case of SER, the importance of left-leaning positions, voting UP, and especially voting PSOE is observed more clearly given that all of these increase the likelihood of preferring that station over RNE during different years.

Finally, the goodness-of-fit of the radio regression model is slightly higher than that of television but clearly lower than that of the print press, as it explains between 14.6–26.3% of the variance.

To compare the influence of ideology vs. party identification on citizens' media preferences, we have specified three regression models (one for each type of media) including time as an independent variable (Table 6). Given that the temporal framework covers an 11-year period (2008–1019), it has only been possible to include the PSOE and PP vote in these models, as these are the only political forces present throughout the period. We left the PSOE vote as a category of reference and included the PP vote as an independent variable. Table 6 presents the regression coefficients of each type of medium: When the regression coefficient is greater than zero, there is a positive association, and when it is less than zero, the association is negative. By using the coefficients in place of beta exponentials, their magnitude can be compared independently from the sign.

The results clearly suggest that the effect of vote on the choice of newspaper, television channel, and radio station is always higher than that of ideology, as the size of the coefficients is greater for all the media analyzed. In other words, voting is a stronger predictor than ideology for Spaniards' media preferences for the three types of media.

Furthermore, it is important to note that in the case of television, voting has more important effects on the selection of Antena3 and La Sexta (vs. Telecinco)—and not for TVE1—than the socio-demographic attributes taken individually. In other words, despite the importance of education level, age, gender, and interest in politics as factors that influence television channel choice, voting is undoubtedly the factor that best predicts consumption of Antena3 and La Sexta, the two major stations that are part of the Atresmedia group. This suggests, as we will see below, a growing segmentation of the television market in terms of politics.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This research shows that selective exposure to the media based on ideology and party identification is a stable phenomenon in Spain, which confirms H1. Both variables significantly influence audiences' behavior and do so for all media types. The print press is not the only politically segmented market: radio and television are as well, as recent studies suggest (Valera-Ordaz & Humanes, 2022; Valera-Ordaz et al., 2021). In fact, the model explains approximately twice the variance of television preferences beginning in 2015, probably because of La Sexta's position as a generalist channel focused on the left-wing audience. In this sense, the results suggest that the television industry is moving—since the formation of the television duopoly with the acquisition of Cuatro by Mediaset in 2009 and the merger of La Sexta and Antena3 in 2011—from the classic "catch-all" model in search of large audiences to a more ideologically segmented model thanks to the role of Atresmedia group, whose Antena3 and La Sexta channels are focused on differentiated ideological niches. For its part, the Mediaset

**Table 5.** Multinomial logistic regression models for radio preferences (reference category RNE).

| | March 2008 | November 2011 | December 2015 | June 2016 | April 2019 | November 2019 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **COPE** | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 0.854 | 0.208* | 3.222* | 4.639* | 5.502** | 2.992 |
| Age | 1.001 | 1.002 | 0.98* | 0.983 | 0.981* | 0.981 |
| Low class | 0.742 | 0.679 | 1.3 | 1.241 | 1.237 | 0.869 |
| High class | 0.444 | 0.726 | 0.908 | 0.989 | 1.338 | 1.74 |
| Left | 0.627 | 0.62 | 0.611 | 0.53 | 1.249 | 0.647 |
| Right | 1.939 | 2.078** | 2.063* | 1.587 | 3.117** | 1.01 |
| Political interest | 1.346 | 1.269 | 2.211** | 1.12 | 1.115 | 1.302 |
| Female | 1.36 | 1.136 | 0.77 | 0.911 | 0.57* | 0.961 |
| Primary education | 0.891 | 1.325 | 1.961 | 0.854 | 1.474 | 2.561 |
| High education | 0.633 | 1.093 | 0.732 | 0.684 | 0.792 | 0.714 |
| Izquierda Unida vote | — | 0.329 | — | — | — | — |
| PP vote | 3.213 | 3.293* | 1.287 | 1.926 | 1.283 | 5.894** |
| PSOE vote | 0.263 | 0.63 | 0.436 | 0.562 | 0.287* | 0.663 |
| UP vote | — | — | 0.644 | 0.477 | 0.137** | 0.238 |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 3.536 | 4.181 |
| **Onda Cero** | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 10.178** | 1.707 | 8.258*** | 5.617* | 3.511* | 2.923 |
| Age | 0.99 | 0.992 | 0.968*** | 0.992 | 0.992 | 0.997 |
| Low class | 0.865 | 0.448 | 0.901 | 1.115 | 0.948 | 1.006 |
| High class | 0.633 | 0.844 | 1.129 | 0.956 | 0.573 | 1.305 |
| Left | 0.656 | 1.752 | 0.576 | 0.513 | 0.657 | 0.51 |
| Right | 0.62 | 1.233 | 1.343 | 0.741 | 1.308 | 0.623 |
| Political interest | 1.68* | 1.102 | 1.705* | 0.986 | 0.829 | 0.571 |
| Female | 1.184 | 1.221 | 0.811 | 0.735 | 0.789 | 1.181 |
| Primary education | 1.06 | 0.79 | 1.352 | 0.329* | 0.679 | 0.492 |
| High education | 1.005 | 1.064 | 0.835 | 0.627 | 1.174 | 1.725 |
| Izquierda Unida vote | — | 0.189*** | — | — | — | — |
| PP vote | 0.464 | 1.498 | 0.773 | 0.824 | 0.632 | 0.909 |
| PSOE vote | 0.093*** | 0.252*** | 0.868 | 0.88 | 0.681 | 0.765 |
| UP vote | — | — | 0.844 | 0.567 | 0.375 | 0.299 |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 1.611 | 0.604 |
| **SER** | | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 6.252* | 1.246 | 4.287** | 5.366** | 2.313 | 2.419 |
| Age | 0.985* | 0.993 | 0.969*** | 0.985 | 0.988 | 0.982 |
| Low class | 1.134 | 1.062 | 0.84 | 0.764 | 0.925 | 0.558 |
| High class | 0.925 | 0.672 | 0.788 | 0.744 | 0.455* | 0.939 |
| Left | 1.156 | 1.953* | 1.264 | 2.225* | 1.112 | 1.416 |
| Right | 1.128 | 1.368 | 1.542 | 1.175 | 0.951 | 0.245* |
| Political interest | 1.076 | 1.121 | 1.662* | 1.206 | 1.676* | 1.443 |
| Female | 0.879 | 1.268 | 1.122 | 0.934 | 0.626* | 1.984 |
| Primary education | 0.786 | 0.986 | 1.509 | 0.739 | 1.462 | 1.053 |
| High education | 0.635 | 0.884 | 0.806 | 0.543* | 1.112 | 0.496 |
| Izquierda Unida vote | — | 1.051 | — | — | — | — |
| PP vote | 0.924 | 0.937 | 0.852 | 0.423 | 0.701 | 2.581 |
| PSOE vote | 1.708 | 2.253* | 4.973*** | 1.979 | 3.116** | 6.531** |
| UP vote | — | — | 5.267*** | 1.853 | 2.773* | 2.918 |
| VOX vote | — | — | — | — | 2.646 | 1.837 |
| *N* | 1228 | 1072 | 930 | 851 | 905 | 397 |
| McFadden R2 | 0.191 | 0.146 | 0.167 | 0.2 | 0.184 | 0.263 |

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

**Table 6.** Unified multinomial logistic regression models.

| | Press (reference category *El Mundo*) | | | Television (reference category Telecinco) | | | Radio (reference category RNE) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *ABC* | *El País* | *La Vanguardia* | Antena3 | La Sexta | TVE1 | COPE | Onda Cero | SER |
| Constant | −1.327** | 1.704*** | 0.265 | 0.487*** | −1.761*** | −0.147 | −1.574*** | 0.632* | 2.006*** |
| Age | 0.022*** | 0.001 | 0.001 | −0.004 | 0.017*** | 0.024*** | −0.007 | −0.015*** | −0.015*** |
| Low class | 0.008 | 0.161 | 0.576* | −0.090 | 0.088 | −0.171* | 0.274 | 0.014 | 0.157 |
| High class | 0.024 | −0.109 | 0.046 | 0.080 | 0.249 | 0.230 | −0.340 | −0.218 | −0.339 |
| Left | −0.582 | **0.750*** | −0.180 | **−0.272** | **0.330** | 0.045 | −0.274 | −0.133 | **0.496** |
| Right | **0.499** | **−0.372*** | −0.010 | 0.124 | −0.256 | 0.024 | **0.700*** | −0.025 | 0.210 |
| Political interest | −0.281 | −0.053 | −0.553** | 0.138* | 0.726*** | 0.066 | 0.303* | 0.021 | 0.170 |
| Female | 0.027 | 0.230 | 0.160 | −0.514*** | −0.839*** | −0.520*** | 0.076 | 0.050 | −0.006 |
| Primary education | −0.144 | 0.072 | 0.533* | −0.096 | −0.577*** | 0.045 | 0.034 | −0.201 | −0.106 |
| High education | −0.402* | 0.124 | −0.157 | 0.531*** | 0.865*** | 0.585*** | −0.159 | 0.110 | −0.196 |
| PP vote | **−0.726*** | **−2.750*** | **−2.759*** | **0.738*** | **−1.050*** | **0.383*** | **1.786*** | **0.914*** | **−1.051*** |
| Year | 0.112* | −0.011 | 0.024 | −0.017 | 0.203*** | −0.120*** | 0.255*** | −0.005 | 0.004 |
| *N* | | 2365 | | | 9594 | | | 3904 | |
| McFadden R2 | | 0.255 | | | 0.09 | | | 0.174 | |

group seems to have focused its efforts on audiences that prefer entertainment over information—a more female, younger audience with less interest in politics, and a lower level of education. In this sense, the opportunity structure for selective exposure in the Spanish television market allows the spectator to select channels based on his interest in entertainment vs. news and based on political preference. In other words, Spanish media groups have deployed efficient market strategies to cater to viewers' interests. These ranged from heavy entertainment consumers (Telecinco) to those interested in politics but with different political attitudes (left-wing in the case of La Sexta viewers, and right-wing in the case of Antena3).

An important conclusion of this study is thus that selective exposure is a structural inclination of Spanish audiences, that is, a phenomenon that remains unchanged over time regardless of the evolution of the political system and changes in the media system. In this sense, our study contributes solidity to the previous cross-sector studies that had identified politically oriented consumption of the media in Spain using bivariate techniques (Fraile & Meilán, 2012; Humanes, 2014; Martín-Llaguno & Berganza-Conde, 2001), and it does so in two ways. First, it confirms that the effect of ideology and party identification on media selection is produced by controlling other important variables associated with media consumption (socio-demographic attributes and interest in politics) through a multi-variable approach. Second, it shows that selective exposure remains a structural characteristic of Spanish audiences over an 11-year period despite two circumstances: (a) the change in the Spanish party system, which is now a multi-party system with a larger variety of political forces; and (b) the notable expansion of the media offer derived from digitalization—and including the creation of two new generalist television chains and the transformation of the television market into a duopoly—and the consolidation of much more fragmented media environments, giving the user a great deal of choice (Prior, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Despite these profound changes in the political and media landscape, Spanish audiences continue to expose themselves to media based on their ideological preferences and party affinities.

Furthermore, the results suggest that the audiences' behavior should be understood based on partisanship (and not ideology) because party identification is the most important heuristic that guides media consumption decisions for all media types. This aligns with studies of the North American context (Camaj, 2019; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Messing & Westwood, 2012). In other words, party identification has more important effects than ideology on individuals' media preferences—which confirms H2—such that the best way to predict which newspaper, radio station, or TV station citizens consume is to learn about their electoral behavior. This result is likely the consequence of the fact that party identification—and voting, its main manifestation—has

a notable level of personal relevance because it allows individuals to cognitively orient themselves and make both political (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001) and media decisions. In this sense, our research reveals that the importance of party identification is not exclusive to the North American context and is very much a factor in Spain. In fact, party identification seems to arise as a central heuristic in the context of media hybridization and fragmentation that force the user to choose between many more options.

The results of this research also suggest that some media outlets produce more polarization because they simultaneously inspire exposure and selective avoidance by certain ideological groups. This is the case with La Sexta in 2015 and 2016. UP voters expose themselves to it more frequently, while PP voters selectively avoid it. In 2016, *La Vanguardia* attracted UP and PSOE voters much more and was selectively avoided by PP voters. *El País* was preferred by PSOE and UP voters in 2008 and 2016 and selectively avoided by PP voters. The same occurred with TVE1 in 2015, as PP voters exposed themselves to it more frequently and UP voters tended to avoid it. While both selective exposure and avoidance occur simultaneously only at specific times, the existence of these media is susceptible to compromising the exposure to diversity of citizenry in the public sphere, which is vital for promoting social empathy and political tolerance (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). Furthermore, its absence carries risks of polarization. In this sense, the results remind us that political polarization has an important connection to the evolution of media ecosystems and that media and political polarization processes should be conceived of as mutually influencing phenomena (Dahlgren et al., 2019). On the one hand, politically biased journalism has been found to lead to attitude polarization (Levendusky, 2013b; Stroud, 2010). On the other, polarized political debate seems to intensify selective exposure to news media. A recent study on the Catalan independence conflict found that drivers of selective exposure are sensitive to political context. Specifically, the author determined that support for independence became increasingly important as a driver of media consumption as political polarization related to the issue of independence grew (Valera-Ordaz, 2022).

However, future research should delve further into the role of the vote as a driver of media consumption over time in order to observe whether selective exposure and avoidance increase over time and whether political and media polarization processes are similar to those described in the US (Rodriguez et al., 2017; Stroud, 2010) or those that we have begun to sense in Spain (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021; Valera-Ordaz, 2022) emerge. This is vital in a context in which the fragmentation of media offerings and increase in competition introduce incentives for communication groups to ideologically segment their content to capture and generate loyalty within specific niche audiences (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

Finally, it is worth underlining the main strengths of this research and some of its most important limitations. First, this is the first study to analyze selective exposure in Spain from a longitudinal perspective, that is, covering an 11-year time frame characterized by major changes in the political system and the information environment. In this sense, this work adds significant solidity to previous studies on selective exposure in Spain that addressed specific moments (Humanes, 2014; Martín-Llaguno & Berganza-Conde, 2001; Valera-Ordaz & Humanes, 2022), showing that political selective exposure is a well-established and persistent inclination of Spanish audiences. Second, our findings clearly show that party affinity is a stronger driver of news exposure than ideology in Spain despite the major shift that occurred in the Spanish political system. Spain's two largest political parties broke apart in 2015, giving rise to new political organizations (UP, Ciudadanos, and VOX in 2019). In spite of this, party identification was the most important factor of selective exposure to the news media during the period under study. Third, we used post-electoral surveys based on large representative samples to generalize the results to the entire Spanish population. We also used data on habitual news exposure, which is easier to generalize than single exposure measures (Stroud, 2008).

It is also important to highlight a few important limitations of the study. First, our work is based on exposure to traditional news media (television, radio, and press). We did not address the consumption of digital news products or social media platforms. As such, we were unable to assess selective exposure online, which has been found to be less powerful than expected despite the fears surrounding digital technologies (Cardenal et al., 2019). Incidental exposure and the weak ties that characterize online networks cause these spaces to serve as diversification forces, helping people to be confronted with novel information that they would not have encountered offline (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019) and providing access to more diverse news sources (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). This limitation highlights the need to conduct studies that account for the complexity of current information environments in the context of hybridization and fragmentation and the need to explore selective exposure beyond the limitations introduced by working with secondary data.

Second, the Spanish political and media context changed a great deal during the period under study (2008–2019), which led to some methodological limitations. For example, we were unable to explore the role of partisanship as a driver of news exposure beyond the PP and PSOE because the other political parties existed for only part of this period. We interpret our results as a sign of the strength of the role of partisanship as a driver of media exposure because party affinity was a significantly more important driver of selective exposure than ideology, which was entirely comparable throughout the same period. Still, future methodological designs will have to delve further into the role of political attitudes in media consumption during larger alternative time frames.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Experiencing Political Advertising Through Social Media Logic: A Qualitative Inquiry

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## Abstract

The allocation of political advertising in social media is rising in Western campaigns. Yet audiences, unlike those of television advertising, are no longer isolated and passive consumers of linear discourses from politicians; users can now interact, share, and merge political advertising with other messages. Literature has dealt with the effects of such affordances separately, yet not in an integrative, holistic way that makes it possible to observe how they interact with each other. Hence, this article explores qualitatively how users experience, engage with, and make sense of political advertising in social media, and how its affordances mediate the attitudes, responses, and meanings users bring to political advertising and its sponsors. Under the lenses of the theory of social media logic, which points out the properties of social media—popularity, programmability, datafication, and connectivity—that structure users' experiences, we conducted six focus group sessions with Mexican users ($n = 34$) during the 2021 federal campaigns. Findings show the fuzziness of digital advertising for users, which blurs with other formats like infographics or memes, the crucial role of individual linkages for advertising attention and attitude formation, a mismatch between the platform's political feed and citizens' information needs, and the tactics users perform to tame or avoid political content, disengaging them from campaigns.

## Keywords

digital advertising; digital campaigns; mediatization; political advertising; reception studies; social media logic

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

While political advertising (PA) remains the main channel of communication between politicians and citizens during campaigns, its pervasiveness on digital media heightens its relevance. Defined as "interactive content placed for a fee" (Fowler et al., 2020, p. 112), PA sustains its main goal, that is, to persuade voters for or against a candidate or party, yet new digital formats widen its original capabilities. Advertising through simple text, images, and videos abounds on websites, social media platforms, or video streaming content. Such a text could be the outcome of search-engine queries, images might display on websites or social media, and videos might pre-roll certain content or appear in a stream after a while (Fowler et al., 2022). But more than simply quantitatively increasing the channels at the disposal of campaigns, the affordances of those digital channels introduce changes to how users experience political advertisement.

Social media platforms organize "interactions between users (and are) geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 4). Thus, social media allow the generation and exchange of user-generated content (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), but their programmed directives of interaction and data-based operations "steer users' behavior" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 5). This is different from the mostly-passive role of audiences in linear television advertising, and supposedly its consequences are distinct.

Thus, while quantitative empirical research shows that social media campaigns are not that effective in winning elections (Coppock et al., 2022) or making candidates liked or followed (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013), they succeed in increasing the "amount and depth of engagement they get from citizens" (Baldwin, 2016, p. 533). Shares, likes, and comments are triggered by advertising content (Peeters et al., 2023). Off and online participation in so-called high and low threshold activities—canvassing, presence at rallies, signing petitions, etc.—are also increased by electoral social media usage (Heiss & Matthes, 2019; Vaccari et al., 2015).

What is lacking in these experiments or survey-based studies is an understanding of the meanings, "experiences, and rationales underlying people's engagement" (Swart et al., 2018, p. 4330) with digital PA. This necessitates a phenomenological approach that investigates several dimensions of that experience holistically. Under this view, multiple perspectives and the identification of the many factors involved in the situation help create a complex picture of the problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2014).

The theory of social media logic (SML) comes in handy for such an endeavor. It proposes four characteristics of social media that structure the experience of its users and, in tandem, guide them through its virtually infinite stream of content (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Users do not lose agency because of that, yet they find limits on the information they encounter, what they can do with it, and with whom they can share it (van Dijck, 2013).

We contend that exposure to PA through the affordances of social media platforms has significant consequences on how users make sense of and engage with such pieces. More importantly, they give room to users to contest advertising by tinkering with platforms and publicly rejecting campaigns' content and strategies. Though there are other theoretical proposals about the core media properties of social media (see boyd, 2010), we choose SML for it is bound to the mediatization theory, which allows us to ground the study in a phenomenological and interpretative approach, untangling how users experience PA through social media.

Thus, we present an exploratory qualitative inquiry that aims to understand how users engage with and make sense of the PA they encounter on social media and how the logic of social networks mediates the attitudes, responses, and meanings users give to advertising. This article explores the flip side of the studies that observe how campaigns maximize social media affordances. It also goes beyond important but partial quantitative accounts about specific components of social media to observe instead how they work in tandem to structure the experience of the user.

For that purpose, we used data from six online focus group sessions held during the 2021 Mexican federal election. In that way, this study contributes to countering the marginalization of qualitative studies by answering the what and how questions for certain phenom-

ena as "a precondition for developing (or, in this case, grounding) new theoretical understandings" (Karpf et al., 2015, p. 1890).

## 2. Social Media Logic in Digital Political Advertising and Campaigns

We chose SML as our working theoretical view because it stems from mediatization and media logic theories and shares its core epistemological assumptions. Mediatization is a broad process of social change where media become highly influential and deeply integrated into other institutions and practices (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Early conceptualizations in the 1970s and 1980s observed the blending of journalism's values with entertainment and popular culture (Altheide, 2004). Yet campaigns were the first activities that demonstrated the mediatization of political parties: propaganda gave way to advertisement, political messages were produced with commercial techniques, and rhetorical discourses about issues were replaced with the personalization of leaders via slogans (Mazzoleni, 1987).

To understand exactly "to what in media platforms…the institutions of society are adapting" (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 3), scholars coined the term "media logic," that is, the norms, rules, and processes of communication production that involve formats and storytelling techniques the media use in the struggle to capture people's attention (Strömbäck, 2008). Thus, entertainment, advertising, cinema, and television became the main sources of the aesthetics—frames, narratives, and styles (Hjarvard, 2008)—that shape political campaigns and messages. This logic is appropriated by audiences, normalizing aesthetic mixtures and setting expectations as to how campaigns should look (Altheide, 2004).

SML conceptualizes the next step in the mediatization process. It brings some of the characteristics of media logic as well as new factors that drive people's attention and interactions. This "refers to the processes, principles, and practices through which these platforms process information, news, and communication, and more generally, how they channel social traffic" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 5). This logic is crucial in people's experiences, including electoral ones, insofar as (social media) platforms affect "the conditions and rules of social interaction" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 3) and are "infiltrating and converging with, the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organized" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2).

Media logic and SML work in tandem. Conceptually, they are an integrative effort to synthesize into a single concept several separate media features and practices. And historically, media logic precedes SML and blends with it. Campaigns are staged by politicians and experienced by citizens mainly as media spectacles. This frame is embedded in social media campaigns' activity, along with four different elements: popularity, datafication, connectivity, and programmability.

Popularity pertains to the way platforms, through ranking devices, signal and boost items—content, other people, and ideas—that get people's attention. It is two-way traffic: "Algorithms automatically assign differentiated value, but users themselves may also engage in concerted efforts to lift certain people's visibility" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 8). Perhaps based on such features, campaigns use more positive instead of negative content and images instead of issue ads (Fowler et al., 2021). Given the popularity of memes, campaigns also implement humorous content to boost sharing and motivate content creation (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021). However, what may be deemed "popular" by social media metrics might not always be the most effective for the persuasion goals of campaigns (Baldwin, 2016).

Datafication refers "to the ability of networked platforms to render into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before" (like friending, following, liking, posting, commenting, and retweeting) and "endows social media platforms with the potential to develop techniques for predictive and real-time analytics" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 8). This leads to the personalization of the stream of content, advertising, and contact suggestions that each user gets (van Dijck et al., 2018). This is conceptualized as an "analytic turn," where campaigns use datafied behavior in digital media environments to organize and mobilize certain segments of the electorate (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). This micro-targeting feature allows campaigns to define and reach specific audiences with tailor-made ads, promote posts, and send messages about the issues those audiences care about (Fernandez, 2020). Nevertheless, though targeting usually works in terms of persuasion, users do not like to be targeted, out of concern about being manipulated (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013).

Connectivity "refers to the socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers," mediating users' activities, and defining "how connections are taking shape" (van Dijck., 2013, p. 10). It also affords networks of like-minded others, which "decide what information is relevant and passed on" (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 9). Connectivity yields two phenomena that are relevant to PA. First, it enhances a recommendation culture where personal recommendations and choices from friends might be more persuasive than advertising (although there is a hierarchy between "Facebook friends" and "real friends"; Klinger & Svensson, 2015; van Dijck, 2013). Second, connectivity stimulates campaigns to locate and sometimes hire digital opinion leaders or influencers that are paid to post content favorable to the candidate (Fernandez, 2020).

Finally, programmability is "the ability of a social media platform to trigger and steer users' creative or communicative contributions" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5) through algorithms. As simple as they seem, "these sets of instructions shape all kinds of relational activities, such as liking, favoriting, recommending, and sharing, so they steer user experiences, content, and user

relations via platforms" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5). However, users are not passive actors of these algorithms, for they can influence the flow of communication and information activated by such platforms through their interaction, resistance to coded instructions, and defiance of established protocols—changing a default setting, filling out false information, or quitting the site, for example (van Dijck, 2013). Consequently, performing in a social media environment may result in unforeseen consequences, such as losing control of discourse or facing opposition backlash (Baldwin, 2016).

Despite using SML as our primary theoretical perspective, we use other frameworks to complement those aspects that it does not cover and that are crucial to understanding users' engagement with advertising.

## 3. Specific Facebook Affordances and Social Media Cultures of Use

In spite of SML's utility, this highly abstract theory is not adapted to specific platforms, where those four components work in particular ways, yielding specific audiences, communication modalities, and content. These distinct possibilities have been conceptualized by the literature as platforms' affordances, that is, the "technical capacities and the types of communication and functionalities which campaigns believe a platform supports" (Kruschinski et al., 2022, p. 3). Users' experiences of an online campaign are not only structured by the SML but, at a lower level, by the specific communication practices each platform affords. And since Facebook is the platform where our empirical endeavor is grounded—and where campaigns pour more resources and users get more political information (Fowler et al., 2022)—we link the aforesaid four components to the affordances of this platform. This gives an extra layer of insight into the responses of the users to PA.

Facebook architecture affords fine-grained datafication. Sophisticated capabilities of matching, targeting, and analytics allow highly customizable options for campaigns to tailor messages to a mass, partisan, group, or even individual target (Bossetta, 2018; Magin et al., 2017). Regarding programmability, Facebook contemplates organic and paid media. The former allows parties to communicate with their partisan audiences, though with a limited reach, while the latter gives campaigns control of the content, timing, and target of their output, expanding their reach beyond the party's base (Kruschinski et al., 2022).

Popularization capabilities on Facebook benefit from non-restrictive rules regarding video lengths and editing options that make visual content more polished and complex, as well as "like" metrics (Bossetta, 2018). Concerning connectivity, this is boosted by the use of hyperlinks, which help drive traffic to parties' websites; a search engine, which makes it easier for users to find and subscribe to politicians' accounts (Bossetta, 2018), and a "friending" dynamic, which requires reciprocal

approval of the relationship. The latter creates a network of strong ties where more or less homogeneous users are bound by trust, empathy, and reinforcement of ideas (Valenzuela et al., 2018). This component of likemindedness is important for the influence and reach of content, which is more visible and prominent between strong ties (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2010).

On the other hand, these affordances do not imply that users respond to them as intended. Each platform is embedded in a certain *culture of use* (Rogers, 2017) where their affordances, like digital objects (likes, hashtags), are interpreted and used in particular ways, and where specific *genres* or social conventions and patterns of discourse are employed by users to coordinate their communication (Kreiss et al., 2018). Of particular importance are *folk theories*, that is, non-authoritative, "intuitive and informal theories that individuals develop to explain the outcomes, effects, or consequences of technological systems" (De Vito et al., 2017, p. 3162) in response to the "black box" algorithms platforms use and that are poorly understood by users (De Vito et al., 2018; Eslami et al., 2016). Cognitively, these systems of beliefs help people explain and predict platforms, yet in practical terms, they yield multipurpose practices that orient future behavior (Young et al., 2023). Its reliability comes from their unsystematic but tested utility and the fact that they are shared between groups and cultures at large (Rip, 2006).

In sum, social media platforms mediatize campaigns for voters and structure their experience, not only through content but also through the more immersive social experience they afford. Nonetheless, general cultures of use, folk theories, and the agency of the users moderate social media campaigns' determinations. In order to ground these assumptions empirically, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do users experience, engage with, and make sense of the PA they get through Facebook?

RQ2: How does each of the elements of the SML in Facebook mediate the attitudes, responses, and meanings users bring to PA and its sponsors?

## 4. Method

Although qualitative research on PA has not been the main approach in the field, a wave of reception studies at the beginning of the century and a recent wave of studies of micro-communities in social media demonstrate its value and inform our research design. Thus, we use the focus group technique as our main tool to explore citizens' views. Rather than generalization, this technique aims to generate "insights on the motives, experiences, and thought processes of individuals that are not obtainable through extensive methods like surveys" (Gustafsson, 2012, p. 52). By exploring "the fluid and dialogic aspects of public opinion formation" (Delli-Carpini & Williams,

1994, p. 788), participants are given the chance to articulate rich and subtle perspectives about communication.

We conducted six focus groups of five to seven members each (*n* = 34) a sufficient number of sessions to saturate themes (Gustafsson, 2012). The groups were held between May 19th and June 1st, during the Mexican midterm campaigns of 2021, when the Federal Congress was renewed, as well as local congresses and municipalities. We conducted the sessions via the online application Google Meet, since the pandemic was on the rise and strict restrictions for indoor meetings were imposed by the authorities. Sessions lasted from 60 to 70 minutes at the most.

A snowball sampling method was used to recruit respondents by contacting them through university students and acquaintances of the research team, who were asked to encourage their acquaintances to participate as well. We implemented a gender quota of 50% male and female respondents, as well as a split age cohort of people from 20 to 34 and 35 to 49, to capture millennials' and centennials' experiences in equal measure. Participants had a homogeneous composition with roughly the same level of education and income (middle class, college diploma), which facilitated discussion, though the middle class was admittedly overrepresented (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999). Thus, we used purposeful and quota sampling criteria for our sample (Örnebring & Hellekant-Rowe, 2022).

Our facilitator administered the same semi-structured questionnaire in all six sessions to allow comparability of the data. The former inquired about the kinds of PA they get through Facebook (our working platform), why they think it reaches them, what the participants think about digital advertising, how useful it is to get to know the candidates, and what makes them think about the candidates.

All sessions were recorded with the permission of the participants, transcribed, and uploaded to Nvivo 12. Coding was a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. In the former, techniques of axial coding were used. Constant comparison of simple themes allowed new categories and subcategories to emerge "in order to identify themes, concepts, and beliefs that revealed how advertising speaks to participants" (Parmelee et al., 2007, p. 188). Once those categories were established, we deductively classified them into the four categories that comprise the concept of SML (connectivity, datafication, popularity, and programmability). Thus, we applied a sequential emic (internal, native) and etic (external perspective) interpretation to the data (Jensen, 2012) in order to give room for the unexpected and then fit the findings into a theoretical rationale.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Broadening the Meaning of Political Advertising

What the majority of participants understand as PA has considerably expanded and blurred on social media.

There are of course short videos, as in conventional TV advertising, yet their format is more diverse: Aside from proposals or attacks, popular formats include videos that dub the lyrics of a popular song for the message of the campaign, homemade self-recordings of the candidates uttering their proposals, and supposedly spontaneous videos of the candidates canvassing and talking to voters on the streets ("they make videos from popular songs that candidates remaster, changing the lyrics"; Participant 5 [P5]).

But many users think of advertising in other genres, such as posts, invitations to follow a candidate, news biased against a candidate or government, Facebook "stories," infographics with proposals, endorsements by local influencers, or memes ("candidates use trendy memes to get the attention of the people"; P21). The latter involved viral memes used to promote some candidates' proposals and others targeted against certain candidates that users took as sponsored attacks: "I saw attacks through memes, which I think are geared towards the frontrunner. Just because they did something funny at an event, there follows an attack through memes'' (P17).

Thus, there is some fuzziness for users in recognizing what is paid posting or organic content. It seems to the users that every message that comes from a candidate is sponsored somehow, and much of the content shared by acquaintances has a persuasive intent. Persuasive messages are equated to sponsored ones, raising the same skepticism towards both.

At the same time, users develop attitudes toward those formats they think are advertised. For example, a participant said that the use of infographics as advertising was very helpful since they were visually appealing and instructive for learning about proposals in detail: "I learned more about the proposals through the infographics than from the videos of the candidates. They were attractive in the colors, drawings, and relevant issues" (P9).

However, a few others rejected what they thought were paid-for targeted memes or news for being too repetitive.

### 5.2. Connectivity

Shared information by "friends" is a central venue through which most of the participants pay attention and give credence to political messages. It highlights that such content should be noted, even if it is mixed with opinions or the user does not agree with it. Most of the advertising or political content that users pay attention to are the messages their contacts share publicly, particularly those engaged in campaigns. In the former case, the intention may be to persuade or to provide a simple account of their involvement in the campaign. Shared information by acquaintances is useful and a low-cost resource to raise awareness of a certain candidacy or gauge the reliability of certain content: "I have some contacts that post such advertising from candidates, so they

keep me informed about everything that's happening in the campaigns" (P19).

The latter grows with the closeness and esteem of the relationship. "Friends" who are deemed smart or trustworthy deserve users' attention: "If I trust that person or deem her intelligent, maybe I can believe that what she is recommending or suggesting to me is interesting, then I will check it out" (P7).

This is somewhat lower with acquaintances and almost negligible with unknown contacts. As a general rule, the closer the relationship between the contact who shares the information and the user, the greater the level of attention, reflection, and sharing. They surpass parties or candidates by a wide margin, who, for most of the participants, do not deserve users' attention: "When advertising comes directly from parties, I do not pay attention, but when it comes from an acquaintance, I share it or at least read what it is about" (P12).

On the other hand, the geographical placement of such connections plays a central role in PA awareness, consumption, and even credibility. When messages about a certain candidate are shared or endorsed by someone from the neighborhood or urban zone, some users pay attention and give them credence. This signals, they think, that the candidate is interested in the needs of the community. Conversely, videos posted by candidates canvassing or walking through local neighborhoods prove, for those participants, the effort candidates make to know firsthand the needs of the people and communicate their proposals on the streets: "When candidates post videos interacting with the community, you can tell what they are up to, for better or worse. I think that is useful" (P13). This is reinforced by the endorsements of local influencers, who make users pay attention to ads. The local origin of the influencer is important since that makes it more likely to "follow" her on Facebook.

Nevertheless, skeptic or even cynical attitudes mediate such practices, and strategies are deployed to validate the political content that a "friend" shares. Some voters screen some sources to avoid being manipulated by them. They ask themselves what is behind the person who shared the content, i.e., if it stems from authentic party support or perhaps she will profit from that—by getting a benefit or landing a job in the government after the election, for example ("some neighbors do it—post a candidate's content—because they want to profit if that candidate wins"; P23). They also check if their contacts are endorsing local candidates from the districts where they live, which gives it authenticity. Bias from the source is detected if the shared content is unsubtle, that is, too negative in terms of frequency, intensity, and generalization of the attacks: "Acquaintances and acquaintances of acquaintances seem to have the intent to manipulate us; they share attacks and wrongdoings from candidates'' (P11).

Similarly, some participants thought of influencers as "mercenaries" who sold themselves to the campaign

because of the number of followers they had and the reach of their messages but did not share the candidate's ideology.

## 5.3. Datafication

The advertising most users encounter on Facebook matches their profile, suggesting that data-driven microtargeting is in motion. A majority of the voters get direct advertising pertaining to the districts or municipalities where they live instead of general advertising from the parties ("I got some advertising in Facebook about the municipality where I live"; P31). Also, during campaigns, advertising appears on the groups they belong to, mainly on those that deal with political or social subjects. Additionally, most of the participants have noticed that the issues included in the advertising they encounter are tailored to their interests and age and are different from what their parents receive:

> I follow some news sites that report about abortion, and I have realized that if I follow those pages on Facebook, I suppose it finds out that I am interested in that subject and starts to post advertising about it. (P2)

This feature is deemed useful since it matches campaign issues to users' interests and gets their attention. Some participants think that ads are very precise in offering information about the issues and proposals they are interested in.

Nevertheless, a few users notice mistargeting issues that may come from a glitch in the platform datafication. For example, voters get ads from candidates who ran for other states instead of their own or do not get any sponsored political messages in their feedback or any political content at all, even if they like politics ("I don't get local advertising in social media, I get it from other states but not from where I live"; P25). A handful of voters said they only got negative memes about a popular candidate from another local race who became a national celebrity.

## 5.4. Popularity

Here, we delved into the kind of political content that the platform signals as popular, or else tries to elicit attention and engagement from the users, that is, to increase its popularity.

Meaning about the digital context matters in this subject. Facebook is characterized by some interviewees as the platform for the lay citizen: It is informal, personal, and depoliticized. They think that people tend not to post or share political content there. The tone of the comments is casual and playful and not as insightful as Twitter, for instance: "Facebook is for all kinds of people. You can see other kinds of content that is not too formal, like politics. My friends do not post about politics there'' (P27).

However, even if the platform is perceived as thin on political content, it is the primary source of exposure to PA for most of the users, more than Twitter or Instagram, second only to posters on the streets, and far more relevant than television, a medium rarely used by the sample's participants.

That characterization sets the stage for the kind of advertising that grabs the attention of most of the users, that is, is popular with them. On the one hand, there is advertising produced by candidates that features peculiar proposals, such as bringing the rock band Metallica to its city, videos from events featuring rock bands or celebrities, adapted viral memes, or entertaining ads, such as candidates singing. On the other hand, there are third-party videos of other users mocking certain candidates for trivial things, such as being bad dancers. Moreover, since attention spans for political messages are low, even little details are crucial for messages to be noticed. Flashy colors, insightful slogans, the production values of the ads, or catchy jingles make users stop and check those messages ("I liked the candidate's catchy song; that hooked me, and from then on, I started to follow him"; P16).

Nonetheless, such tactics do not grant support to candidates. Those pieces are consumed for the sake of being amusing without yielding any political persuasion or insight: "Those ads are entertaining, for sure. They are well-crafted and engaging. But they do not make you think. They (the candidates) just want you to like them'' (P6).

Additionally, some criticism arose for those content features. Firstly, a participant said that differences in the ads are negligible since the agenda and proposals are the same from party to party and between election cycles. Secondly, some participants think that the fact that candidates cling to current issues, popular memes, and popular songs to dub them with their messages shows that those politicians are interested in getting the attention of young voters, but in an unoriginal, opportunist, and cynical way: "I think politicians support some issues like feminism or the environment just because they want you to vote for them. That does not convey who they really are, and it raises doubts about their integrity" (P32).

Lastly, users saw content that featured candidates who are celebrities, like singers, actors, and *luchadores* (Mexican wrestlers), as well as candidates who show themselves singing, dancing, or making jokes. One participant showed disagreement and even disgust with the profiles of those candidates and the things they did in their videos. He said they are unfit and incapable of governing and just try to distract from the real problems that the nation is facing.

All of these ad features and content make a few of the participants think that the campaigns are sophisticated in form but devoid of substance and that they eschew information about the issues, proposals, and candidate profiles that would help voters to be more knowledgeable when they cast their votes.

## 5.5. Programmability

Programmability features allow most of the users to not only like, comment on, or share political ads, as mentioned above, but mostly to avoid PA or content in general. This is due to their feeling of being saturated by political messages during the campaign, both because of the frequency of the ads and the fact that the same pieces are displayed time and again. Therefore, a majority of the users deploy their agency and enact practices to reduce saturation or avoid campaign messages, which vary in their simplicity and affordability in terms of technical expertise.

The simplest action for certain users is to ignore PA or shut down Facebook for a while to rest or "detox" from it, though this expresses a high level of saturation. The next level of complexity is using the tools the platform gives for avoiding unwanted messages, like selecting the option "is not interesting to me" for the political sort of advertising. Furthermore, some users also tinker with the platform features, like changing privacy configurations to exclude people involved directly in campaigns or that are highly politicized, or "unfollowing" those contacts or groups that share an excess of PA and saturate users ("I even had two contacts that posted a lot about politics, time and again, and I unfollowed them because I felt overwhelmed"; P26). In the most complex and demanding manner, a participant who does not like politics does not interact with political content at all. She is careful not to follow, comment on, or like any piece in order not to draw the attention of the platform and trigger advertising deployment from it ("I try not to follow any party, react, or comment on anything that has to do with politics"; P3).

Nevertheless, some of those actions do not stop advertising from appearing on some users' feeds, generating frustration among them. Hence, some participants feel that Facebook abuses its users, since a bit of interaction with political content, like notifications or news, triggers the massive deployment of more notifications, biased news, or advertising on their feeds. Participants said that liking a meme makes parties send out posts and invitations to users or bombard them with advertising, even if the party portrayed or attacked in the meme is different: "I gave a like to that candidate, and out of nowhere all of their posts appeared, even a recently published video. Facebook's algorithms make it so that if you like anything, they bombard you with posts" (P17).

In another example, clicking news about certain subjects, such as Covid-19, triggered a political ad about how a party had donated its budget to the government to buy vaccines. This was understood by a participant as opportunistic and in bad taste by the sponsor (party).

Furthermore, the platforms allow so-called "intruder bots" to appear in the groups they are subscribed to, even if they have nothing to do with politics. There is an anecdote of a user who saw a post from a bot in a football group encouraging members to check the propos-

als of a candidate. Some of the members issued a complaint to Facebook about this kind of post because it had nothing to do with the subject of the group. These practices annoy participants and generate anger and rejection toward candidates and politicians in general.

On the contrary, some users recognize that the platforms do give them options to filter the advertising, so they feel they have some degree of control.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we sought to explore how users experience, engage with, and make sense of PA they get through on social media and how the components of the SML and specific Facebook affordances mediate such processes.

Overall, it is important to stress that the meaning of PA is distinct in social media. It has either expanded for users, since they recognize a myriad of formats and types of political content as such, or is rather fuzzy. We think this is due to the difficulty for users to differentiate between paid-for content and spontaneous feeds, but there is also a folk theory in place, under which sources—candidates—are regarded as sponsors and the platform as an unrestricted marketplace. Users may think that most political messages are nothing but funded persuasion attempts, equating persuasive messages with sponsored ones. Since the former raises a cautionary approach to the messages from users—that entails scrutiny in order not to be manipulated by them—that fuzzy quality makes many political formats and messages susceptible to skepticism, reducing opportunities for engagement.

Thus, the SML components are not the only factors that structure the meaning of PA, but so are their beliefs about how they work. In addition, the intermingling of paid and organic political content makes it difficult to determine whether participants are reacting to genuine advertising or any campaign content. However, we stick to the emic (native) meaning of PA, a core qualitative principle, and, from that on, we can explain how SML elements shape the experience and meaning of it.

Firstly, Facebook's strong-ties connectivity heavily mediates how users approach advertising, for connections make users pay attention and further engage with it. The like-mindedness of the contacts plays a part but is not a clear-cut criterion. Yet the closer the contact is, in both affective and geographical terms, the higher the credibility of the messages, which are thought of as "good," reliable advertising. In that way, local PA bridges users' community politics to parties and elections. By analyzing how users screen contacts' authenticity and sincerity, as well as the rejection of influencers, this category reveals that a recommendation culture is not only influenced by proximity but also by skepticism and distrust of political leaders and political persuasion.

Secondly, Facebook's high capabilities of targeting make advertising geographically precise and drive the

content to groups and preferred issues. Nonetheless, the downside is that the target is so precise that they think candidates are cynically courting them and do not have a genuine interest in a given issue. Mistargeting is a problematic issue too, when users get advertising from other states or districts, blaming the candidates for promoting themselves outside their constituencies. In this way, a technical failure from the platform and a perceived malpractice from the sponsor render micro-targeting a potential source of negativity from users.

Thirdly, popularization shows a major failure of targeting since the algorithm seems to post flashy content to at least mildly politicized citizens who expect political substance instead of entertainment and political logic instead of media logic (Altheide, 2004). It also shows how the platforms' algorithms reveal a contradiction between consumers and citizens since content that would be popular by social media standards seems disliked by citizens. Thus, as previously stated, strategies from platforms could be counterproductive to the persuasion goals of the campaigns. Yet, citizens seem to attribute those grievances to candidates and not platforms.

Finally, in terms of programmability, all of SML features and Facebook's affordances do "steer" the users' experience, but the latter show a high degree of agency by enacting tactics to regulate the flow of content. Moreover, they blame the platform for their frustration, feel intrusion by it, and believe that their right to privacy is being violated, as the literature reports (Fowler et al., 2020). The downside or "unforeseen consequence" (Baldwin, 2016) is that some of that blame goes to the candidate sponsors, while the issues stem from the platforms and not the campaigns.

To conclude, our holistic approach to campaigns and PA reveals many interconnected factors that influence the meaning and engagement of political ads. As a result of SML, more formats are available for users' engagement with political advertisements, some of which have specific properties, such as entertaining content. Additionally, engagement is linked to close-knit connections that raise attention to advertising and shape mostly favorable attitudes towards it. When associated with like-minded acquaintances and local politics, advertising is meaningful and authentic. Moreover, users can get advertising tailored to their locations and issue preferences, which makes it convenient and on the spot. These elements are particularly relevant in low political involvement scenarios where citizens use primarily peripheral cues to make electoral decisions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Nevertheless, SML sometimes also disengages users from advertising and political content; yet, this is influenced by the local political culture, which is characterized in this case by distrust and cynicism. Under the role of citizens, participants complain about a mismatch between the platform's media logic display and their information needs. Some users exert their agency to avoid PA when they feel saturated. Precise targeting or mistargeting elicits attitudes towards manipulation attempts by politicians. A wide contact network brings about what they think are manipulative and insincere contacts, as well as sold-out influencers, who make ads unworthy.

All in all, users do not adequately separate the actions of the platform from those of the sponsors. Given the general lack of trust in politicians (Echeverría & Mani, 2020), some platforms' failures and features could end up damaging the candidate's reputation or that of politicians at large.

In terms of methods, further research will be able to expand our design and findings to other social media platforms, looking for differences and similarities. Also, scholars can complement the focus groups with in-depth interviews to avoid group thinking and bias. Of course, these propositions could be tested with experimental and survey-based techniques for nomothetic validity. Additionally, more work can be done to observe how political culture interacts with SML, particularly the way some negative beliefs beget certain platform practices. As for the characteristics of the ads, popular content seems to be close to entertainment techniques and stimuli, whose implications deserve further research. Of course, the blurring or mingling of traditional advertising with other online formats should be investigated in more depth.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Technopopulism and Politainment in Brazil: Bolsonaro Government's Weekly YouTube Broadcasts

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## Abstract

Digital platforms have become powerful weapons in the hands of many politicians. In search for disintermediation of information, Jair Messias Bolsonaro found in social networks a new space to interact with his voters. With a communication strategy primarily online, the former president of Brazil had social profiles on all platforms and has transformed these channels into official government sources, in a campaign whose goal was to discredit the traditional media and occupy the place of speech of these social actors. This article analyzed Bolsonaro's weekly live streams, made available on his YouTube channel in order to study the technopopulism undertaken by Bolsonaro. Through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis, 121 videos (with a total duration of 83 hours and 58 minutes) were examined, from March 7, 2019, when the president of Brazil began doing the weekly YouTube broadcasts, until May 11, 2022, when this research was planned. The results indicate that the themes addressed in the live streams have influenced the disinformation process in Brazil and especially the hate attacks against important Brazilian democratic institutions. The speeches of resentment against the press, the Supreme Court, and the opposition parties are constant in Bolsonaro's weekly programs. Finally, this article concluded that Bolsonaro's communicative strategy on YouTube is an example of technopopulism based on the manipulation of public opinion with the dissemination of propaganda favorable to the government, and veiled attacks on all kinds of enemies of the current system in place as a true example of right-wing populist government.

## Issue

This article is part of the issue "Political Communication in Times of Spectacularisation: Digital Narratives, Engagement, and Politainment" edited by Salvador Gómez-García (Complutense University of Madrid), Rocío Zamora (University of Murcia), and Salomé Berrocal (University of Valladolid).

## 1. Introduction: State of the Art and the Construction of Technopopulism in the Current Brazilian Context

Challenging traditional models of information flow (Anastácio, 2017), the interactivity of digital platforms has initiated a debate about quality and credibility in the digital age, which has resulted in a social process of eliminating intermediaries and has led to the disintermediation of information, journalistic disintermediation, and disintermediation of communicative processes (Katz, 1988; Lafrance, 1997; Zallo, 2016), whose effect of the "network society" resonates in the spheres of communication, economy, culture, and, of course, politics (Sousa, 2004). While journalists lose their monopoly on the fourth estate, governors take advantage of the available modes of disintermediation to communicate directly with voters (Bruns & Highfield, 2015), in a clear commodification process of public political life (Larrondo et al., 2016; Manning et al., 2017), which turns them into influencers (Street, 2012; Wheeler, 2013).

Thus, online communication and the interactivity of digital platforms have brought to the globalized world a critical infrastructure from a political, economic, and organizational point of view, in which the echoes of

public and private conversation coexist (Salaverria et al., 2019). With the new ways of telling the facts and the expressive speed employed in these transmissions, a myriad of processes of disinformation, disintermediation of journalism, and manipulation of public opinion, never seen before, have been produced (Arce-García et al., 2019). Attentive to the trends of the post-truth era, many politicians, such as Jair Messias Bolsonaro in the presidency of Brazil, have begun, through social networks, to seek autonomy in their speeches and mainly, to mark their appearances in unusual spaces in political communication (Pérez et al., 2018). We are facing the so-called "new populism," also known as technopopulism, digital populism, or cyberpopulism, which has the same characteristics of traditional populism, except that the leader no longer takes into account the institutions of social intermediation and uses digital media to be in direct contact with society and voters.

Besides that, in this new context of cyberpopulism, the need to demoralize the service provided by the media and journalists and to occupy the other's place of speech was increasingly shown as a clear and evident trend in the social profiles of public and influential characters in the world such as President Bolsonaro and the then President of the US Donald Trump (Di Nubila, 2021). The communicative strategy of these new populisms is based on the following premises: the rejection of the rules of democracy, production and dissemination of hate and disinformation, an anti-corruption and anti-elite discourse, and the presence of conspiracy theories (Sánchez Frías, 2022). With the adoption by these politicians of a modus operandi based primarily on online, direct, objective, and intimate communication with voters (Benkler et al., 2018), it was noted that the bombardment of information on digital platforms created an environment of competition with conventional media (Almeida, 2019).

The use of fake news in political campaigns is nothing new, but, in some cases, it has become clear that technology, such as data segmentation and bots, were being used to spread false information in order to persuade undecided voters. This type of political strategy gained momentum in 2016, during the election of Donald Trump in the US, carried out with the help of the strategy firm Cambridge Analytica. This company has also been active in more than 100 election campaigns on five continents, including the presidential election campaign in Kenya in 2013, Nigeria (2015), the Czech Republic (2018), and Malaysia (2013). Donald Trump made a point of criticizing the mainstream media and used social media and "alternative" media to spread his speech. He invariably accused journalists of misinforming the population. Trump's tweets also focused on his political opponents. Aware of the discontent with the Obama administration, the businessman spread several fake news stories about Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party. From stories such as that Barack Obama was allegedly born outside the US to arms sales to the Islamic state and cases of pederasty. Trump has spared no effort to smear his opponent. As for the God code, Donald Trump did not directly use religious speech, but said that his opponents were anti-Catholic, as an attack (Danelli, 2020).

Focusing on the case of Bolsonaro in the phase prior to his arrival to the presidency of the Republic of Brazil, Mello (2020) highlights how the traditional media offered a critical image of this military man who was described as polarizing, populist, and with an extreme-directed ideology. Thus, the large Brazilian media groups became one of the biggest obstacles to the audacious electoral objectives of Bolsonaro, a permanent conflict, which always had the purpose of shielding the politician against criticism, undermining the confidence of the interlocutors in the communication process (Mello, 2020; Santana & Archegas, 2022).

With this troubled and long-standing relationship, the constant attacks between the parties became even more visible during Bolsonaro's candidacy for the presidency of the country, which led the politician's team to adopt a communication strategy focused primarily on digital, thus availing itself of the advice of Steve Bannon, the strategist who took Donald Trump to the White House in the US (Benkler et al., 2018). With Bolsonaro's tactical shift (he was the only candidate who did not rely on traditional political marketing techniques during the 2018 presidential election), it was realized that the bombardment of information in closed networks such as WhatsApp created a competing environment with the mainstream media, placed partially under suspicion by the politician himself and his allies.

Social media platforms have become powerful weapons for Bolsonaro who has come to embody the figure of a technopopulist leader. Technopopulism is understood as the system that articulates the manipulation of public opinion and of the digital mass of frustrated and isolated individuals through algorithms and big data, fomenting anger and extremism (Da Empoli, 2019). Rather than creating consensus around an ideology, technopopulists operate by creating chaos and dissensus to foment hate and manipulate digital engagement. The term *technopopulism* appeared in the 1990s and referred to the emergence of anti-system political parties in a context of expansion and technological development.

If in the analog version, populism depended heavily on the leader's personal charisma, especially his oratory ability (Cesarino, 2007); in the digital version, this central figure puts and distributes his own populist mechanism so that his followers spontaneously reproduce it. This fractalization has come to be potentiated in an unprecedented way by the digital character of social media, in particular its ability to, on the one hand, produce equivalence between originally disconnected individuals, and, on the other, produce difference and polarization through digital bubbles (Gerbaudo, 2018). Authors like Rosa (2021) point out that the new marketers of technopopulism have learned how to use digital

language to mobilize the gigantic (depoliticized and disjointed) energy of contemporary mobs in favor of their political and ideological agendas, not by creating adherence, but by fostering dissent. And that is exactly how, with this movement, Bolsonaro and his supporters have risen to the category of prosumers, consumer users, and content creators (Tapscott, 2010).

The propaganda in favor of candidate Bolsonaro occurred spontaneously, through live broadcasts, via internet, made by advisors and participants of the events. With a simple and interactive dynamic, basically working as a kind of repeater station, the voters felt empowered by not only being receivers of news, but also propagators of the campaign's movements. The overall result was an explosion of information, some of it decontextualized and even false (Almeida, 2019). Much of this content fell into the category of fake news, in the broad sense of the term (Tandoc et al., 2018): fake news, conspiracy theories, offensive and slanderous material against certain people or groups, urgent and alarmist warnings, distorted or taken out of context statements—in other words, messages that would hardly circulate with such amplitude, speed, and capillarity in traditional forums of the public sphere such as the professional press, where there is greater publicity and social and legal control.

In addition to the term fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and post-truth have also gained prominence in the vocabulary of communication experts, and show the relevance that information, obtained through social networks, has acquired these days. In addition to the bombardment of information in a virtual environment, the veracity of facts has become constantly questioned and, as a result, it has become increasingly necessary to check whether the information received is actually true and accurate. Although misinformation is defined as "the dissemination of incomplete, inaccurate, or misleading information that aims to deliberately or intentionally lie about something" (Fetzer, 2004, pp. 228–231), for some authors such as Wardle & Derakhshan (2017), it can probably be harmless and treated as ignorance regarding a subject. As in postmodernity, there is no longer any absolute truth; the spreading of false news leads to the trivialization of lies, and consequently to a fertile ground for the construction of post-truth, a phenomenon that privileges subjective and emotional discourse to the detriment of reason and facts (Estrada-Cuzcano et al., 2020), making the communication disseminated through social networks an ideal place for the proliferation of beliefs and ideologies.

With this trend on the rise, the scenario of intolerance to diversity of thought and political polarization (right and left) have been significantly rearranged in the 2018 Brazilian electoral context (Aggio, 2020). The technopopulist mechanism was put into operation. The idea of leadership, which emerges in contexts of widespread dissatisfaction and stands as a paladin of rupture and change, was launched (Cesarino, 2020). Sponsored by the Social Liberal Party and presented to the population as an anti-system candidate and defender of family values, Bolsonaro contested the second round of the general elections with Fernando Haddad, candidate of the left, representing the Workers' Party and managed to be elected with the support of 55.1% of the valid votes.

"Bolsonarism" was born as a political project of "anti-political'' nature that, besides incorporating classic traits of populism, presents some peculiarities in its design of attacking and degrading democratic and republican institutions with the ultimate goal of concentrating political legitimacy in the figure of the leader (Avritzer, 2020). After all, this is how populist politicians see themselves, as the only true representatives of the people's interests (Fitzi et al., 2019; Müller, 2019; Tormey, 2019). Bolsonaro has thus laid the foundations of a government based on a public image on and off social media, which combines verbal aggression with identity agendas, hate attacks, and the dissemination of fake news (Nascimento et al., 2018).

The technopopulism practiced by Bolsonaro during the 2018 election campaign worked so well that, since the first months of his government (January and February 2019), the president has further reinforced his communication strategy based on politainment and the use of social media as his official sources, diversifying his activities on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube (Cesarino, 2020). Seeking a radical change in the intermediation between politicians and the media, the new president promoted his YouTube channel, encouraging his followers to turn off the television and inform themselves only by his weekly lives (shown from March 2019 onwards), in an explicit intention to build an exclusive channel with his electorate (Recuero et al., 2017).

The use of social media as a political weapon has already been studied by different authors (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, 2019; Lacalle et al., 2023) in a large number of countries. Concrete examples such as Trump's victory in the US (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Journell, 2017), the Brexit in the UK (Kucharski, 2016), and the Mexican elections in 2018 (Magallón, 2019) have already been analyzed and the strategy of disinformation through social media for the purpose of manipulating public opinion in democratic processes has been demonstrated. The case of Bolsonaro has been treated by authors such as Almeida (2019), Cesarino (2020), and Di Nubila (2021). However, there is a lack of works that focus on the case of the Liberal Party leader's technopopulist practice on YouTube. That is why this research intends to investigate the weekly lives posted by Bolsonaro's YouTube account, published on his channel from March 7, 2019, when Bolsonaro, as president of Brazil, began weekly broadcasts, until May 11, 2022, when this study was planned. The objective of this study is to analyze the content and presentation of the messages propagated in the lives as an example of politainment with the aim of confirming and pointing out characteristics of Bolsonaro's "technopopulism."

## 2. Methodology

In order to investigate Bolsonaro's political discourse communication strategy during the weekly lives posted by his YouTube account, as already mentioned in this article, all Bolsonaro's weekly lives were analyzed, from March 7, 2019 (the date on which the president went to his social networks and said he would perform this periodic programming) to May 11, 2022 (the time when this research was plotted). The sample was finally composed of 121 distributed chronologically as follows: 31 from 2019, 38 from 2020, 38 from 2021, and 14 from 2022. The average duration of these videos is 43 minutes (*M* = 42'41" and *SD* = 16'49"). For the analysis of Bolsonaro's weekly live videos, an analysis sheet was used, divided into categories, in order to trace qualitative and quantitative characteristics regarding each video made available on Bolsonaro's personal account. The variables included in the analysis were based on the literature review, adapting categories described in previous research (Cordeiro Da Silva, 2020; De Oliveira & De Vargas, 2021; Santos de Moraes & Silva, 2021), according to the analysis of a previous sample of 25 videos. Thus, the aim was to describe certain informative characteristics present in Bolsonaro's lives, through a description and quantification of its thematic components, typology of messages transmitted, the presence of a certain type of guests, the scenarios chosen, and the type of production that occurred. To achieve these ends, the analysis sheet was composed of identification variables (number of unit of analysis [UA], date, link), duration, user interaction (number of likes, views, and comments), subject matter (national politics, international politics, Covid-19, economy, criticism of the opposition and the press), presence of guests, audiovisual format (scenario, production, types of shots, camera movement, use of signs), and type of message (generating fear, reinforcing stereotypes, fostering resentment, people against the elite). The interaction variables (or the interaction features) were quantitative scale variables, while the remaining variables were qualitative nominal variables. A statistical study was performed with the SPSS program, which provided descriptive and inferential results, providing the significance level (*p*).

The search was restricted to links found on the social network in question. Due to the policy adopted by the digital platform to take off the air videos that violate the company's internal rules and also go against Brazilian legal precepts, some links have no audiovisual content, just a warning for rule violation and consequent removal from the air.

The sample was fully coded by two coders and then tested for intercoder reliability by having 50 videos (42% of the total sample) viewed by a third coder. An average agreement coefficient value of over 80% was found, as indicated by Igartua (2006), in order for the data to be reliable. This author points out that the determination of the degree of agreement is particularly appropri-

ate when using categorical variables, that is, those that adopt a nominal level of measurement, as was the case with the variables analyzed.

## 3. Results

In more than half of the videos (65.3%), the setting chosen was the Brazilian leader's office, while the making of the videos stood out for their simplicity, as they were always made with a single camera, a general shot and without camera movement. Regarding the topics covered, an average of five themes were explored in each video, highlighting national and international politics, the economy, attacks on the press, and the Covid-19 pandemic (see data in Table 1).

**Table 1.** Main topics.

| Subject | % | *N* |
|---|---|---|
| National | 100 | 118 |
| Opposition | 91.5 | 108 |
| International | 81.4 | 96 |
| Economy | 76.3 | 90 |
| Criticism of the press | 73.7 | 87 |
| Covid-19 | 50.8 | 60 |
| Praise for the press | 30.5 | 36 |

On the other hand, a characteristic of Bolsonaro's lives was the presence of guests, who participated in 84% of the videos. Among them, the most frequent were government ministers (53.4%), the military (28.8%), and economic representatives (20.3%). Far behind, physicians participated with 5.1%. Also, the presence of a sign interpreter was also common (92.4%). Regarding the gender of the guests, it was found that the vast majority were men, being the only ones present in 89% of the lives, while there were only women guests in 4% of the programs and guests of both genders in 6%.

Only 1% of the videos had no guests. On two occasions that he had female guests (UA 25, UA 66), it was to talk about the Indigenous people, in relation to their economic development and that they were effectively treated with hydroxychloroquine. On another occasion, he received as a guest a woman, affiliated to his party, and running for mayor of Recife. She is the sister of a naval officer, and therefore in favor of civil-military schools. Finally, on November 9, 2020 (UA 64), he invited a girl who stated that she would get vaccinated against Covid-19 only if the relevant bodies such as Anvisa approve the use of the vaccine. The guest commented that she did not like the word "misogyny." Bolsonaro concluded that the audience of his live videos had to be heterosexuals like her to have a future.

The four occasions in which women were invited were videos in which the national economy was discussed ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 11,100$), resentment was used ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 6,396$), and the message of the people

against the elite did not appear ($p < 0.01$, $\chi^2(1) = 14,048$) as well as no discussion of racism was visualized in the scope of the investigation.

No statistical association was detected between most types of messages and the presence or absence of guests in the videos. Thus, the type of topic covered (education, health, economy, army, etc.) and whether the video included messages of fear, stereotypes, or criticism of the press were independent of whether the video had a guest or not. On the other hand, an association was detected between two types of messages and the presence or absence of guests. In the first case, a tendential association was detected between the presence of guests and the dissemination of messages of resentment ($p < 0.1$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,443$). Thus, issues were dealt with resentfully to a greater extent when there were guests than when there were not. Specifically, 85.9% of the videos with guests conveyed messages of resentment, while only 68.4% of the videos without guests did so.

Secondly, a statistically significant association was detected between the presence of guests and the message of "the people against the elite" ($p < 0.01$, $\chi^2(1) = 7,737$). This message was broadcast in 26.3% of the videos without guests, compared to 6.1% of the videos with guests.

Breaking down these results by the possible types of guests, statistical association was detected in several cases. Thus, the presence of physicians was associated with health care messages ($p < 0.01$, $\chi^2(1) = 7,569$). In 83.3% of the times that physicians were invited, healthcare topics were discussed, while only in one case was a physician invited to discuss other issues. This was UA 10, a video published on May 10, 2019, in which education, economy, and army issues were discussed. Similarly, the presence of military personnel was associated with some treatment of issues of racism, which although statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 5,026$), referred to only two cases in which the invitation to a military member entailed addressing this issue, compared to 32 cases in which military personnel were invited and not addressed.

The use of resentment was also associated with a greater presence of the military in the videos ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 4,156$). Thus, resentment was spoken in 94.1% of the occasions in which members of the military participated in the videos, "only" appearing in 78.6% of the videos in which military members were not present. In contrast, the participation of economic specialists was associated with less recourse to resentment, which appeared in 86.2% of the videos in which economists were not present, compared to 70.8% of those in which they did ($p < 0.1$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,195$). In addition, military guests were also more frequent in international topics, as this topic was discussed in 91.3% of the videos with military personnel, compared to 77.4% of videos without military personnel, resulting in a trend-type association ($p < 0.1$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,037$).

The military also appeared more often in messages that did not include fear (64.7%) than when they

did (35.3%), again a statistically significant association ($p < 0.1$, $\chi^2(1) = 2,834$). In contrast, economic guests were more common when fear was used (66.7%) than when it was not (33.3%), a statistically significant association ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 4,458$). Inviting economic specialists was associated at the trend level ($p < 0.1$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,687$) with a lower probability of criticizing the press, since when specialists in this area were invited, criticism of the press occurred in 58% of the cases, compared to 77.7% when there were no economic guests.

The "people against the elite" argument was used to a greater extent when neither ministers ($p < 0.1$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,325$) nor military personnel ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 4,910$) were invited, so that this idea appeared in only 4.8% of the videos in which ministers took part and never when military personnel appeared, while it was present in 14.5% of the videos in which ministers did not appear and 13.1% in which military personnel were not invited.

As for the types of messages that were disseminated, the presence of components qualified in previous research as populist messages was detected. Thus, 83% of the messages had a resentment component, that is, in which the rival was treated as an enemy, subversive or even terrorist. In addition, 73% of the videos tried to discredit the media and journalists, while fearmongering was used in almost half of the units analyzed (47.5%). Information classified as "fake news" was disseminated in 29.7% of the videos, and the argument "people against the elite" appeared in 9.3% of the videos (see data in Table 2). Messages that included resentment were coded as UA 88, a video from July 24, 2021, in which Bolsonaro refers to Lula da Silva as a "thief" and to the press as "shameless liars who want to suck from the government teat, to make money with advertising funds." Within this category, the video of October 16, 2020 (UA 62) in which Bolsonaro claims that the Worker's Party used to help other countries with money from the National Bank for Economic and Social Development was also categorized: "We are fighting against the corruption of former governments. In my government there is no corruption.''

**Table 2.** Typology of messages.

| Message | % | N |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Resentment | 83.1 | 98 |
| Press | 72.9 | 86 |
| Fear | 47.5 | 56 |
| Fake news | 29.7 | 35 |
| People against the elite | 9.3 | 11 |

It was detected that certain topics were related to the use of a certain type of messages. Thus, a statistically significant association ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2(1) = 22,289$) was found between the use of fear and the topics of healthcare, Covid-19 ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2(1) = 41,766$), and racism. Such

that 78.9% of the videos on healthcare and 76.7% of the videos on Covid-19 used fear, whereas fear was only used in 32.5% of the videos that did not discuss healthcare and 17.2% of those that did not discuss Covid-19. Similarly, the only two videos that dealt with racism included the fear component.

Half of the videos in which the opposition was criticized used fear, while when it was not criticized, fear was only alluded to in 20% of cases, an association that turned out to be only trendy ($p < 0.1$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,303$). Fear was also used in 53% of the videos in which the press was criticized, compared to 32.3% of those in which it was not criticized, a statistically significant association ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,896$). Examples of the use of fear include the video of September 16, 2021 (UA 95) in which it is stated that the World Health Organization has recommended not to vaccinate young people aged 12 to 17 years from Covid-19, or that of April 1 of the same year that related how the number of poor people were increasing due to confinement. The October 14, 2021 (UA 98) video recalls how Bolsonaro warned from the beginning of the pandemic that the economy would be affected by the blockade and that this would cause the population to go hungry and out of work. It was also common for the Brazilian president to blame mainly the press for generating fear against him, for example, by accusing him of not having bought syringes or lacking intubation kits (UA 78, March 25, 2021). Thus, in UA 70 (December 7, 2021) he literally states that "the media creates fear in the population with all this disinformation."

Recourse to resentment was more likely in videos dealing with the topics of the army ($p < 0.01$, $\chi^2(1) = 7,669$), education ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,838$), international ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2(1) = 15,610$), opposition ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2(1) = 30,857$), press criticism ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 10,261$), economy ($p < 0.01$, $\chi^2(1) = 8,479$), and, less recurrent in the videos, on health ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 5,732$). Thus, resentment was included in 95.5% of the videos on the army, 92.5% on education, 89.6% on international issues, 88.9% of those criticizing the political opposition, 89.7% of those criticizing the press, 86.1% on economy, compared to 75.7% of those that did not allude to the army, 78.5% of videos that did not deal with education, 54.5% on international issues, 20.0% on the opposition, 64.5% that did not criticize the press, 50% that did not report on the economy. On the other hand, the videos that reported on health included resentment "only" 71.1% of the time, compared to 88.8% of the videos that did not talk about health.

For its part, the argument "the people against the elite" was positively associated with health ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2(1) = 13,677$), Covid-19 ($p < 0.01$, $\chi^2(1) = 7,790$), press criticism ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 4,322$), and economy ($p < 0.1$, $\chi^2(1) = 3,774$) issues and negatively with international issues ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 5,749$). Hence, "the people against the elite" appeared in 23.7% of the videos on healthcare, Covid-19 on (16.7%), criticism of the press (12.6%), and the economy (12.2%) and only in 2.5% of

the videos that did not deal with healthcare, Covid-19 (1.75%), and the economy (0.0%).

On the other hand, it was less frequent when international issues were discussed (6.3%), than when it did not deal with international topics (22.7%). In addition, a statistically significant association was found between criticism of the press and the political opposition ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2(1) = 15,459$). Thus, 77.8% of the times in which the opposition was criticized, the press was also criticized.

Finally, it was found that fake news was statistically associated with racism ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2(1) = 4,825$) and criticism of the press ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2(1) = 14,083$). Fake news was used in 39.1% of the videos in which the press was criticized and 100% of those in which racism was discussed, while it was used in only 3.2% of the videos that did not criticize the media.

In terms of user interaction, Bolsonaro's videos received an average of 173,763 views, 32,790 likes, and 3,092 comments. Covid-19 and healthcare were the topics that provoked the highest number of total interactions, followed by abortion, education, and criticism of the press. On the other hand, the army, the economy, praise for the press, and international issues were the topics that received the fewest interactions (see data in Table 3).

The video that received the most views (529,999) was uploaded on May 3, 2019, and it dealt with the arrest of an advisor to his son, Senator Flavio Bolsonaro, as the main topic. The second most viewed video (June 25, 2019, 521,744 views) featured the president of the Brazilian Agency for International Tourism Promotion playing the Ave Maria with the accordion and criticized regional governors for imposing confinement and praised legislation to end the "monopoly" of the TV station Rede Globo to broadcast soccer matches. In the third most viewed video, Bolsonaro shows himself to be against the so-called "gay kit," allegedly approved by the Workers' Party. Under the denomination of "gay kit," different materials were alluded to in Brazil that would be distributed in schools, from pamphlets of the Ministry of Health to prevent AIDS among prostitutes, to alleged children's books, movies, or porn magazines.

A negative correlation was detected between the frequency with which a topic was addressed and the number of interactions received ($r = -0.307$, $p < 0.05$), which indicated that the issues most frequently addressed by Bolsonaro were those that provoked the fewest total interactions among the users of his YouTube channel. Thus, unusual topics such as health, abortion, education, or racism obtained a high number of interactions, while other more frequent issues such as international issues, praise for the press, the economy, or the army were among those that received the fewest interactions.

Finally, the interactions that provoked the participation of guests were analyzed. Firstly, it was found that videos without guests received more interactions (231,057) than those with guests (205,536). Secondly, it was found that videos in which only men were invited

**Table 3.** Interactions of the topics analyzed.

| Subject | N | Views | Likes | Comments | Interactions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Covid-19 | 60 | 215,449 | 40,951 | 3,785 | 260,185 |
| Sanitation | 38 | 205,612 | 39,336 | 3,734 | 248,682 |
| Abortion | 3 | 187,475 | 33,413 | 8,532 | 229,420 |
| Education | 40 | 190,692 | 34,309 | 3,601 | 228,602 |
| Criticism of the press | 87 | 181,008 | 34,149 | 3,300 | 218,457 |
| Racism | 2 | 181,382 | 33,254 | 3,077 | 217,713 |
| Fuel | 41 | 179,044 | 35,057 | 2,927 | 217,028 |
| Opposition | 108 | 178,006 | 33,287 | 3,156 | 214,449 |
| National | 118 | 173,763 | 32,790 | 3,092 | 209,645 |
| Economy | 108 | 171,918 | 32,314 | 3,039 | 207,271 |
| International issues | 96 | 170,864 | 32,809 | 2,987 | 206,660 |
| Praise for the press | 36 | 169,857 | 32,665 | 3,013 | 205,535 |
| Economy | 90 | 167,159 | 31,706 | 2,820 | 201,685 |
| Army | 44 | 160,896 | 27,555 | 3,064 | 191,515 |

had more interactions (209,659) than those in which there were guests of both sexes (189,616), and even more than when only women were invited (137,679). Finally, videos with economic experts were found to have the most interactions (238,242), while doctors received the fewest (174,756), with military personnel and ministers in intermediate positions.

## 4. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to analyze the content and presentation of the messages propagated in the lives as an example of politainment with the aim of pointing out characteristics of Bolsonaro's "technopopulism."

The research results show that using the platform the president's live videos on YouTube influenced the process of disinformation in Brazil, with hate attacks against democratic institutions. The article indicates that Bolsonaro's communicative strategy is based on manipulation of public opinion and government propaganda.

Bolsonaro's weekly live broadcasts achieved an outstanding interaction of prosumers and developed a populist discourse that included messages of fear, stereotypes, or criticism of the press, among others. A component of resentment was present in 83% of the messages, that is, the rival was treated as an enemy, subversive, or even terrorist; what recalls one of the grammars of populist discourse is the friend/enemy dichotomy, in short, the formation of an "us" opposed to a "them," a logic that is basically built through antagonism (Laclau, 2013). This same dichotomy had been reflected in the recurrent "the people against the elite."

In addition, an attempt was made to discredit the media and journalists in 73% of the videos, while fear-mongering was used in almost half of the units analyzed (47.5%). In turn, information classified as "fake news"

or hoaxes was disseminated in 29.7% of the videos. Fear was also one of the main themes of the live presentations, especially in relation to healthcare and the Covid-19 pandemic and the press.

The growth of technopopulism on a global scale demonstrates that Bolsonaro's digital strategies are aligned with the practices of the global far right when it comes to acting on digital platforms. The content propagated by the president in his weekly YouTube lives was mostly structured based on discursive patterns described by the digital right-wing populism theory. By combining a fierce criticism of press freedom, Bolsonaro acts as a technopopulist, repudiating journalistic institutions as if they were enemies of society, and bringing to himself the responsibility of ensuring and providing the Brazilian population with key values intrinsic to journalism such as independence and providing reliable information.

By disregarding the need for interlocutors, Bolsonaro, in a way, disrespects free access to information, a right that is guaranteed by the Brazilian constitution. Another relevant point highlights the strategy of the populist politician in conditioning his YouTube lives as if it were a communication vehicle, whose function is to carry out the exclusive selection of facts favorable to a particular point of view, especially in benefit of his government, bordering on propagandistic airs, able to exalt extremism as his main source of "ideological violence." And so, we reach the conclusion that Bolsonaro manages to spread with great repercussion and in a direct way what benefits his government, as if he were in a regime without means of communication as validators of the right to information.

As for the last statement, it is worth remembering that the World Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters Without Borders in 2021, showed that

journalism, the main vaccine against disinformation, was totally or partially blocked in 73% of the 180 countries ranked by the organization, and that Brazil was in the "red zone" of the list. Ranked 111 out of 180 countries analyzed, Brazil is one of the places where the exercise of journalism is seriously compromised, especially by the direct action of President Bolsonaro (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

The results indicate that the themes addressed in the lives have influenced the disinformation process in Brazil and especially the hate attacks against important Brazilian democratic institutions. The speeches of resentment against the press, the Supreme Court, and the opposition parties are constant in Bolsonaro's weekly programs. Finally, this article concluded that Bolsonaro's communicative strategy on YouTube is an example of technopopulism based on the manipulation of public opinion with the dissemination of propaganda favorable to the government, and veiled attacks on all kinds of enemies of the current system in place as a true example of right-wing populist government. This political and media context should lead us to reflect on how technopopulist information strategies and politainment provide fertile ground for the manipulation of public opinion.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# The Spectacle of "Patriotic Violence" in Romania: Populist Leader George Simion's Mediated Performance

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## Abstract

Political actors who adapt their performance to the logic of politainment gain visibility and success in the public sphere. Such is the case of George Simion, an emerging politician and leader of the newest parliamentary party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a populist radical right party that proved especially attractive to Romanian diaspora voters. This study focuses on the discursive and stylistic dimensions of Simion's newsworthiness and mediatization. Additionally, a multiplatform analysis of his populist communication content and style aims to determine degrees of populism. As such, we propose a mixed-methods multimodal approach that combines corpus linguistics and semi-automated content analysis with thematic coding and visual semiotic analysis. The media-reported performance analysis focuses on content ($n$ = 963) produced by three popular online news media outlets (*Digi24.ro*, *Adevărul.ro*, and *Antena3.ro*) between May 13th 2015 and April 30th 2022, while the analysis of Simion's discourse examines his Telegram channel's feed (738 messages and 383 images) between March 15th 2021 and April 30th 2022, and his authored texts published in *Adevărul.ro* ($n$ = 116) between July 8th 2014 and April 30th 2022. The results indicate that news media reports are defined by conflict (aggression, violence), scandalization, negativity, emotionality, and by a prevalent use of arresting quotes that employ colloquial language (sarcasm, vulgarity). Simion's celebrity populism is styled through an "ideal candidate," "populist campaigner" image and framed through the emotional glorification (unionism, patriotism, Orthodoxy) of a potentially united "homeland," a democratic space that reflects the unadulterated will of ordinary Christian-Orthodox Romanians whose sovereignty is currently undermined by corrupt political elites. He invokes historical narratives (e.g., founding fathers, retrospective utopia) reinforced through othering the EU and ethnic/sexual minorities as forces that threaten the purity of "the people."

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

George Simion is a Millennial populist politician who uses the affordances of new media as political communication tools by proposing highly polarizing topics (Ofițeru, 2020). He initially entered the public arena as a campaigner for the unification of Romanian-speaking territories and an activist for the rights of Romanian minorities and diaspora members within the European Union. He was part of right-leaning groups and movements such as 2012 Action or the anti-corruption Resist, rooted within United We Save social networks (Marincea & Popovici, 2022). He joined the world of politics by unsuccessfully participating in the 2019 European Parliament elections ("Cine este George Simion," 2021). In December 2019, he became co-president and since

March 2022, the sole president of the newest parliamentary party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a populist radical right party (PRRP) that ran on an ethnonationalist and anti-globalization platform calling for the unification of Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Particularly attractive for the Romanian diaspora (23% of votes) from countries with large Romanian communities (Italy, Germany, Greece) and openly supported by the Romanian Orthodox Church (Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2022), AUR was surprisingly voted into the Romanian Parliament on December 2020 (9.1% votes), becoming the fourth political power in Romania. The party's rise happened on the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic's rising unemployment, a crisis that was discursively politicized to make room for a populist opposition to the establishment (Doiciar & Crețan, 2021).

But Romanian politics is not new to populism, as populist movements and parties have accompanied post-communist Romania through its transition towards liberal democracy (Norocel, 2010; Werkmann & Gherghina, 2018). After 1989, two PRRPs were founded in 1990 and 1991: the Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR) and the Greater Romania Party (PRM). Both parties' proposed presidential candidates played significant roles in elections held during the first post-communism decade: in 1992, Gheorghe Funar (PUNR) obtained 11% of votes; in 1996, the PRM candidate Corneliu Vadim Tudor (4.7%) and Gheorghe Funar (3.2%) came in fifth and sixth, while 2000 marked the peak of political support for the far-right with Corneliu Vadim Tudor's 33% score, the highest post-1990 electoral score for any far-right politician in Europe at that time (Thorpe, 2012). For years, Corneliu Vadim Tudor and PRM engaged in "slanderous campaigns against democratic politicians and intellectuals" (Gross & Tismaneanu, 2005, p. 148). PRM served as a political trampoline for another populist leader, George ("Gigi") Becali, a former shepherd turned real-estate mogul and president of the New Generation Party-Christian Democratic (PNG-CD) since 2004, whose public image is associated with religious ethos, as he called himself "The Warrior of Light" or "of Christ" (Asavei, 2022, p. 44). In a country ranked as the most religious out of 34 European countries (Evans & Baronavski, 2018), the Orthodox Church remains Romania's most important religious denomination (85.3%, according to the 2022 census), exerting a considerable sway on local politics (Turcescu & Stan, 2005), even openly supporting AUR (Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2022). Both Corneliu Vadim Tudor and Gigi Becali promoted Orthodox values and traditional gender roles, which are equated with "Romanianism" (Soare & Tufis, 2021), their discourses encompassing anti-elitist, ultranationalist, antisemitic, anti-Roma, anti-Hungarian, and homophobic rhetoric (Asavei, 2022; Corbu et al., 2017). Apart from adopting similar discourses, AUR condemns what they believe is a political establishment built on the legacy of a pre-1989 Romania (Popescu & Vesalon, 2022). The party currently dominates the Romanian populist landscape as the only Romanian PRRP represented in Parliament. In line with some of his populist counterparts and predecessors, George Simion has also indicated an interest in the presidency of Romania (Sirbu, 2022).

The global populist communication phenomenon has been increasingly characterized by the high mediatization and celebritization of populist leaders' strategic controversial performances, adapted to the logic of politainment through distinctive emotional patterns (Bartoszewicz, 2019). As such, it has been argued that when studying populism, with few exceptions, it is the leader who should be the main focus due to their centrality in connecting with their populist followers, especially since their relevance transcends the large variety of links between populists and their parties/movements across different regional contexts (Moffit, 2016). AUR's growing mediatic prevalence stems from scandals involving Simion, whose verbal and physical aggression towards various political actors has been characterized by media commentators as "patriotic violence," which he justifies as him channeling the "screams of millions of desperate Romanians" (Fati, 2022). The issues he highlights are discussed in various online platforms connected to AUR: alternative news sites and echo chambers on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and TikTok (Doiciar & Crețan, 2021). Moreover, AUR and Simion's growing online footprint has expanded on Telegram, a messaging app that has become increasingly favored by the far right, following banning practices on other platforms and general deplatformization efforts (Van Dijck et al., 2021). Simion himself encourages the public to "install Telegram and get on the Supporters of George Simion group," as "we need alternatives for Facebook" (Simion, 2021). Considering Simion's current centrality to Romanian populism and his high mediatization, our research proposes a multimodal content analysis (text and image) that aims to contribute to academic knowledge on politainment and populist communication through a multifaceted mixed-methods approach focused on a populist leader's mediated performance. The novelty of this study is also seen in its examination of the discursive features of religious nationalism and unionism as peculiarities of understudied populist communication style specific to a Christian-Orthodox, East-European, former communist country. As such, our research combines corpus linguistics and semi-automated content analysis with thematic coding and visual semiotic analysis to identify the discursive and stylistic dimensions of Simion's multimodal performance. Additionally, the multiplatform analysis—mainstream Romanian online news media and Telegram—aims to determine degrees of populism in Simion's discourse.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Politainment and Celebrity Populism

Any social establishment can be described as a stage where individuals perform roles dramatized by language,

mannerisms, and costumes (Goffman, 1956), often congruent with the culture and norms of the respective social setting. Goffman (1956, p. 13) defines performance as "the activity of an individual which occurs…before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers." Seen at "the heart of society's real unreality," the production of various performances is epitomized through its goal as well as its outcome, which is the spectacle (Debord, 1995, p. 13). Whether in news media, advertising, or entertainment, the spectacle is increasingly the omnipresent product and common language of both production and consumption spheres. As such, media communication practices are more infused with entertainment value, especially in political communication, where the media system's commercial interests, when combined with political actors' interests, become oriented towards a specific entertainment category: politainment (Dörner & Vogt, 2002). The term describes a political reality constructed on two indelibly linked levels that mark a phenomenon labeled "celebrity politics" (Street, 2004): entertaining politics, in which political actors use certain strategies to "celebritize themselves to help win media attention and elections" (Riegert & Collins, 2015, p. 7) or when political candidates trade on their background in entertainment to garner votes; and political entertainment, seen in celebrities engaging with politics (Street, 2019), and in the political tropes and themes employed by the entertainment industry (Wodak & Koller, 2008).

Contemporary politics is increasingly characterized by the "presidentialization" and celebritization of political leaders, who "have become as important as—if not more important than—policies and platforms in influencing how people vote" (Moffit, 2016, p. 64). This interdependent relationship between politics and the media, crystalized within the celebrity politics phenomenon, is part of a larger process of mediatization and spectacularization of politics and society at large, a "Mediatization 2.0" given the widespread utilization of social networks (Mazzoleni, 2014), which illustrates how the logic of the political stage adapts to media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979) and show business (Duffy & Pooley, 2019). The consequences are seen not just in election campaign communication but also in the emergence of media scandals (Cottle, 2006), which are mediated processes "necessarily bound to attention and visibility—both provided by and through mass media" that have politicians stage themselves for an endlessly present audience of prospective voters (Vorberg & Zeitler, 2019, p. 5). The increased ubiquity of political scandals is grounded in contemporary media culture and sustained by their newsworthiness (Bednarek & Caple, 2014) through social media networks and echo chambers (Solovev & Pröllochs, 2022). Due to its emphasis on the people's general will and its resulting capacity to mobilize citizens by actuating identifications with in-/out-groups (Blassnig et al., 2019), populist political communication epitomizes these mediated processes

through celebrity populism. This phenomenon "changes the political processes into confrontation, conflict, and [the] performance" of charismatic leaders who embody a distinctive form of normalized emotionality seen in the discursive framing of problems and their solutions (Bartoszewicz, 2019, p. 6).

Populist leaders' perceived centrality within the populist phenomenon is owed to well-balanced performances of extraordinariness—appearing legitimate and authoritative, alongside ordinariness—staged through rhetoric and fashion, but also "bad manners" such as the frequent use of vulgar language, political incorrectness, and scandalous disruptive behavior (Moffit, 2016), which serve to attract media attention due to their high news value (Mazzoleni, 2008). News values theory is rooted in the concept of gatekeeping (White, 1950) and news selection factors (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) and refers to the criteria that journalists apply in the process of selecting and constructing stories that are deemed newsworthy (Bednarek & Caple, 2014; Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). In the case of populist communication, even "quality" news media have been increasingly opening the gates for populists (Mudde, 2019). Their newsworthiness is spectacularly constructed through Negativity, Eliteness, Unexpectedness (Molek-Kozakowska & Wilk, 2021), Conflict, and Proximity (Schmidt, 2020), largely due to their controversial performances that violate socially-accepted norms through scandalization (Wodak, 2015), dramatization (Albertazzi, 2007), as well as the politicization of certain issues (Ernst et al., 2019). Populists exploit political mediatization on the backbone of crises that are discursively framed within the confines of political divides (Bobba & Hubé, 2021) and employ a hybrid communication strategy, so beyond news media, other digital platforms are used for disseminating messages and directly connecting with "the people," as "new media is conducive for populist communication" (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 427). Social media in particular has become a successful set of venues for populist actors, especially on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (Datts, 2020; Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019), and Telegram (Urman & Katz, 2020), seeing how the logic of these platforms is free from the professional norms of news media and their more passive audience (Mudde, 2019).

### 2.2. Populist Discourse: Characteristics, Content, and Style

Populism has been conceptualized in various ways: as a "thin" ideology that informs discourse which places "the pure people" at its center and the "corrupt elite" and others as antagonists who obstruct the expression of the people's will (Mudde, 2015), as a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), or as a political strategy seen in the performative aspects of populist discourse (Moffit, 2016). More recently, populism has been defined as a global communication phenomenon, "an expression of

[both] political communication content and style," the operationalization of which makes it possible to determine degrees of populism based on frequent use of content and style features: empty populism (references to the people: people-centrism); anti-elitist populism (negative references to elites and people-centrism); excluding populism (exclusion of out-groups and people-centrism); and complete populism, which encompasses all the above elements (de Vreese et al., 2018, pp. 426–427). These elements build a master populist frame by (a) naming the issue and claiming the "people" need defending from (b) the identified threat, the blame being typically attributed to elites/out-groups, and by (c) claiming the ability to solve the problem through solutions, which often include invoking an idealized homeland and restoring the sovereignty of the people (Blassnig et al., 2019; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017).

Populist content elements can be categorized based on their us-them dichotomy in both vertical and horizontal dimensions (Brubaker, 2017): "us," the simple, hardworking virtuous people are vertically disaffected by the "corrupt" power elite. Horizontally, the in-group is antagonized by "them": ethnic/religious/sexual minorities or forces/institutions such as globalization and the European Union, who are seen as threatening the people's way of life (Aalberg et al., 2017). PRRPs encompass certain common characteristics: nativism, a nationalistic view over the in-groups' dominion and subsequent exclusion of out-groups such as immigrants in Western Europe or ethnic and sexual minorities in Eastern Europe; and authoritarianism, seen in discourse pushing towards an increased criminalization of perceived social issues such as abortion, sex work, inclusive sex education, drug use (Mudde, 2019). These discourses are expressed through a communication style that crystalizes within symbolic performances such as "the champion of the people" or "the man on the street" (Bracciale & Martella, 2017, pp. 11–12) and can be operationalized following three main dimensions (Ernst et al., 2019): negativity, seen in crisis rhetoric and negativism (negative characterization of targets); emotionality, seen in emotionally-infused absolutism and patriotism; and sociability, which encompasses colloquialism (vulgarism, sarcasm), as well as intimization (references to personal life).

Certain dramatized communication styles can also crystallize within visual social media (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). The content analysis of images (Rose, 2001) can provide insight into the various levels of visual framing (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011) employed in the image construction process by political leaders (Archetti, 2014). Understanding visuals as both denotative and connotative systems (Barthes, 1957/1991) allows for the operationalization of the different structural and symbolic dimensions of populist celebrities' communication style, built on a combination of performed extraordinariness and ordinariness: "statesmanship," seen in imagery depicting the subject in the company of high-ranking/influential allies or patriotic symbols/monuments, their "mass appeal" is apparent when in the company of large crowds, and their "ordinariness," in appearances with regular people, elements which construct the image of "the populist campaigner" and "the ideal candidate" (Grabe & Bucy, 2011, pp. 213–219). This "double-positioning" frontstage performance strategy has the populist leader construct themselves as "both savior of the people and representing the people; and as being one of the people," therefore part of the in-group (Wodak, 2015, p. 152).

## 3. Methodology

Considering our scope, the questions we formulate are:

RQ1: What are the discursive and stylistic features of the sampled news media content reporting on George Simion?

RQ2: Which populist communication content and style elements construct George Simion's discourse within his authored texts?

RQ3: What are the visual communication style elements of George Simion's discourse on Telegram?

As such, we employ a mixed-methods approach to our analysis of the data sample (see Table 1).

The three corpora we compiled for analysis are: (C1) news media reports on Simion from three mainstream

**Table 1.** Data sample and corpora size.

| Corpus of analysis | Online Platform | Source | Time frame | N total | Corpus size |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| C1 | News media | *Digi24.ro*, *Adevărul.ro*, *Antena3.ro* | 13.05.2015–30.04.2022 | 963 | 464,477 words |
| C2 | News media | *Adevărul.ro* | 08.07.2014–30.04.2022 | 116 | 97,477 words |
| C3a | Social media/Telegram | Sustinatori GeorgeSimion | 15.03.2021–30.04.2022 | 738 | 15,948 words |
| C3b | Social media/Telegram | Sustinatori GeorgeSimion | 15.03.2021–30.04.2022 | 383 | 383 images |

Romanian online news outlets, *Digi24.ro* (*n* = 229), *Adevărul.ro* (*n* = 358), and *Antena3.ro* (*n* = 376), of which we filtered the second corpus data based on authorship: Simion's authored texts published on *Adevărul.ro* (C2). This data was collected using a web extraction software, Octoparse 8, which facilitated the obtainment of all articles as far back as he is reported on/published until the extraction day (30.04.2022); therefore, the general timeframe is eight years. The Telegram corpus (C3) was collected on 30.04.2022 with a timeframe going back to the first message on the channel on 15.03.2021, using Telegram's open API to extract (C3a) text messages and (C3b) photos from George Simion's Telegram channel, ambiguously named Supporters of George Simion (SustinatoriGeorgeSimion). To answer the first two RQs, we imported and separately compiled the corpora using Sketch Engine, a text analysis software and corpus manager, which generated lists of frequent lemmas/POS/n-grams that were approached both inductively and deductively (based on literature), as we constructed a codebook which was customized for each corpus as follows.

The C1 (news media reporting on Simion) codebook was based on a combination of the relevant literature on news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016), the discursive news values analysis approach (Bednarek & Caple, 2014), populist communication style elements (Ernst et al., 2019), as well as populist communication strategies (Moffit, 2016; Wodak, 2015). Specifically, the first stage of our analysis employed a corpus linguistic approach (discursive news values analysis) to determine the relevant conflict news values linguistic indicators, based on analysis of frequent words/POS/n-grams that construct the conflict news value by referencing controversies, scandals, fights, warfare, and strikes (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). Following a pilot coding, the codebook used in the thematic analysis of headlines was refined to encompass the following variables: (a) scandal/scandalization as a feature of the conflict news value and populist strategy, seen in reports of incidents provoked by or involving the populist leader (Moffit, 2016; Wodak, 2015); (b) sociability, seen in quoted colloquialism (simple language, vulgarism, slang, nicknaming, use of rhetorical questions and sarcasm) and intimization (references to personal life); (c) negativity as a communication style of reported negativist discourse regarding elites/others, as well as negative characterization of the populist actor by the media; and (d) emotionality as an umbrella-dimension that encompasses emotionally-infused absolutism (the expression of positive or negative emotion when presenting something as unbearable or the only possible solution), and patriotism (references to the "homeland"; Ernst et al., 2019). Additionally, we coded emotionality-relevant categories specific to Simion's populism: unionism (references to an idealized utopic past or future united heartland) and Orthodoxy (the use of emotionally-laden Christian-Orthodox symbolism and vernacular). The thematic categorization was

based on analysis of lexical choices, which construct the relevant issues within each headline, since headlines "tend to be strategically engaging rather than just informative" (Molek-Kozakowska & Wilk, 2021, p. 767). To account for the potential limitations of this approach, headline coding relied on contextual information offered by the lead and the body of the article. The headlines corpus was separately coded by each of the two researchers, and the resulting intercoder agreement was 87.22%.

The C2 and C3a codebooks (Simion's authored written texts on *Adevărul.ro* news platform and his Telegram channel) were similarly based on the corpus linguistic approach and the relevant literature, which aided in defining the main actors, issues, and actions that construct the master populist frame (Caiani & della Porta, 2011; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017). As such, frequent verbs used to tell the story of how things "were," "are," "should be," or "could be," are coded under the Actions dimension, which, together with words designating Issues (e.g., economy/religion/politics) were included in the codebook based on word/POS/n-gram frequency. Next, the codebook was further refined to encompass populist content elements as variables: people-centrism (seen in frequent us/we rhetoric), anti-elitism (blaming "them," power elites), ostracizing others (immigrants/minorities), and invoking an idealized homeland (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019). As such, we coded the following populist content dimensions: (a) "Us" refers to Person/Group (Simion/AUR party), the People (Romanian citizens/diaspora/people/folk), the Homeland (our country/motherland/homeland, Romania, Bessarabia, Greater Romania), and Allies (group entities/people who support Simion/AUR); and (b) "Them" refers to Corrupt Political Elites who are deemed the cause of certain politicized issues (the president/MPs/political parties), to Institutions or Systems, and "Out-Groups" who are blamed or othered. Additionally, we coded style dimensions: Sociability (colloquialism, intimization), Negativity (negativism, crisis rhetoric), and Emotionality (absolutism, patriotism, Orthodoxy, unionism). The corpora were imported into MaxQDA 2020, a mixed-methods data analysis software, where semi-automated coding was employed: We used lexical search to identify each variable within the corpus, and then we qualitatively examined and coded every statement accordingly, provided the context matched the defined concepts. The colloquialism dimension was entirely manually coded to identify sarcasm, irony, rhetorical questions, and vulgarism.

To answer RQ3, the Telegram corpus of images (C3b) was manually coded in MaxQDA 2020, based on several features of visual communication content (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011; Rose, 2001) and dimensions of the image construction of the political celebrity (Archetti, 2014; Goffman, 1956; Grabe & Bucy, 2011; Street, 2004). Thus, the C3b codebook includes the type of visual content (photograph/poster/media clipping/illustration) and the symbolic dimensions of Simion's persona as a

Christian-Orthodox and a patriotic political leader: (a) a populist campaigner, performing ordinariness as "man of the people," and through celebrity-like mass appeal, due to his political presence among supporters, further constructed through us-them dichotomic images (e.g., large groups of supporters vs. corrupted politicians) and associated with national and religious symbols; and (b) ideal political candidate, seen in visual manifestations of authority and power as well as compassion (Grabe & Bucy, 2011). The visual content was separately coded by each researcher, and the resulting intercoder agreement was 96.6%.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Mediatization of George Simion's Performance

The newsworthiness of George Simion's public performance is constructed by news media reports through prevalent conflict lexis (Figure 1), a news value that informs stories of arguments, warfare, and controversy (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016), reflected in our analysis of the most frequent words/POS/n-grams within the news media corpora (C1).

The results show that conflict is discursively constructed through words (Figure 1) referencing several highly mediatized events whose main actor was George Simion. He is either portrayed as a "violent aggressor" of Virgil Popescu (Minister of Energy), whom he "grabbed by the neck"; of then Prime-Minister Florin Cîțu, whom he "screamed" at; of the City Hall building in Timișoara, which he entered by "force" and caused a "scandal," or he is portrayed as a "victim": he had "ink spilled over him" during a street protest, "was banished" from the Republic of Moldova, and his reentry was denied. This dualistic construction of politicians' personas within public conflicts by the news media plays an important role in the celebrity politician phenomenon (Street, 2019), as seen in Silvio Berlusconi's highly mediatized controversial performances (Mazzoleni, 2014) or Donald Trump's celebrity populism (Bartoszewicz, 2019) as well as his angry populism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018).

The analysis of headlines (689 coded segments) shows that news reports of Simion are permeated by
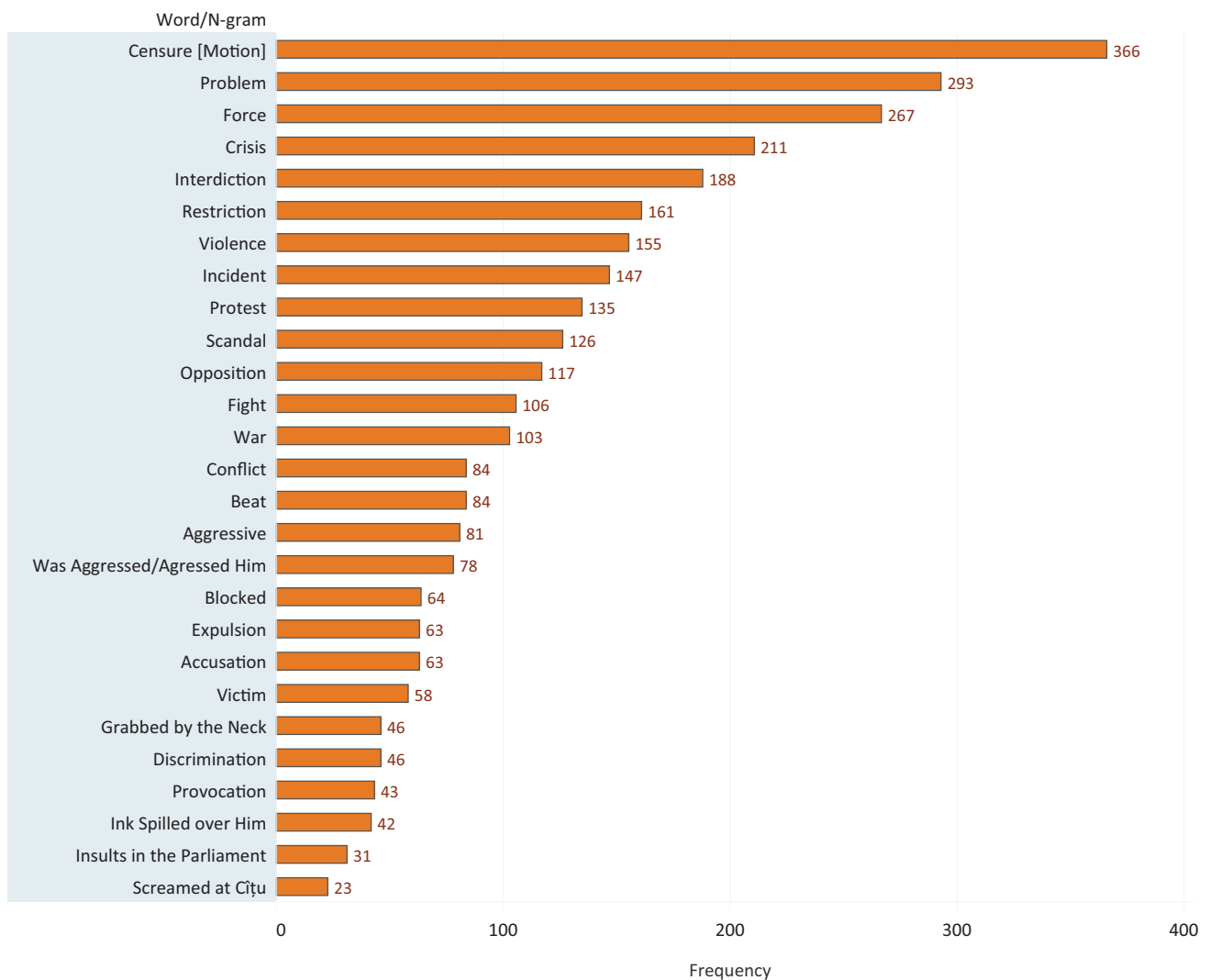


**Figure 1.** Conflict news value linguistic indicators (C1).

Scandalization, Negativity, Emotionality, and Sociability. More specifically, the results indicate that scandalization-centered headlines (33.38%) are the most consistent in all sampled media (Figure 2). As a political strategy, scandalization generates the necessary attention and visibility populists need, indirectly supported by news media, which prioritizes reports on controversies. This is reflected in our analysis of headlines, which mediate the events involving Simion, labeling them "scandal," "fight," "incident," "provocation," and "conflict."

Another key stylistic dimension of Simion's news mediatization is Negativity (30.33%), which is multifaceted: on the one hand, a dimension of negativity refers to discrediting politicians, for example, when Simion is quoted on or represented as verbally disparaging "corrupted" political actors, or as part of various "calls to action" against the political elite, ranging from public protests to presidential impeachment "against corona, Iohannis [Klaus Iohannis, current Romanian president], and other viruses." On the other hand, some headlines focus on negative characterization of the populist leader/AUR party, either through quoting opposing politicians and others describing them as a "legionary," "dangerous," or through media commentators' positioning by characterizing them as "extremist," "xenophobic," "antisemitic," "neo-fascist." As previous research also indicates (Schmidt, 2020), a multifaceted expression of

negativity within news discourse on populist leaders and parties is a prevalent dimension of the newsworthiness of conflict.

The coded dimensions of Emotionality (24.81% aggregated) within the headlines emphasize Simion's patriotism, unionism, and absolutism, observed in his vivid language: "People are desperate. Our country's lands are being stolen." Orthodoxy, a dimension of emotionality associated with religiousness, is seen in Simion's quotes on God ("God is with us!," "Thank God!") and Christian-Orthodox holidays cheers. Besides a general emphasis on Simion's conflictual, violent behavior, the headlines also present elements of Sociability, such as colloquialism ($n$ = 22; $n$ = 3.19%) seen in quoted sarcasm, insults, rhetorical questions such as references to the PM—"where is Florin Cîțu hiding? Where is the little one?," "we've worked hard to remove this parrot"—or to other MPs—"you are a thief!," "Mr. Roman, your chair is shaking!" Intimization was scarce, seen in a few human-interest stories focusing on Simion's personal life.

These headline constructions mediate Simion's rhetoric; therefore, he sets the agenda through newsworthy scandalous behavior, a dynamic defined as "the Right-wing populist perpetuum mobile" (Wodak, 2015, p. 42). This term refers to intentionally provoked scandals that force the media to celebritize the populist leader by giving them "more face time and an opportunity
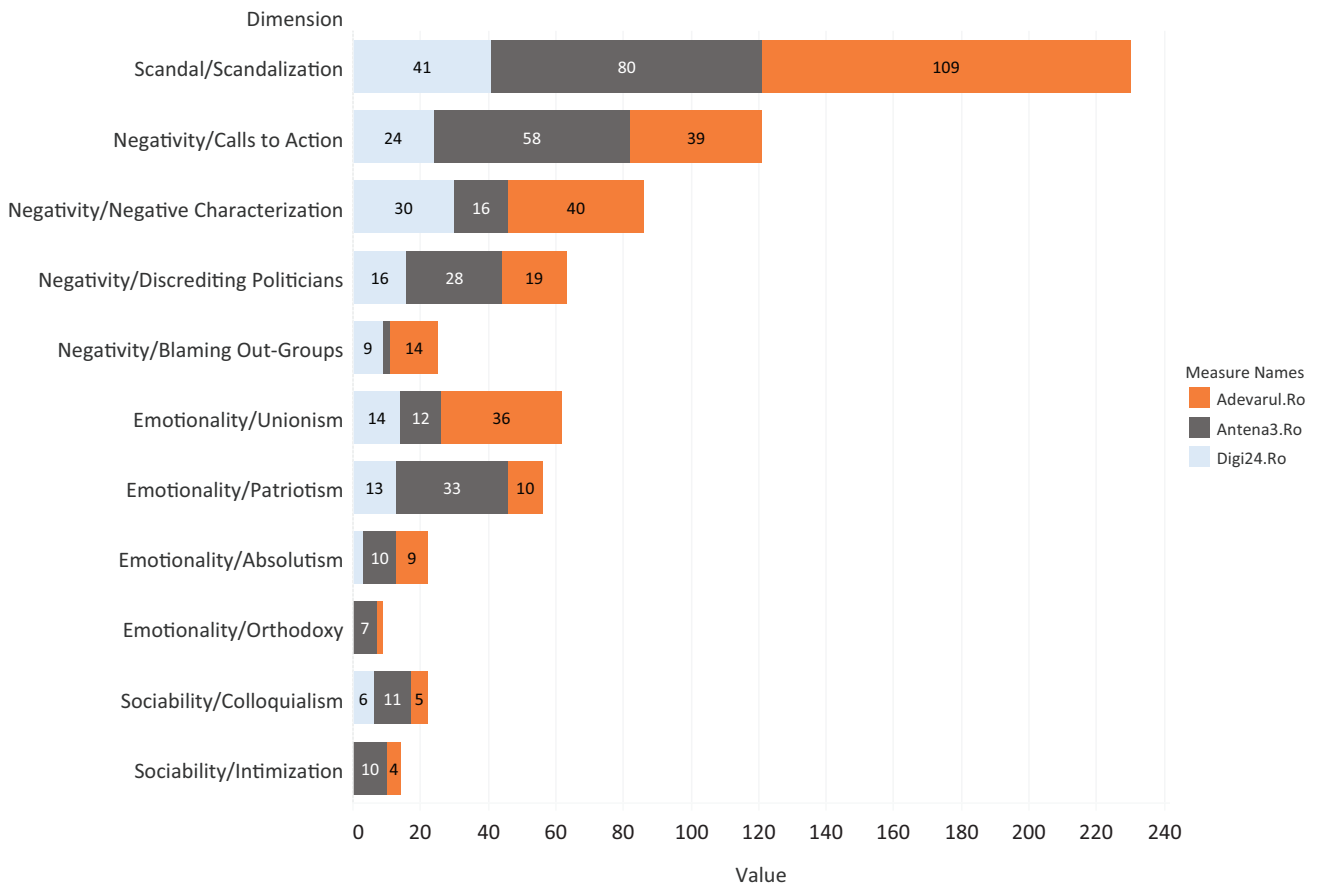


**Figure 2.** Thematic distribution of headlines (C1).

for perpetrator-victim reversal," blaming elites and out-groups, as exemplified through FPÖ's Haider and HC Strache's successful scandalization and subsequent scapegoating strategies.

### 4.2. George Simion's Populist Discourse: Content and Style

The analysis of George Simion's populist content within his authored texts on *Adevărul.ro* news platform (12,364 coded segments) and his Telegram channel (2,653 coded segments) indicates the presence of all populist elements defined in the literature (Figure 3).

There are several definitions of "us" (Figure 3), constructed in both corpora: people-centric "us," referring to the pious, hardworking, "golden" (based on the acronym AUR, which also translates to gold) Romanian citizens or minorities from abroad and diaspora members, who are seen as an aggregate of ordinary and honest people with a common set of wishes and values; "us," the proudly patriotic folk who inhabit "our homeland" (40.59% of coded segments C2; 18.78% C3a); "us" as AUR and George Simion, the self-proclaimed simple "man of the people," who fights for and champions the unity of all Romanians and their values (liberty, the nation, faith, and the traditional family), and "allies" ("Union Friends" organization, the Romanian Orthodox Church). These definitions are congruent with other findings on populist content elements within populist rhetoric, such as the Us/We and Homeland rhetoric, the emphasis on the sovereignty of the people, as well the construction of the populist leader's capacity as best representing the people's will, widely exemplified within analyses on Nigel Farage or Silvio Berlusconi's discourse (Mazzoleni, 2014).

The people's sovereignty is undermined by "them," defined by Simion as the "corrupt political elite," such as the "traitorous" and "ignorant" president of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, or the "diseased" Traian Băsescu, former president of Romania and honorary president of the People's Movement Party (PMP), a center-right unionist party that Simion accuses of the same inefficiency in moving things along as its leader was in running the country. His anti-elitism is further extended to the largest parties: The National Liberal Party (PNL), The Social Democratic Party (PSD), who, together with the entire Government, the Parliament, and the "system," are blamed for their "so-called democratic," "thieving," and "abusive" methods of governing that he equates with Nicolae Ceaușescu's communist dictatorship. Other entities that Simion scapegoats as impediments to the economic, ethnic, and territorial sovereignty of the people are the globalization-centric discourses of the EU and the "corrupt," "dishonest," and "separatist" Hungarian politicians and people who inhabit Romania and "disrespect" the "mother-tongue"/Romanian language, a stigmatizing othering discourse that was previously a staple of Romanian populist Vadim Tudor's discourse (Corbu et al., 2017).

The most prevalent issue that Simion references is the Unification of Romania and The Republic of Moldova, under the slogan "Bessarabia is Romania," which he frames as the solution to most political and economic issues that the Romanian people face (Table 2).

He invokes certain historic moments as examples of times when "our motherland's heroes" unified "our homeland territories": "The Little Union" of the Romanian Principalities Moldavia and Wallachia in 1859 and "The Great Union" of 1918, when territories such as Bessarabia (today's Republic of Moldova), Bukovina, and Transylvania were united as the Kingdom of Romania. He calls on God and his heroes, the "founding fathers" of Romania, back to Dacian and Thracian ancestors,
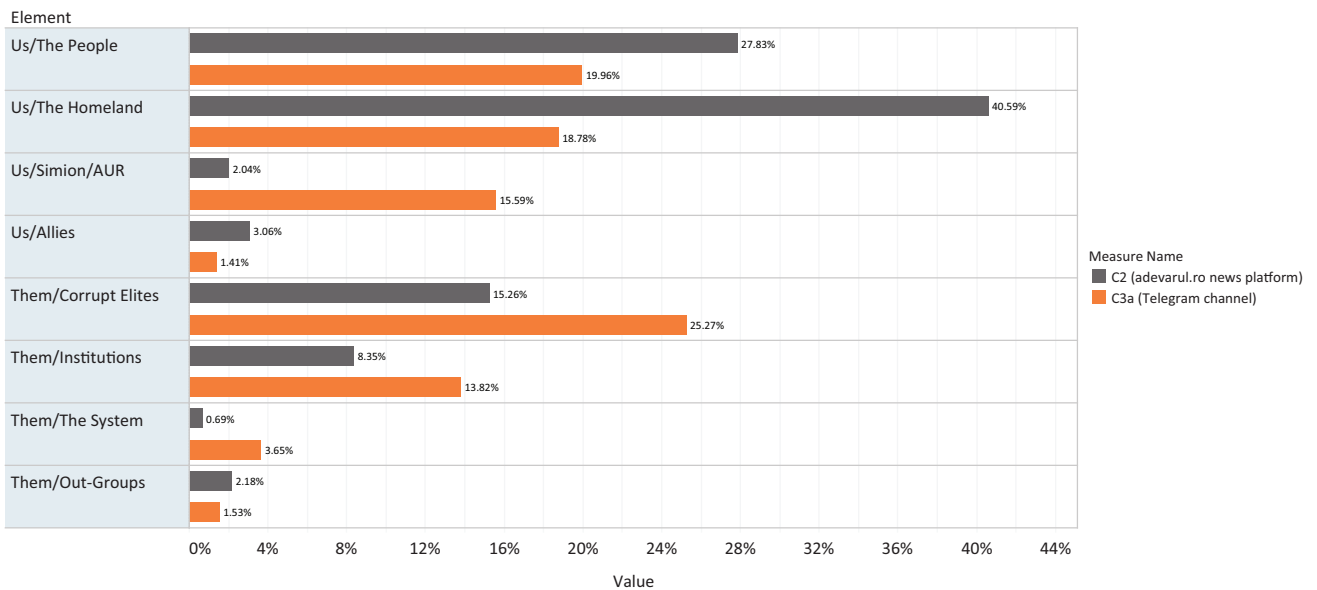


**Figure 3.** Us vs. them dichotomy in George Simion's discourse (comparison C2–C3a).

**Table 2.** Most prevalent issues (C2 and C3a).

| Issue | C2 (*Adevărul.ro* news platform) | Frequency | C3a (Telegram text messages) | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Unification | 32.78% | Politics | 29.91% |
| 2 | Politics | 21.31% | Protests | 12.89% |
| 3 | History | 15.68% | Orthodoxy | 11.73% |
| 4 | Protests | 8.19% | Covid-19 | 7.43% |
| 5 | Economy | 4.34% | Unification | 5.78% |
| 6 | Orthodoxy | 3.58% | The System | 5.12% |
| 7 | The Media | 1.99% | History | 3.96% |
| 8 | Romanian language | 1.86% | Freedom | 3.30% |
| 9 | The System | 1.55% | Economy | 2.64% |
| 10 | Identity | 1.37% | Family | 2.31% |

sometimes by quoting iconic poet Mihai Eminescu, to legitimize the ideal of a united "Great Romania."

The master populist frame is seen in all these elements, woven together through verbs used to tell the Simion-filtered story of how things used to be, how they are, and how they could/should be. Although calls to action through protest are widespread throughout both corpora, instigations towards going "out into the streets" and shouting "down with Iohannis," "the Government," "with Cîțu," and "with the dictatorship" are more widespread on Telegram (12.89%), where

he also openly opposes anti-Covid-19 vaccination and references the traditional family (2.31%) as the ideal Romanian way of life. In doing so, he others sexual minorities and shames those who advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual education, since "us Romanians are overwhelmingly on normality's side, and wish to protect our children from harmful ideologies," a narrative that foregrounds traditional values, in line with East European populism (Aalberg et al., 2017; Soare & Tufis, 2021).

This content is expressed through highly emotional and colloquial style (Figure 4), seen in vulgar language
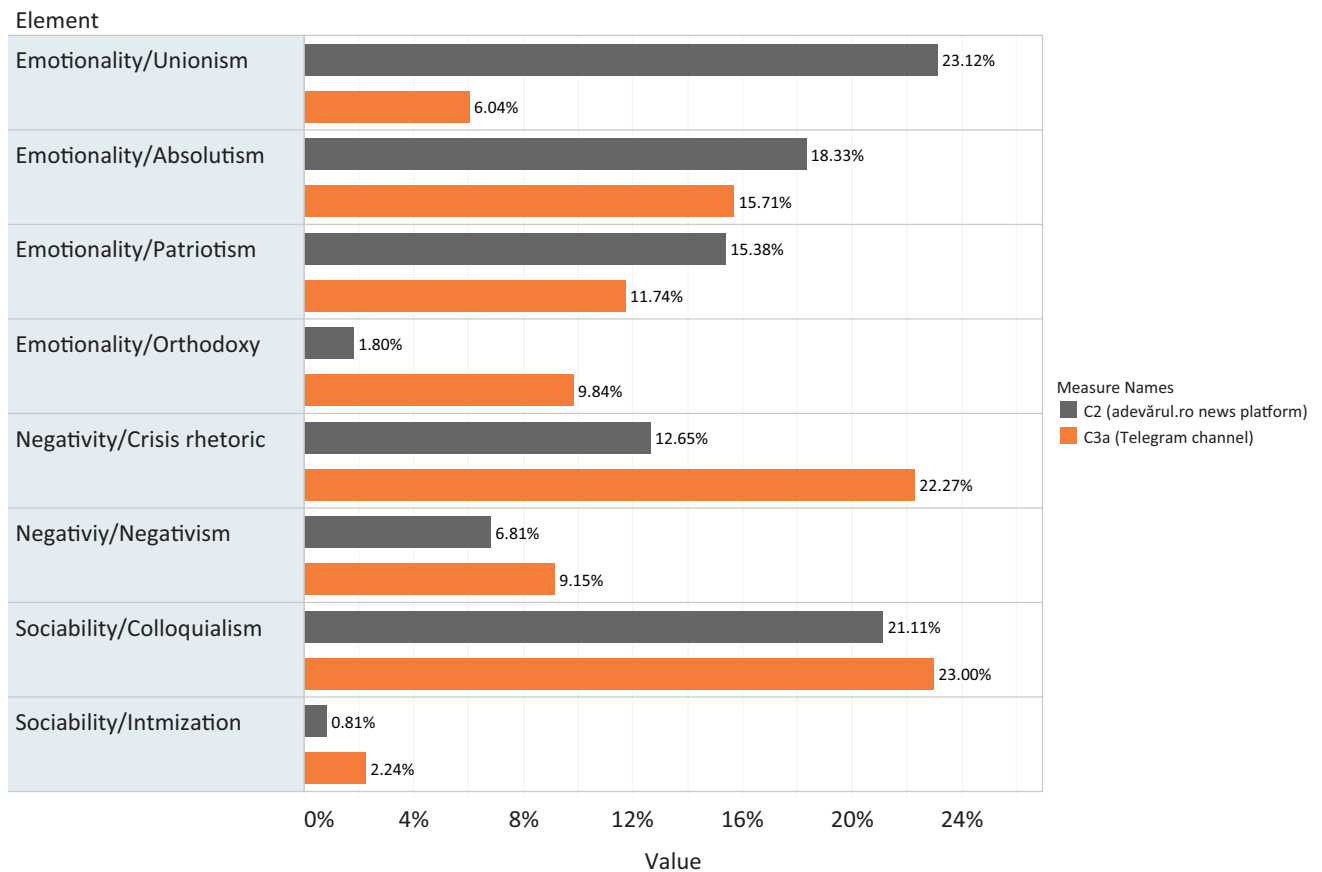


**Figure 4.** George Simion's Populist Communication Style (C2 and C3a).

("asshole," "bastards," "thugs"), sarcasm, and rhetorical questions ("are these thieves so stupid as to send in the prosecutors?"). This is weaved in with strong negativity, congruent with other findings on Romanian populism (Corbu et al., 2017), seen in negativism directed at targets ("corrupt," "liar," "malevolent") and crisis rhetoric ("fight," "conflict," "war").

Simion's emotionality is multi-dimensional: Unionism stands out ("our power is in the Unification!") as a historic ideal since the USSR annexation of Bessarabia and of Northern Bukovina following the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, signed on August 23rd, 1939, that is further enhanced by sentiments of patriotism; absolutism is seen in his assertive tone and problem/solution, accepting/rejecting discursive dichotomies, and Orthodoxy is more prevalent on Telegram, to connect with the pious Romanian folk ("our prayers to God," "God bless Romania!"; "God will give us a united Romania"). This mix of unionism, Orthodoxy, and people-centrism is congruent with other research that underlines the religious character of Romanian populism (Asavei, 2022; Corbu et al., 2017).

### 4.3. George Simion's Visual Communication Style on Telegram

The visual content (*n* = 383) shared by George Simion on @SusținătoriGeorgeSimion channel consists of original photographs (63%), posters (24%), media clippings (8%), and other illustrations (5%). Over half the image corpus (51.95%) features the image of George Simion, found mostly in photographs (selfies and individual/group portraits) and posters (cropped portraits added to templates reflecting the visual identity of the party).

The analysis reveals a multifaceted identity of Simion the celebrity politician, consistent with previous research on the image construction of political leaders (Grabe & Bucy, 2011): the "populist campaigner," represented through performed ordinariness, as the "man on the street" blending in with simple people, wearing traditional folk shirts or casual attire (Figure 5), complemented by the image of the "ideal candidate," a type of presidentialization through performed extraordinariness (Moffit, 2016), constructed here within the image of a compassionate leader surrounded and seemingly beloved by either masses of Romanian supporters or small groups of people in need (unemployed, low-income families, children, old people), or more rarely, when in Parliament or party-related settings, through fashion—black suit and white shirt (Figure 6)—a dress code associated with statesmanship and power.

This manifold image construction of the politician is complemented by national and Orthodox symbols. The recurrent national symbols are the national flag, folk costumes, monuments/tombs of war heroes and prominent historical figures such as Stephan the Great, known for defeating a large Ottoman army in the Battle of Vaslui in 1475; Michael the Brave who was the first to briefly reign over all principalities inhabited by Romanians in 1600; or Avram Iancu, a Transylvanian lawyer who played an important role during the Austrian Empire Revolutions of 1848–1849. The rhetorical appeal to such historical narratives within populist communication, defined as mythopoesis, serves to legitimize nationalist sentiments, often observed within post-communist territories' populism, heavily informed by anti-communist and anti-Soviet stances (Wodak, 2015). Furthermore, present-day heroes are also used here to reinforce the



**Figure 5.** Example of visual representation constructing the "populist campaigner" image (C3b).



**Figure 6.** Example of visual representation constructing the "ideal candidate" image (C3b).
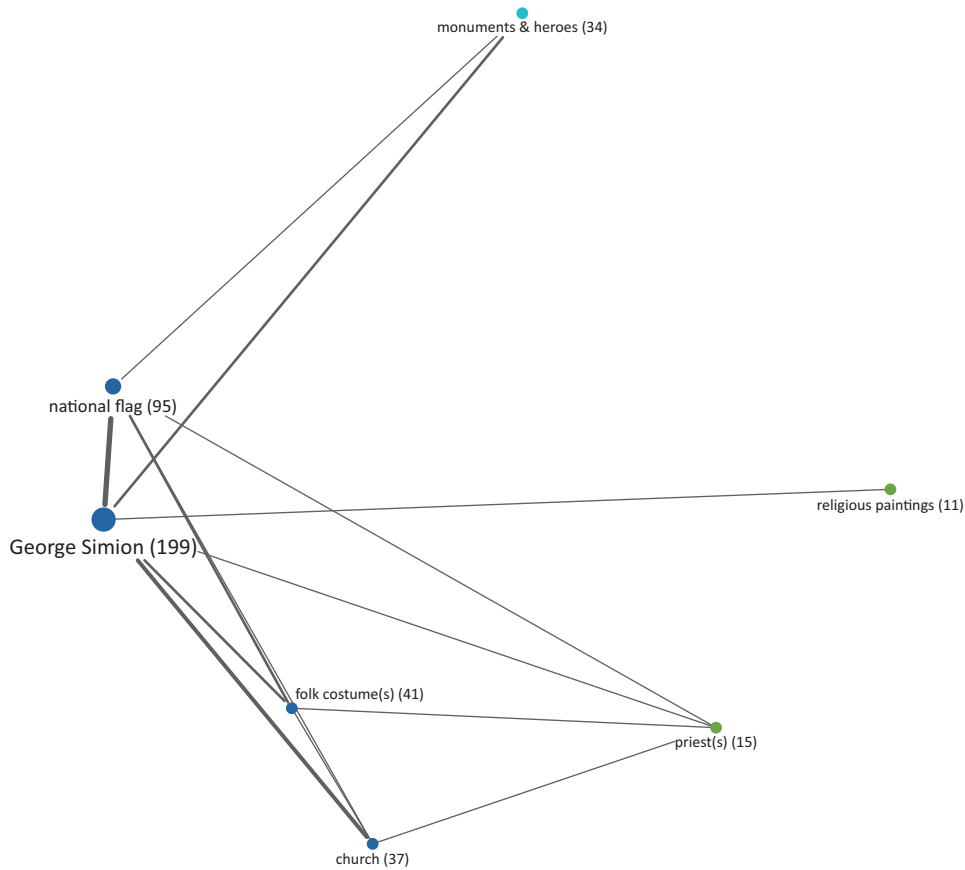
**Figure 7.** Network of co-occurrences: George Simion's image and national/Orthodox symbols (C3b).

national self-esteem, such as famous (retired) football players Gheorghe Hagi and Gică Popescu, or the gold medal-winning rowing team. Consistent with the values promoted by his party, Simion often appears in the presence of Orthodox symbols such as religious paintings, Orthodox priests, churches, and monasteries (Figure 7).

The posters within the corpus function as visual triggers aimed at grabbing the audience's attention, as the saturated, yellow backgrounds with black and red texts, and the edited photographs of various politicians who are framed as corrupt, inefficient dictators (Figure 8), serve to encourage and call upon the public to meet, protest, march, or vote.

Overall, the image corpus analysis reveals a message construction consistent with the AUR party values, emphasizing the Orthodox faith, nationhood, promoting liberty, and the traditional family. These values are visually packaged as represented by George Simion, the charismatic, compassionate leader, the ideal candidate: a populist campaigner who works to eliminate the corrupt elite and restore popular sovereignty.

## 5. Conclusions

As a political strategy, scandalization generates the necessary attention and visibility, as well as the tension that allows populist leaders to dress themselves as saviors or problem solvers. This process of adapting to the logic



**Figure 8.** Example of "call to action" poster (C3b).

of politainment is reflected in our findings on George Simion's mediatization, who sets the agenda through violent performances within public conflicts, which he justifies as a problem-solving tool, proposing a "patriotic

violence" approach to politics, thus forcing the news media into a "no-win" predicament. Hence, journalists end up reporting on his deeds. His newsworthiness is seen in editorial choices of vivid words, in some cases doubled by arresting quotes that construct the vocabulary of the conflict news value, reinforced by emotionality and negativity features, which work to disseminate not just his scandalous aggressive behavior, but also his populism. The AUR leader's discourse on multiple platforms politicizes diverse issues by blaming the political elite for various crises. His unionism and patriotism are complemented by a multifaceted politician image as "an ideal candidate" and "populist campaigner," dimensions of the well-balanced performances of ordinariness and extraordinariness of a celebrity populist. Our findings show that Simion engages in an illocutionary act of a discursively constructed complete populism while celebritizing himself through spectacle and scandalization by violence and vulgarism. His anti-elitism, authoritarianism, and nativism are congruent with the radical right populism of post-communist Eastern Europe, discursively built here around the glorification of a potentially united "homeland," a democratic space that reflects the unadulterated will of the ordinary and virtuous "golden" Orthodox Romanian people.

While Christianity is increasingly central to European populism, moving away from anticlerical stances towards "Christian roots" (as observed in Marine Le Pen or Norbert Hofer's [FPÖ candidate] presidential campaign discourses), Northern and Western European populism is predominantly secular and identitarian in its Christianism (Brubaker, 2017), defined through its othering of Islam, less so through religious worship. By contrast, East European populism is distinctly nationalist regarding religion, as exemplified through Orbán's discourse which emphasizes the importance of Christianity's role in preserving nationhood, an attitude seen in Simion's rhetoric, yet specifically infused with religious ethos here. His "Romanianism" is reflected in his unionism and in the endorsement of Orthodoxy and the traditional family. This discourse foregrounds a complex ideal portrait of the "good Romanian," which he further legitimizes through moral evaluation of political actors and out-groups (ethnic and sexual minorities). The prevalence of call-to-action discourse on Telegram constructs and supports the image of the problem-solver, crisis manager, and providential savior whose proposed solution (unification) is legitimized through mythopoesis.

The results of the analysis of George Simion's multimodal performance show that his communication strategies are congruent with existing literature and previous findings on other populists' political approaches (scandalization, performed ordinariness and extraordinariness through fashion, rhetoric, and communication style, politicization of various issues, anti-elitism, othering, mythopoesis). At the same time, these strategies are adapted to the idiosyncrasies of an Orthodox Eastern European former communist country with native language-speaking populations living outside the current borders. By building on the definition of populism as an expression of communication content and style, as well as political strategy, while honing in on the textual and visual performance of one populist leader, our research is limited by its focus on a single case study. However, our proposed methodological and analytical approach can be employed as a model for future research concerned with the multimodal performance of populist leaders in the context of platform-mediated populist communication, by identifying main discursive features through corpus linguistic analysis complemented by thematic analysis and combined with semiotic visual analysis. Our multifaceted approach aims to contribute to the diversification of approaches to the construction of newsworthiness and performance to match specific themes, in this case, politainment and celebrity populism.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

# Politainment on Twitter: Engagement in the Spanish Legislative Elections of April 2019

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**Abstract**
The mediatisation of politics is based on the logic of spectacle. Politainment defines the phenomenon in which political information is trivialised by the hybrid narratives in which it is included and its anecdotal tone, with the aim of reaching an audience that seeks entertainment rather than information. This phenomenon has reached the digital sphere; the media, political parties, and prosumers are interested in using the new communicative context to expand their audience or become producers of new narrative formulas that act as a loudspeaker for online infotainment policies or discourses. This research examines the engagement obtained by politainment producers on Twitter, a network where debates about television content are concentrated. The article examines the tweets issued by Spanish television programmes that carry out politainment. The research focuses on the Spanish general elections held in April 2019 to establish whether this social network acted as a sounding board for television broadcasts and how it contributed to fixing ideas and content. The researchers conducted a content analysis on a sample of 7,059 tweets and 2,771 comments. The results show that the production, promotion, and communication strategies of programmes on Twitter are still scarce and unoriginal. The behaviour of prosumers is not very creative, active, or interactive, preventing the creation of a debate on Twitter or the construction of a horizontal (user–user) or vertical (user–programme) interaction on the content published.

## 1. Introduction

The processing of politics in modern political systems is based on the logistics of show business, which has developed into a television landscape closer to a cartoonish distortion of reality than the broadcast of serious political information. Television politainment has been present in Spain and several other European countries, North America, and Latin America since the 1990s (Conde-Vázquez et al., 2019; Prado & Delgado, 2010; Stark, 1997; Thussu, 2007). It can be defined as a global phenomenon whose development is due to the appear-

ance of private television channels, the audiences' interest in sensational information, the approach of politicians to this format, and its profitability (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Moy et al., 2005; Neijens & Brants, 1998). Politainment can be regarded in different television formats: television news programmes, magazines, and talk shows, in which topics and features of infotainment are introduced (Berrocal et al., 2014; Díaz Arias, 2011; Früh & Wirth, 1997; Gordillo et al., 2011; Ortells, 2015; Pellisser & Pineda, 2014; Zamora-Martínez et al., 2022). Some examples can be seen in emotional and sensational news, in which the voice of the

citizen and the journalist is relevant as in live connections, sound effects, and music post-production elements such as slow motion, split screen, and headlines, as well as recordings with dramatic, symbolic and subjective nuances. The classification of political programmes established by Cebrián and Berrocal (2009) distinguishes three genres: spectacularised political formats, politicised magazine programmes, and political info shows. The spectacularised political formats deal with current political affairs by participants from the traditional political-journalistic sphere and incorporate production formulas or elements from other television genres that distort the treatment of political information. The politicised magazine programmes mix trivial sections with political information sections, and the infoshows deal with purely political content from a humorous and entertaining point of view. In addition, its strong impact on the media landscape has transformed politainment into a formula that, according to some, threatens public debate and the democratic system by addressing political information superficially (Blumler, 1992; Moy et al., 2005; Prior, 2005; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000; Valhondo, 2007); although others argue that it improves news recall and fosters public interest (Baum, 2002; Brants, 1998; Ferré & Gayà, 2010; Salgado, 2008; Stockwell, 2004; Taniguchi, 2011; Thussu, 2007).

This kind of content not only occurs during electoral campaign periods but is also seen during so-called permanent campaigns. Likewise, there is a transfer to the digital environment: enticing stories, political scandals, and the proliferation of trivial anecdotes related to show politics that rule the virtual landscape (Berrocal et al., 2022; Dader, 2012). The growth of this journalistic trend of news sensationalism particularly affects social networks, as they are the place where politicians, media, and prosumers converge. Politicians try to use them as loudspeakers to send messages, promote themselves, make their agendas visible, and communicate with their audiences (Berrocal, 2017; Castells, 2010). The audience receives considerable amounts of television content related to the political environment (imitations, memes, and videos); thus, using these channels to obtain information, reply to, reproduce, and spread messages created by others, encourages the development of politainment on the internet.

Twitter's quick, simple, and public nature has made this social network the most successful for informative purposes. Regarding this popularity, politainment formats and contemporary political activity have increased their presence on this network because it concentrates the bulk of the debates on television content, grants greater broadcasting power to television programmes, allows interaction with the audience, and provides details about their preferences and opinions by sending instant messages which relate to the broadcast content (Zamora-Martínez & González-Neira, 2022).

The audience, which in the past, associated the activity of watching television with a particular time of day

and to a specific location, can now be informed everywhere and at any time due to the power of social networks. This important change in the audience has led to them now being referred to as prosumers. This term refers to the digital engagement of individuals and is defined as a communicative interaction that shows itself in the form of clicks, likes, shares, comments, suggestions, and other content produced by users (Ballesteros, 2019; Dhanesh, 2017; García Orosa & Alafranji, 2021). The interaction of users by reproducing, voting, broadcasting, or commenting about television content on social networks such as Twitter means that the television programme ceases to be "an outdated product of a single broadcast to become a long-term project" (Sánchez Tabernero, 2008, p. 274), thanks to the "buzz that its broadcast causes, through different means" (Gallego, 2013, p. 20). This has encouraged changes in the ways of producing, distributing, and consuming information and different kinds of content (Riera, 2003). The symbiosis between television and social networks is becoming increasingly noticeable within the media landscape since it reinforces television content, broadens its life beyond the broadcast, and allows interaction with the audience.

In this line of work, this article examines, within the context of the 2019 general elections in Spain, the engagement gained by politainment broadcasts on Twitter, as it is considered the network where political debates about television content are mainly located (Giglietto & Selva, 2014; Halpern et al., 2016). Likewise, this social network was chosen because it is an open platform (Williams et al., 2013) that allows a constant information flow among users without any restrictions (Wu et al., 2011). Thus, the Twitter platform becomes an interesting environment to study the dissemination of information and the strength of the content broadcast spontaneously and uncontrollably (Leonhardt, 2015; Mohr, 2014).

The research pursues the following three objectives (O):

O1: To study the broadcast of politainment programmes on Twitter to establish which communication strategies achieve the most engagement in tweets, and to identify the level of this engagement.

O2: To examine the behaviour of the prosumer audience's responses in relation to politainment programmes.

O3: To determine when the tweets with the greatest repercussion are broadcast and when the greatest number of comments are issued, as well as to determine if the tweets of the programmes and the comments of the users behave similarly throughout the life cycle of the issue.

Under these premises, the research is based upon hypotheses that include new proposals, such as

estimating which tweets with a softer frame will achieve a greater engagement, or how the interactivity of prosumers will result in humorous comments. In addition, this research aims to determine when there is greater activity on this network and during what periods the tweets linked to television politainment are mostly spread. The following three hypotheses are detailed below:

H1: The profiles of the programmes examined on Twitter achieve a greater engagement in their broadcasts when they include audio-visual documents and mentions, the frame is that of soft news, and they use colloquial language.

H2: The audience's response to the tweets with the greatest interaction is characterised by the inclusion of audio-visual documents and emoticons, the use of colloquial language, and critical and humorous intentions.

H3: The tweets of the programmes with the most engagement and the audience's comments mostly take place during the broadcast and are concentrated at the beginning and end of the life cycle of the programme's broadcast.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Sample and Tool

To find out the engagement obtained by politainment programmes on Twitter, the content analysis method has been used, as it has been proven a very useful tool for systematically, objectively, and quantitatively analysing communicative messages (Berelson, 1952; Riffe et al., 1998; Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). The analysis samples of the study are made up of 7,059 tweets and 2,771 comments, collected from March 28th–April 28th 2019, during the run-up to the Spanish general elections. The selected dates include 15 days of the pre-campaign and 17 days of the electoral campaign, including both election day and the day of reflection. The reason for including both dates is due to the dissemination that politainment programmes make on Twitter during these days. On the other hand, only tweets about politics were analysed in this article, discarding those that talked about other topics or guests of the programme during the month of monitoring. The tool to download tweets from Twitter accounts was the paid version of Twitonomy.

The selection of politainment programmes comprises all those television programmes broadcast during the pre-campaign period and the electoral campaign. It has been shown that political information received a spectacular treatment either through the narrative style, the election, and the treatment of sources and themes, or due to the technical characteristics of post-production. The sample includes programmes that are entirely politainment and others that include specific sections belonging to one of the three sub-genres mentioned in the theoretical introduction. In total, 18 infotainment programmes were studied. All of them were programmes that were broadcast during those given dates: *Los Desayunos* (Televisión Española), *La Mañana* (Televisión Española), *La Noche en 24 Horas* (Televisión Española), *Espejo Público* (Antena 3), *El Hormiguero 3.0* (Antena 3), *Cuatro al Día* (Cuatro), *Todo es Mentira, El Programa de Ana Rosa* (Telecinco), *Ya es Mediodía* (Telecinco), *Mi Casa es la Tuya* (Telecinco), *Salvados* (La Sexta), *El Objetivo* (La Sexta), *La Sexta Noche* (La Sexta), *Al Rojo Vivo* (La Sexta), *El Intermedio* (La Sexta), *Más Vale Tarde* (La Sexta), and *Liarla Pardo* (La Sexta).

### 2.2. Procedure

The research was carried out in four different stages. In the first stage, the 253 tweets with the highest engagement were selected from the total sample of 7,059 based on the interactions obtained: the sum of the retweets, likes, and comments. Figure 1 shows that 50% of the total interactions were concentrated in the most engaging 253 tweets.

In the second stage, a quantitative index was built to measure the level of engagement based on the average between the number of comments, the number of retweets, and the number of likes of three groups (high, medium, and low), with which the different variables that make up the analysis template of politainment programmes were crossed. In the third stage, the sample of the prosumers' comments—comprised of 2,771 tweets—was analysed. To do so, the number of comments that appear most frequently in the 253 tweets with the most engagement was considered, with 13 being the most common number detected. This is sought to establish a fixed value of comments in order to analyse and standardise the study. The value of 13 comments is represented in Figure 2 which is a probability distribution figure to determine which population slot is adjusted and which corresponds to a lognormal distribution.

Finally, the fourth stage refers to the temporary study of the programmes' tweets. This was done by sizing the time variable to carry out the study in all cases simultaneously and to ignore the different broadcast frequencies. To do this, a period was defined, which the authors of this research call the "life cycle of the broadcast" (Figure 3). It includes ranges from the start of a programme (*N*) to the start of the next programme (*N* + 1). By doing so, the tweet is located by deleting the time variable, and the analysis is homogenised for the different durations and time slots.

### 2.3. Content Analysis

The study required the design of two template models, one for analysing the tweets with the most engagement issued by the politainment programmes, and
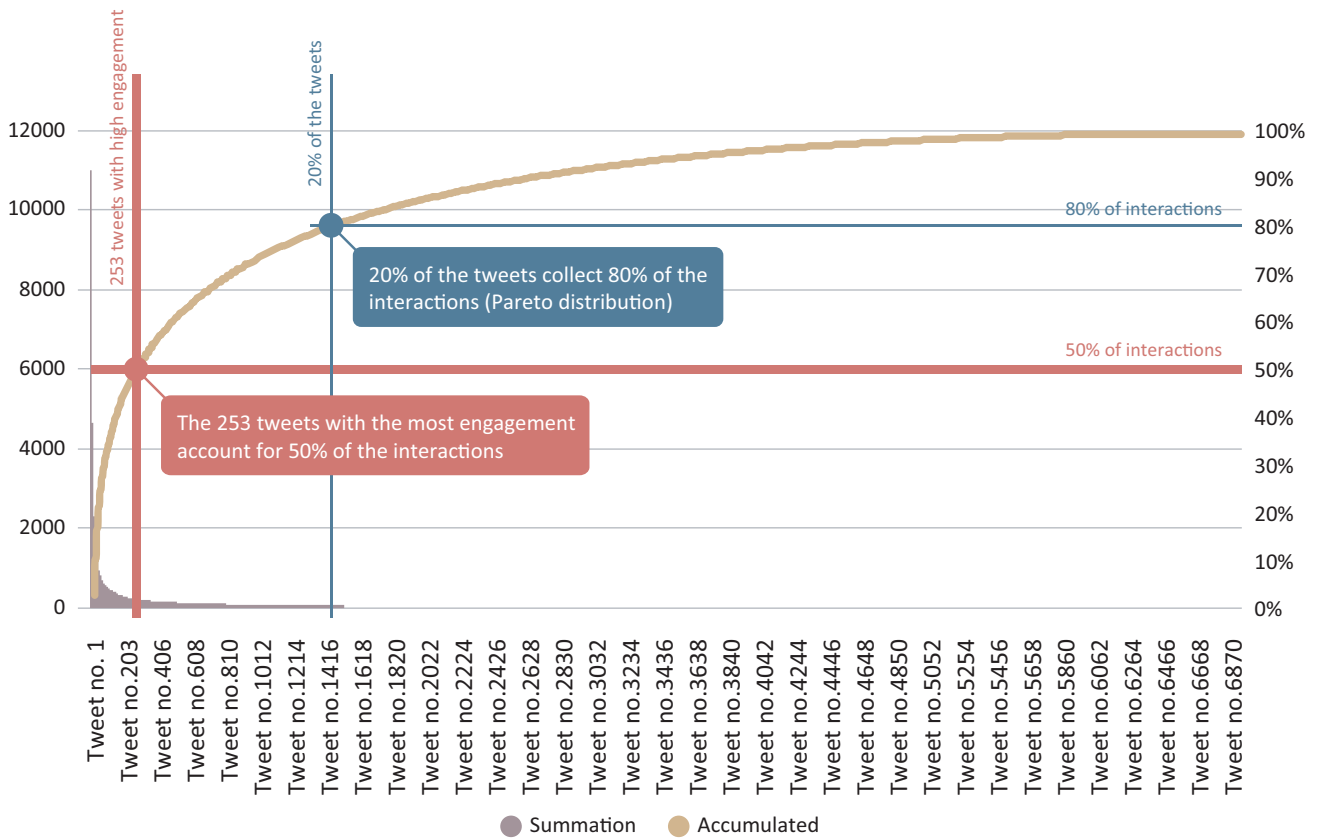
**Figure 1.** Distribution of interactions.

another for studying the comments of the social audience. In total, the programme template comprises 22 categories and 143 variables, while the prosumers template comprises 21 categories and 107 variables. The template is made up of three blocks. The first section focuses on the record and scope data, a basic dimension when coding, which includes the variables "date," "time," "URL," "programme," "number of comments," "number of retweets," and "number of likes." In this first part, the politainment programme template also includes the
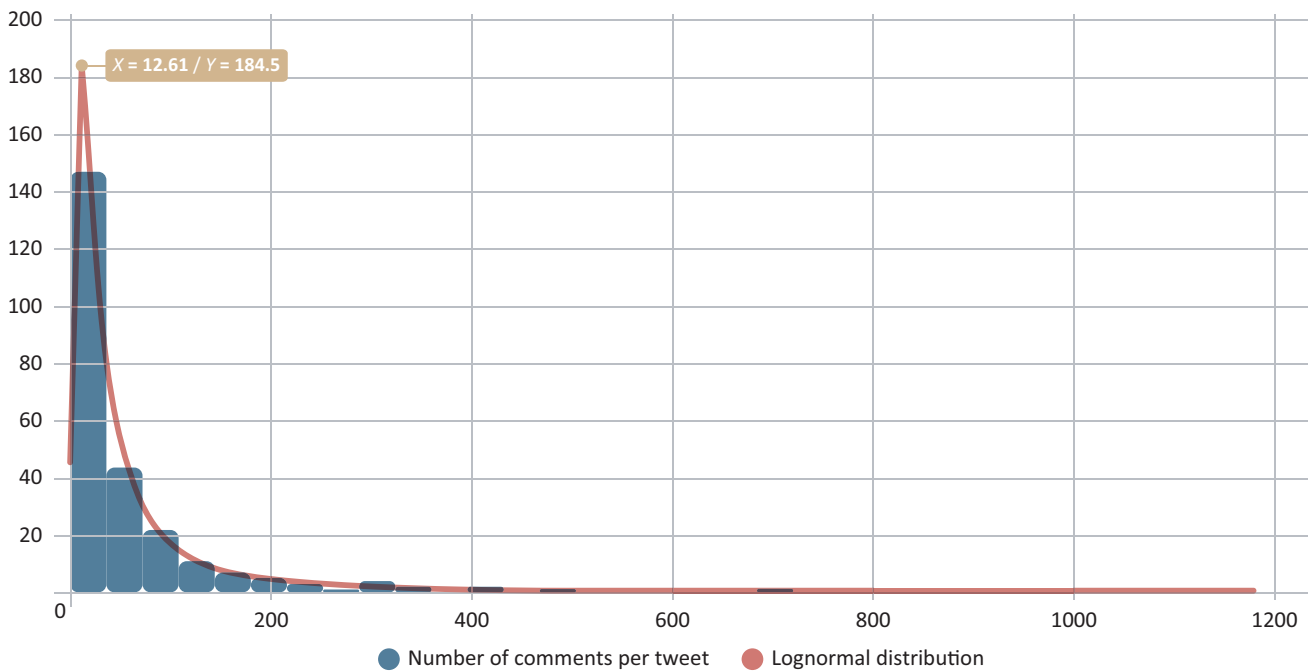


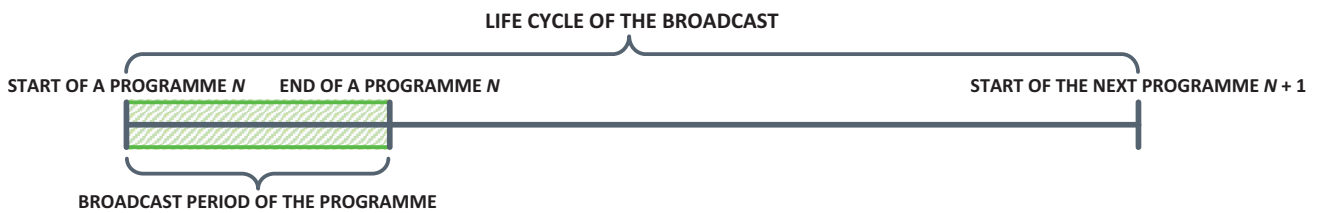**Figure 2.** Probability distribution.

**Figure 3.** Illustration of the life cycle of the broadcast.

"broadcast period" category to identify the tweets that were issued during the pre-campaign and electoral campaigns. For the section designed to study the social audience, we included the category "user account," which aims to identify the prosumers making the comments.

The second block refers to the formal and descriptive aspects of the tweet. This section includes two different parts: the first refers to textual complements that encompass the categories "links," "mentions," "emoticons," and "hashtags"; the second refers to audio-visual attributes that address the type of "document," "main character," and "space." Regarding the differences in this block, related to the social audience template, the variables "link to other tweets" and "link to social networks" were included in order to provide a more complete view of the comments published by the prosumers. In the case of the programme template, the visual section is further explored. Three variables were formulated for politainment programmes: "spontaneous photography," "posing photography," and "selfie"; for the social audience, the variables were "image" and "linked image."

The third block, entitled content aspects, brings together the categories of "information," "news topic," "context frame," "predominant frame," "language," "bias," "intentionality," and "feedback." The first two categories belong to the template of politainment programmes, and the last concern the social audience. The "information" category includes the variables: "hard news" (breaking public affairs involving political leaders, fast-moving current affairs, and information about disruptions or problems that are presumably important for citizens); "soft news" (sensationalist information that refers to events); "soft interviews" (interviews where decontextualisation, personalisation, and emotionality predominate, as well as a combination of hard and soft questions); "serious interview" (current affairs news addressed through the statements given by the interviewee); "whistleblower report" (exposes events affecting a certain community in which indications of illegality are confirmed); and "political parody" (political issues narrated through humour, dramatisation, and criticism). The "news topic" refers to issues such as election campaigning, political corruption, campaign politics, politician, and party as news. The "context frame" encompasses the variables proposed by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) called the "episodic frame," centred on the individual, on a particular event or incident which is not discussed in depth, and the "thematic frame," dedicated

to important information of a general nature or problems in public life. The "predominant frame" includes the variables of "morality," "politics," "human interest," "attribution of responsibility," "sensationalism," "conflict," "humour," "public framing," "conjecture," and "consensus." The "language" category is subdivided into "formal language," which emphasises posts that are carefully and rigorously written, and "colloquial language," which highlights tweets that introduce grammatical errors, misspellings, and inaccuracies in the choice of vocabulary (e.g., crutches, swear words, and colloquial expressions). The "bias" category is organised into three sub-categories: "positive," "negative," and "not applicable." The "positive" variable refers to publications with friendly or favourable connotations towards the topic or the character addressed, the "negative" variable is precisely the opposite of the previous case, and "not applicable" refers to the absence of bias in the tweet. The "Intentionality" is divided into the variables "informative," "humorous," "critical," "self-promotion," and "other." Finally, the feedback contemplates the subcategories established by Sunstein (2009): "information cascade," when a new issue is detected in the comment (arguments, evidence, or data) different from what was commented in the programme's tweet. The "cascade of conformity" will prove when there is approval regarding what has been published, and "group polarisation" will be decided when the comments discuss and refute the content. The authors participated in the analysis as coders, with an agreement index using Holsti's formula (1969) ranging between 0.90–0.96. Disagreements were resolved by a review of the differences between the three coders.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Analysis of the Tweets of Politainment Programmes With the Highest Engagement on Twitter

After the study was carried out, it was observed that the greatest number of tweets made by the prosumer audience of the politainment programmes was concentrated during the pre-campaign (75.89%) and not during the official election campaign (24.11%), as would be expected. This phenomenon could be due to the fact that the pre-campaign period is already very active in the framework of modern political communication and the user's interaction decreases as time goes by due to

the fatigue caused by the lifespan of the electoral activity. Concerning the metrics of the tweets, the main action was to like content (31.49%), followed by retweeting it (18.31%), while commenting was the least preferred (5.27%). This leads us to affirm that there is a low interaction level, considering that comments are the element of interaction related to a greater engagement with the social audience (Ballesteros, 2019). Likewise, the time slots that stand out for registering the most important engagement with the social audience are prime time, midday, and morning (Figure 4).

In relation to the textual research carried out, it is noted that those that manage to achieve the greatest engagement with the social audience are the hashtags of the topic of the day (36.63%), the programme itself (27.57%), and the main character (26.75%). It is also important to take into consideration the links that redirect the user to the URL of the channel where the programme is broadcast which enables the audience to follow it live (49.64%), the links to videos of the television schedule (37.96%), and finally, the mentions of political profiles (40.31%) and famous personalities (21.43%). The emoticons do not manage to achieve a great impact in the tweets of the television shows. Only 33.20% of the messages that include emojis encouraged the audience to interact, which leads us to affirm that using emoticons is not a successful strategy.

On the other hand, considering the most successful audio-visual aids to encourage engagement with the audience, screenshots (26.88%), videos (26.09%), and videos with links (21.34%) stand out as the strongest resources in this environment (Figure 5). This last variable is known in Twitter's jargon as Twitter Cards since they allow one to see a preview of multimedia information. The analysis highlights the success achieved by

audio-visual documents, compared to texts, which may be due to the algorithms used in Twitter's platform that favour audio-visual content or to the prosumer's choice to interact with these tweets because such content can be understood faster than text. De Vries et al. (2012) and Jamieson (2006) state that social network users are more attracted to posts with greater vividness, that is, those in which sight and hearing come into play.

The topic "political and/or party as news" is the one that manages to achieve the greatest impact in the tweets of the politainment programmes. Also popular were those that contained soft news (77.86%) and those written with formal language (85.35%). The pseudo-informative nature of most of the programmes is the key to understanding the success of the formal language in the selected sample. Less popular were the ones that have an informative intention (43.08%) and those including criticism (36.36%), in line with the current affairs narrative of a large number of the politainment programmes studied. Finally, the episodic context frame (99.60%) and the sensationalist (22.13%), human interest (18.97%), and public frames (17%) are the ones that arouse the most engagement in the programme tweets, strengthening the idea that soft is what generates more interest and interaction, thanks to its ability to highlight the most striking facts. There is no evidence regarding the bias applied since the highest engagement is distributed similarly between the positive bias (37.94%) and the negative bias (37.15%) adopted by the tweet.

### 3.2. Behaviour of the Audience in Twitter Politainment Programmes

Regarding the results of the analysis of the user response, it is observed that the social audience comments mostly
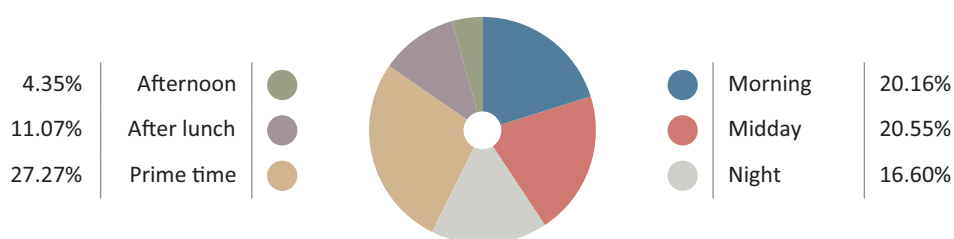


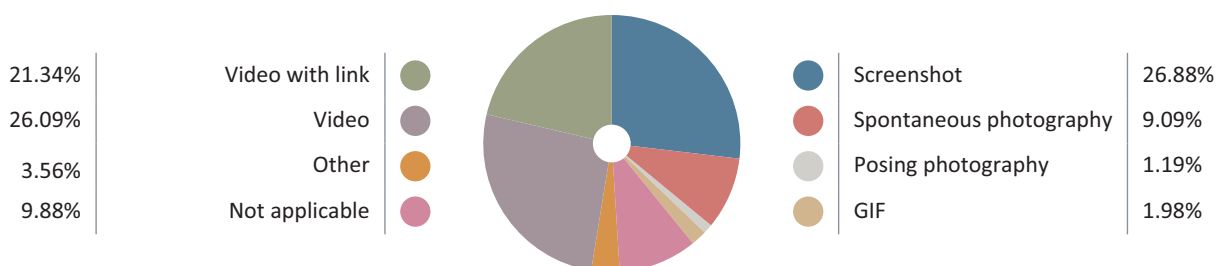**Figure 4.** Engagement of the tweets according to the time slots.

| | | | Morning | 20.16% |
| 4.35% | Afternoon | | Midday | 20.55% |
| 11.07% | After lunch | | Night | 16.60% |
| 27.27% | Prime time | | | |



**Figure 5.** Engagement of the tweets related to audio-visual aids.

| | | | Screenshot | 26.88% |
| 21.34% | Video with link | | Spontaneous photography | 9.09% |
| 26.09% | Video | | Posing photography | 1.19% |
| 3.56% | Other | | GIF | 1.98% |
| 9.88% | Not applicable | | | |

under total (44.60%) or partial (21.42%) anonymity: some users employ pseudonyms, fake names, and hidden identities; others only give part of their name and an impersonal photograph, which helps them to interact more and be less inhibited when responding (Figure 6). These results show that the official accounts of politainment programmes on Twitter have a community of strangers on whom much of the active participation relies. They are also in line with the social and communicative reality of Twitter: at the same time as they affect digital engagement, anonymity makes the social audience feel less inhibited, safer from being discovered (Domínguez & Hernán, 2010) and, therefore, more involved. Being real implies taking responsibility for what is expressed, which makes them take a more cautious approach.

Also noteworthy is the low number of times that the prosumers make use of the retweets (30.71%) and comments (18.98%), compared to likes (63.75%; as seen in Figure 7) with which they intend to leave proof of having seen or read the tweet, thus supporting what is stated in it (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). This trend shows that the users are comfortable being passive in this environment (Muñiz et al., 2017). However, when the user participates with a comment, it is mostly to start a discussion about the tweets (18.48%), described by Sunstein (2009) as group polarisation, or to reaffirm the majority message (13.75%), which the same author refers to as a cascade of conformity.

On the other hand, the comments stand out for their lack of elaboration, with links (3.28%), hashtags (12.20%), emoticons (17.48%), and mentions (40.03%) in the comments being quite unusual user responses. Audio-visual documents are also rare, as they are only included in 9.42% of the comments. This could be due to the adult public towards which the politainment spaces studied are oriented, as these resources are more common among young people (Azuma & Maurer, 2007; Baron & Ling, 2011; Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

In relation to the study of the audience's responses, the frequent use of colloquial language in the comments (62.36%) stands out, suggesting that the users seek to express themselves in an open way, similar to the spoken language (Figure 8). The two intentions in which the responses are included are critical (37.28%) and informative (30.71%). The behaviour, in this case of the social audience, is due to the public nature of the message or the desire to gain some benefit or advantage from the rest of the community, either in the form of a comment, retweet, or like. The episodic setting (92.71%), based upon the private life of individuals or certain events, is the most common, together with the public setting (53.48%), in line with the news set by the programme or the moment. On the other hand, the bias of the messages is ambiguous since very similar percentages are found regarding the positive (25.51%) and negative (27.86%) biases related to what is being said.
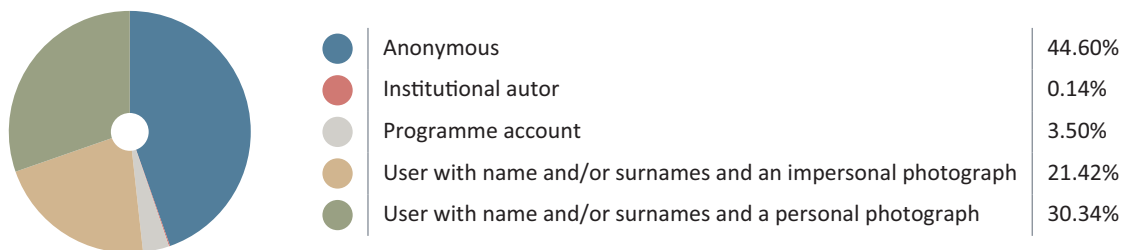


| | |
|---|---|
| Anonymous | 44.60% |
| Institutional autor | 0.14% |
| Programme account | 3.50% |
| User with name and/or surnames and an impersonal photograph | 21.42% |
| User with name and/or surnames and a personal photograph | 30.34% |

**Figure 6.** Classification of the user account according to its typology.



| | |
|---|---|
| No comments | 81.02% |
| From 1 to 10 comments | 18.26% |
| From 11 to 25 comments | 0.47% |
| More than 25 comments | 0.25% |

| | |
|---|---|
| No retweets | 69.29% |
| 1 to 10 retweets | 28.15% |
| 11 to 25 retweets | 1.37% |
| More than 25 retweets | 1.19% |

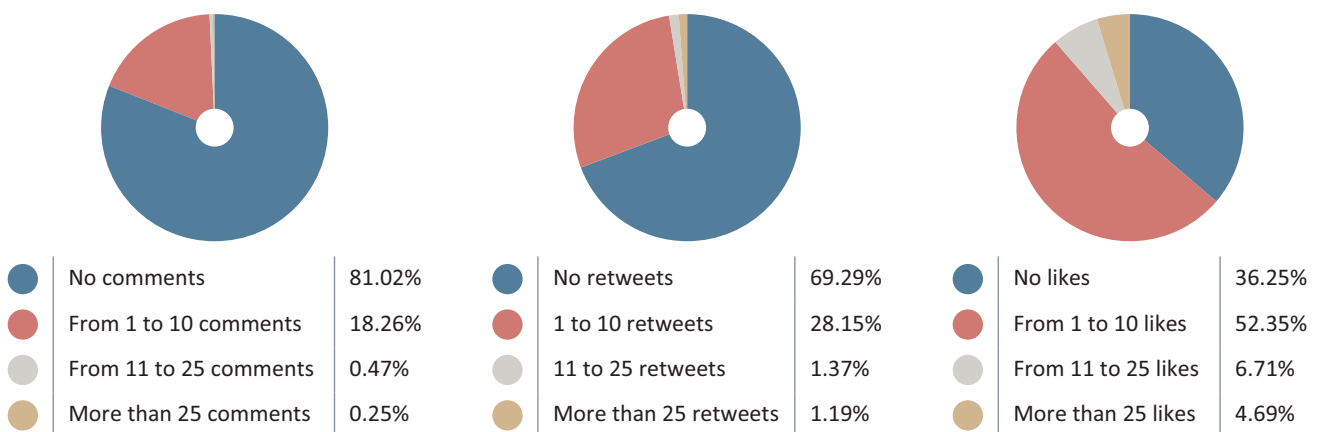| | |
|---|---|
| No likes | 36.25% |
| From 1 to 10 likes | 52.35% |
| From 11 to 25 likes | 6.71% |
| More than 25 likes | 4.69% |

**Figure 7.** Metrics for comments, retweets, and likes.

**Figure 8.** Examples of comments using colloquial language. Note: The translation of the tweets is as follows (a) "There @Albert_Rivera small cookers!!, The only one who has cooked what he has. Nothing like working hard", (b) "Every morning when I go to the toilet I remember a lot about casado and many like him and even more when I am constipated YOU CAN'T IMAGINE HOW I SHIT ON THEM."

*3.3. Temporal Analysis of Programme Tweets and User Comments*

Regarding the temporal analysis that was carried out regarding the tweets of the programmes and the comments, it is clear that the politainment programmes achieve their highest engagement (62.65%) through the tweets issued during the broadcast schedule, especially within the first hour after the posting of the tweet (52.8%). This behaviour, which is observed in the first section of the life cycle of the broadcast, is modified depending on the time slot to which each programme belongs. In this sense, it is observed that the programmes broadcast in prime time and at night accumulate their greatest interactivity during the first part of the life cycle, while the programmes broadcast from morning to afternoon shows a greater dispersion (Figure 9). These results show how greater interactivity could be achieved in politainment programmes according to the time slot. For example, during midday, after lunch, and afternoon slots, a significant interaction is seen during the last part of the life cycle, that is, in the time before the broadcast, which could be used to encourage engagement with the social audience.

Taking a closer look at the behaviour of the programmes and users during the broadcasting period of the television space, we see that different patterns are detected depending on the time slot. The clearest trends are the linear behaviour during the broadcast period in prime-time programmes, a greater incidence in the first section of the period in the morning programmes, and a greater incidence in the final section in after-lunch television shows. These behaviours are reflected both by programmes and users (Figure 10).

**4. Conclusions**

This research presents new results within the field of active audiences, such as the study of the timing of the social audience's activity depending on the broadcast schedule. These results can be used as a basis for future research and the action of television managers since it will allow them to design a digital strategy that favours engagement in today's highly competitive television market.

The study partially supports the three hypotheses raised at the beginning of this research. The first stated that the profiles of the programmes examined on Twitter achieve a greater engagement in their broadcasts when they include audio-visual documents and mentions, the frame is that of soft news and when they use colloquial language. The findings show that politainment programmes achieve greater engagement when they include audio-visual documents, contain soft news, and introduce mentions, but not when they use colloquial language. In this context, in most cases, the tweets with the highest engagement are written in formal language. This may be due to the pseudo-informative nature of the programmes examined and the fact that social audiences expect politainment programmes to have a coherent style between what is said on television and what is expressed on Twitter.

The second hypothesis stated that the response of the social audience related to the tweets with the greatest interaction is characterised by the inclusion of audio-visual documents and emoticons, the use of colloquial language, and critical and humorous intentions. The objective is considered partially fulfilled because the audience avoids using emoticons and audio-visual documents, and they do have a humorous purpose when responding, as it was presumed, but they do normally use colloquial language and critical intent.

Finally, the third hypothesis is related to the fact that the tweets of the programmes with the most engagement and the users' comments occur during the television programme broadcast and are concentrated at the beginning and the end of the life cycle of the broadcast of the programme. In this case, the results show,
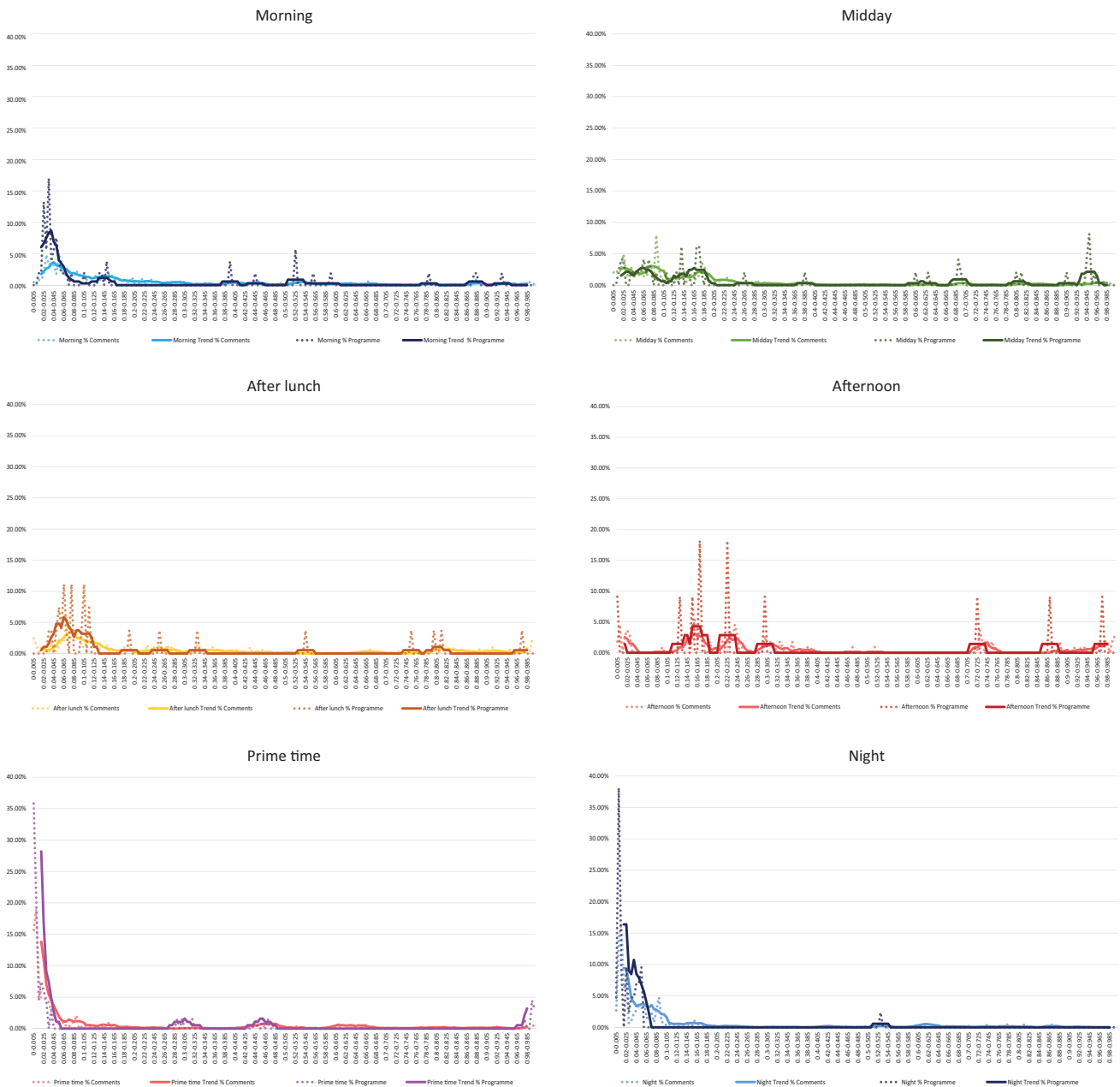
**Figure 9.** Evolution of tweets/programme's comments during the life cycle by broadcast slot.

in the first place, that politainment programmes obtain the greatest engagement through publications issued at the same time as the programme is broadcast; however, the largest number of comments take place after the programme is broadcast. Secondly, it is observed that the trend is to gather the majority of tweets and comments during the beginning of the life cycle of the broadcast, while the concentration that takes place at the end of it is quite insignificant.

This research supports the results of recent work in which it is observed that the social audience does not behave as creatively, actively, and interactively as might be expected (Lin & Chiang, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2017), in this sense, no political consequences were perceived given the low activity of the social audience. In the same

way, in the action of the profiles of the programmes examined, inconsistent and not very innovative production, promotion, and communication strategies are also observed (Coromina et al., 2020; Franquet et al., 2018; Sequera, 2013). These actions are not adapted to the platform's characteristics, and the resources it offers are not used productively, nor is engaging content created to generate a greater interaction with users. Apart from that, it is evident that spectacularised political information broadens its audience significantly when placed on Twitter and that soft, sensational, personalistic news topics that contain audio-visual elements produce a greater engagement. This deserves significant attention from the academy due to the complexity of its consequences: on the one hand, the approximation of politics and its
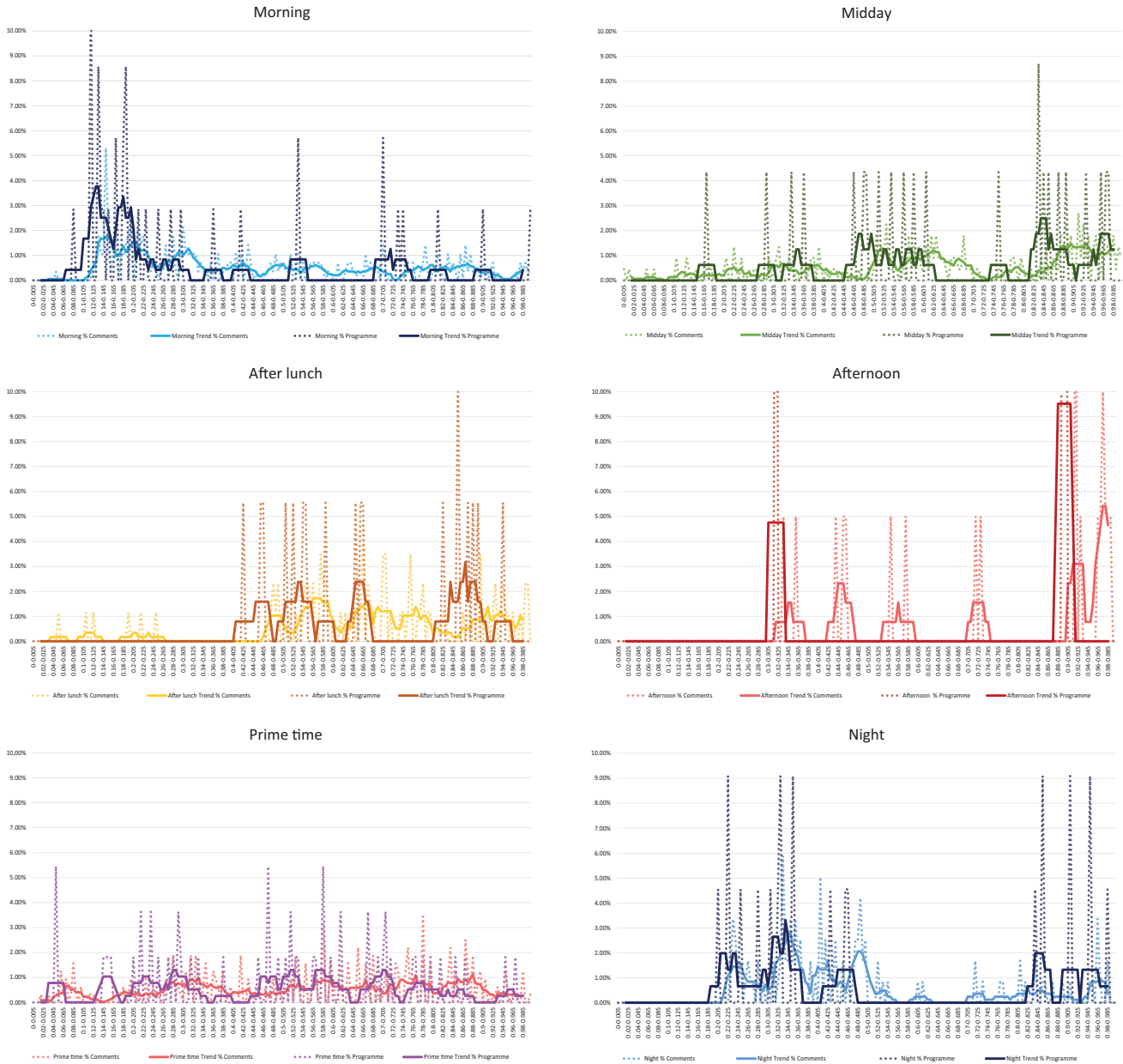
**Figure 10.** Evolution of tweets/programme comments by time slot throughout the broadcast period of the programme.

main characters to the citizenry and, on the other, the frivolous or superficial perception of it that may become established in the audience.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

# Journalism in Democracy: A Discourse Analysis of Twitter Posts on the Ferrerasgate Scandal

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## Abstract

This research analyses the discourse on Twitter surrounding the "Ferrerasgate" scandal involving the Spanish journalist Antonio García Ferreras, director and host of the television show *Al Rojo Vivo* (La Sexta, Spanish TV channel). It examines the main object of criticism, the tone of the discourse, the argumentation made by users, as well as the existence of hate in their rhetoric. The tweets included in the study's sample (*N* = 2,846), posted between 5 and 15 July 2022 and extracted on 16 July 2022, were examined in two complementary phases. The first entailed a quantitative content analysis of the messages and the second analysed whether hate speech was found in the sample as a whole. The Sketch Engine tool was used to determine whether "crypto hate speech" existed in the sample as a whole, and to whom it was targeted. The results reveal that "Ferrerasgate" sparked a debate that spilt over into journalism across the board, calling into question the media's role in a democracy. The most prominent arguments were the condemnation of misinformation, lack of independence, and absence of professionalism in the journalism sector. It should be noted that most of the messages were destructive in tone; hate was found in the tweets analysed, although these did not represent a high percentage in relation to the total sample.

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

The debate on the status of journalism is not new, but recent events seem to have strengthened and bolstered the profession. In the digital age, where information spreads around the world at breakneck speed, the new technological context, the different consumer tastes and habits (Carlón & Scolari, 2009), the phenomenon of disinformation (Alonso, 2019), and the changes in the ethical principles that once underpinned journalism (Rodrigo-Alsina & Cerqueira, 2019), not to mention specific events such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Martín-Jiménez et al., 2021; Reguero-Sanz et al., 2021) or Ukraine war (Pavlik, 2022) have placed journalism

at a historical crossroads. Twitter has become an established professional tool for journalists, whether used as a source of information, a space for conversation, or a forum to observe trends of opinion (Molyneux & McGregor, 2022). However, in parallel to these new opportunities provided by Twitter, it has also intensified a number of negative phenomena that have historically affected good practice in journalism. In particular, misinformation and the causing of hoaxes to go viral. Several studies have examined the link between Twitter and the spread of fake news, for example, in the case of Donald Trump's election victory or the Brexit referendum (Cabezuelo & Manfredi, 2019). Similarly, Vila Márquez and Arce García (2019) applied big data techniques to

analyse the process of dissemination of fake news on Twitter and concluded that there were organised structures for the re-dissemination of this type of fake content. Likewise, Sivasankari and Vadivu (2022) monitored how hoaxes were reproduced using graph theory. In response to the increasing amount of fake news on Twitter and the impossibility of confirming the veracity of the content, some initiatives have been launched to combat fake news through algorithmic methods such as deep learning (Sakshini & Bhavna, 2022). The defence of the truth has also been advocated as the only solution to combat journalism's lack of credibility (Sixto-García et al., 2021).

Twitter has also provided new avenues for sensationalism that have even affected how news agencies use their profiles (Brown et al., 2016). In fact, due to the specific formal peculiarities—a restricted number of characters—and its transmedia properties, Twitter has encouraged dishonourable business behaviours such as clickbait, closely linked to sensationalism (Bazaco et al., 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic was also a vector that affected the media's sensationalist use of this social network (Sánchez-Figuera et al., 2021). The spectacularisation of information, a phenomenon directly related to tabloid journalism that has been a trend in Spain since the arrival of private television (García-Avilés et al., 2022), has also been encouraged by Twitter. For example, the use of memes by users has served to further increase the already existing toxic sphere in relation to journalistic content (Paz et al., 2021).

The characteristics of Twitter have somewhat accentuated these major problems and created a fracture between society and the media. Not only is there a media credibility crisis (Barrios-Rubio & Gutiérrez-García, 2022), but we are seeing the emergence of personal and professional finger-pointing. Miller (2021a) noticed this trend and developed a theory related to it, which demonstrated that the harassment experienced by journalists on social media directly affects their professional performance. This has led to them avoiding interviews with certain leaders and has had an impact on their personal freedom, which has ultimately resulted in their becoming less active on social media (Miller, 2021b). The type of journalistic specialism is also an influential factor in the violent communication received by media professionals, with politics and gender being the two profiles that most often experience aggressive behaviour from social media users (Kim & Shin, 2022).

Verbal aggressiveness is directly related to the ideological polarisation of the 2010s and even to hate speech. Journalists have not been considered to be a marginalised group and therefore the target of this type of rhetoric, as hate speech was only deemed to affect vulnerable groups or those at risk of social exclusion (MacAvaney et al., 2019). However, recent research has identified a type of discourse that targets other individuals or groups (such as journalists) who are not discriminated against because of their economic status, gender, race, or religion (Shin et al., 2020). This phe-

nomenon is defined as "socially unacceptable discourse" (Vehovar & Jontes, 2021) or, more precisely, as "crypto hate speech" (Herrero-Izquierdo et al., 2022). This term refers to rhetoric found in the social media environment which is semantically constructed in a similar way to traditional hate speech, although it cannot be considered as such because it is not targeted at vulnerable groups. This research underlines the interest in this type of discourse that has been perceived at the political level, where much of the violent communication on social media is found.

This theoretical framework contextualises the initial purpose of this research, that is, to examine the discourse produced by the social media audience on a specific media-political scandal. This article aims to investigate Twitter users' reactions to this event, as part of a rising wave of polarisation (Weismueller et al., 2022). The focus is the case popularly known as "Ferrerasgate," concerning the manipulation of information about Pablo Iglesias, former vice-president of the Spanish government and founder of the left-wing party Unidas Podemos. This was uncovered in July 2022 as a result of the recording of a conversation between police commissioners José Luis Olivera, José Manuel Villarejo, Atresmedia executive Mauricio Casals, multiple business owner Adrián de la Joya and journalist, director of La Sexta TV channel and host of the programme *Al Rojo Vivo*, Antonio García Ferreras. In May 2016, news about an alleged bank account belonging to Pablo Iglesias in the Grenadine Islands, a tax haven, and his relations with the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro were broadcast in *Al Rojo Vivo*. The information would prove to be false after having been first published in *Okdiario*, the newspaper directed by Eduardo Inda. However, the controversy arose because, despite giving little credibility to the news, the director of La Sexta (Spanish private television channel) decided to broadcast it: "I told him: 'Eduardo [Inda, director of *OKDiario*], this is very serious. I'm going with it, but this is very delicate and too crude'" ("Ferreras, sobre los audios," 2022).

Besides other issues mentioned in the audio recording, such as political conspiracies to sink the career of Juan Carlos Monedero (co-founder of Pablo Iglesias' party), it notably sparked a heated discussion in the media industry and, above all, on social media platforms. Specifically, the tweets posted on this topic in July 2022 generated a significant flow of information and opinions on the subject, including more-or-less critical views. What first appeared to have caused yet another flurry of comments on Twitter gave rise to an extensive digital discourse that displayed different ideologies.

Once again, Twitter became the preferred arena for dialectical confrontation (Burnap & Williams, 2015), a framework that was representative of the existing political polarisation (Friedolin & Volfovsky, 2018; Urman, 2020) and a repository for a form of hostile communication that often bordered on hate speech (Gómez-García et al., 2021). "Ferrerasgate" exposed the

dilemma of credibility, disinformation, diligence in the use of sources, as well as respect for the truth in journalism: "Villarejo's audio recordings of Ferreras uncover the origin of the news about Pablo Iglesias' fake bank account" (Precedo, 2022); "journalism, a profession in palliative care" (Cacho, 2022); "FerrerasGate: what to do with the 'sewer' media" (Alfonso, 2022); "Journalism is in need of a catharsis" (Barceló, 2022).

## 2. Objectives and Method

Given the relationship between Twitter discourse and journalism, the hostile environment faced by news professionals and the specific case in question, the general objective of this research is to analyse the argumentative criticism generated by Twitter users in relation to the "Ferrerasgate" scandal. This general objective can be broken down into three objectives (O):

O1: To examine who the main object of criticism was in the "FerrerasGate" Twitter conversation. That is, to ascertain if the messages focused on the main journalist involved (Ferreras) were extrapolated to his colleagues in the programme, in the television channel, or even to the rest of the profession.

O2: To identify what type of argumentation predominated in the tweets. To analyse whether users focused on debates about the journalism profession or whether their criticism was solely targeted at the characteristics of this specific case.

O3: To explore whether the messages posted had a constructive or a destructive purpose. That is, to examine whether they contribute to the improvement of journalistic practice or whether they are intentionally hurtful messages. This will allow us to determine whether hate speech was perceived in the tweets analysed.

Three starting hypotheses were formulated that were consistent with the three specific objectives outlined above:

H1: The discourse on Twitter was extrapolated to the entire journalism profession, despite the references necessarily made to the case study at hand.

H2: The criticism in the tweets was dominated by the argument against disinformation since the scandal began with a report revealing that the director of the programme *Al Rojo Vivo* had authorised news stories despite his doubts about their credibility.

H3: This scandal resulted in an aggressive rhetoric against journalism in general on Twitter that was specifically aimed at the protagonist of the scandal, which manifested itself as crypto hate speech.

In order to verify or refute the proposed hypotheses, this study used quantitative content analysis, a technique used in previous research to obtain an objective and systematic understanding of the content of the messages analysed (Riffe et al., 2019). The study sample was selected from tweets containing the handle @alrojovivo posted on Twitter between 5 and 15 July 2022 (*N* = 2,846).

The tweets were compiled using text-mining techniques, which allow information to be extracted from big data with minimal human interference (Lin et al., 2016). RStudio free software (version 1.4.1103) and VOSON Dash library data were used for data collection. A link was established using the application programming interface for Twitter developers with an account registered for academic research. This is a data acquisition method tested in recent research (for example, see Arce & Vila, 2021).

The messages were examined in two complementary phases. In the first phase, a detailed analysis was made of each tweet in the sample. Three researchers undertook the coding work and randomly tested it using Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient to calculate reliability. A pre-test with tweets posted on different dates and by different users provided a reliability coefficient of 0.855 in the overall computation, confirming that the three coders followed the same criteria. The variables analysed were divided into two groups: form-based and content-based.

There were six form-based variables:

- Followers of the tweet's author.
- Date when the tweet was posted.
- Interaction.
- Hashtags used.
- Twitter handles mentioned.
- Attachments to the text message. Memes were categorised based on the ideas of Paz et al. (2021). Based on the purpose of the message, the authors classified this content into two macrocategories: positive and negative. Within the latter, they established different purposes of a visual montage: ridicule, criticism with hate, and hate speech. The memes were analysed due to the role they play in fragmenting digital audiences and creating an emotional political narrative. Macro image memes and the most popular meme were selected, whereas those that had no image, video, or GIF were excluded, following the formulation by Zenner and Geeraerts (2018).

The main aim of this research was realised by studying the content of the tweets. The three variables analysed relate to each of the specific objectives of the study.

The first variable was the Target of Criticism: (a) The journalism profession—those tweets that specifically referred to journalism practice as a whole; (b) TV channel—messages that mentioned La Sexta; (c) TV show—references to the name *Al Rojo Vivo*;

(d) Host—the key player in the scandal, Antonio García Ferreras; (e) Other—any other individual mentioned in the tweet (whether they were journalists or not). More than one option was checked if the message was targeted at several people and/or groups. Following the corresponding analysis, saturation sampling was used in order to identify the various categories that make up this variable.

The second analysed variable was the Main Topic. Seven subcategories were included to classify each of the messages according to the reasoning and the main topic to which they referred, with saturation sampling also used in this case. The seven subcategories were: (a) Lack of Independence—this section categorised any tweet related to corruption, "sewers," and the controversial relationship between politics and journalism, where the latter depends on the power elites in society; (b) Professional Protectionism—this included examples of messages accusing either La Sexta or the television programme *Al Rojo Vivo* of covering up "Ferrerasgate," and failing to thoroughly question the information about the scandal to avoid harming the reputation of the channel, its team, and/or its professional and commercial interests; (c) Lack of Professionalism—messages demanding the resignation of the main individual involved in the scandal, Antonio García Ferreras, and those calling for the show to be cancelled or for the television channel to be shut down, including users' claims concerning the lack of journalistic ethics regarding the scandal; (d) Disinformation—this category included arguments referring to the lack of credibility of the target of criticism and tweets related to the alleged manipulation engaged in and presumed disinformation spread by the media; (e) Partiality—this section included tweets in which users perceived imbalanced news coverage, or in other words, where one of the key actors involved could voice their views, while another was silenced or not allowed to retort; (f) Groundless Arguments—this included messages with no reasoning whatsoever, that is, tweets in which the user only hurled insults against the target of criticism, additionally the results obtained in this section determined the analysis phase in which hate speech in those tweets was assessed; (g) Others—lastly, this group included messages which, for one reason or another, could not be classified into one of the previous sections (unrelated to the subject of study, decontextualised, etc.).

The third variable analysed was Purpose, which was divided into two subcategories based on the study by Ksiazek (2016) in which a conversation on Twitter is divided into terms of two large blocks: civility and hostility. This idea has been adapted to the present research by classifying it as: (a) Destructive—this variable was considered when a tweet contained empty reasoning and/or insults, or if sought to harm or ridicule the target of criticism, and these posts were found to convey highly emotional messages and feelings linked to rage, anger, disillusionment, and disappointment,

among others; (b) Constructive—this variable was taken into account when a tweet contained logical and coherent arguments rather than emotional ones, as such, the post might contain objective and verifiable facts reaffirming and supporting the user's view.

The second phase of this study, which determined the extent to which crypto hate speech was used in the sample, entailed classifying the tweets according to the "groundless arguments" variable which, by their nature, also form part of the "destructive" category. Subsequently, the discourse of this type of messages was analysed using the Sketch Engine software. This is capable of automatically generating lists of words which, are placed within the same semantic category according to their use (percentage of shared collocations), avoiding any type of bias on the part of the researcher. In other words, this list is produced according to the context in which the words appear in the selected text corpus. In this way, we could find out which were the most repeated terms on which the hostile discourse was focused. The "thesaurus" tool made it possible to locate words with similar meanings or which appear in the same context.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Object of Criticism

This study comprised a sample of tweets collected from various Twitter accounts with varying degrees of impact (Table 1). Nearly all of the 10 most influential accounts that tweeted about this episode post political content regularly.

All the accounts that posted political messages, such as @protestona1 and @AnitaBotwin, were prone to use Twitter for political activism, leaning towards the left. These accounts act as a mouthpiece for journalists closely identified with that side of the political spectrum, such as Antonio Maestre, Julián Macías Tovar, and Rosa María Artal. The @HPodemita handle made its opinion on the debate known by changing its header photo to one of Antonio García Ferreras superimposed with the word "manipulation" emblazoned on it (Figure 1). The rest of the Twitter accounts analysed in this study that do not regularly publish political content are focused on their users' professions, such as graphic design or photography.

These prominent Twitter accounts and the other less influential users involved other users in their messages by using the "mentions" feature. In addition to the handles of those directly involved in this newsworthy incident (*Al Rojo Vivo*, La Sexta, Pablo Iglesias, and Eduardo Inda), many of the channel's journalists were also mentioned, including Ana Pastor (55), Rodrigo Blázquez (80), Joaquín Castellón (18), Cristina Pardo (four), Jordi Évole (five), Iñaki López (three) and Helena Resano (one). This indicated that the news manipulation scandal affected the credibility of the entire La Sexta channel. However,

**Table 1.** 10 Twitter accounts posted about the study object with the highest number of followers.

| Accounts | Number of followers | Political content |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Protestona ◎ | 237,098 | Yes |
| SIM | 95,505 | No |
| Anita Botwin | 70,049 | Yes |
| *Famélica legión* ▼ | 66,971 | Yes |
| Jon Juarez | 46,324 | No |
| Gato por Madrid 🐱 | 37,891 | No |
| Hugo Bonet | 36,220 | Yes |
| Heidi Podemita | 20,499 | Yes |
| Iban Ameztoy | 20,362 | No |
| Ali Lmrabet المرابط علي | 19,189 | Yes |

journalists with no links to the television channel or the Atresmedia group also appeared in the sample. These included Jesús Cintora (five), Angels Barceló (four), Carlos Herrera (three), Ana Terradillos (two), Ana Rosa Quintana (two), Lucía Méndez (two), Xabier Lapitz (two) and Antonio Naranjo (one). Moreover, other television or radio programmes or other media also surfaced in this social media discourse: *El País* (four), *Público* (four), *El Plural* (three), *En Jake* (three), *The Guardian* (three), *Herrera en COPE* (three), *Cuatro al Día* (two), *El Programa de Ana Rosa* (two), *Espejo Público* (two), *La Hora de TVE* (two) and *El Mundo* (one). This finding clearly demonstrates that the publication of the Antonio García Ferreras audio recordings sparked a meta-media dialogue involving communication industry professionals and companies (Figure 2).

### 3.2. Type of Argument

The tone of the tweets was highly critical and most of them questioned the work of Antonio García Ferreras (95.33%). Moreover, it affected the credibility of the rest of the contributors, the programme, La Sexta, and the journalism profession. Among the posts that related this specific event to journalism as a whole, Figure 3 shows how the manoeuvres of a single journalist could affect

the overall "dignity" of the profession. This particular tweet was linked to external content on a similar case of information manipulation that targeted another leading politician, Juan Carlos Monedero (López, 2022). López's article was not the only one to express an opinion about the status of journalism.

Anita Botwin, whose tweets were also included in the sample, published a piece in the monthly magazine *El Salto*. This was part of the messages that made up the sample in which "Ferrerasgate" was mentioned as another example of the current situation of Spanish journalism:

> The right to information is trampled underfoot by the major media powers in Spain on a daily basis. What Ferreras has done and what the fourth estate is doing, for the most part, is controlling activists and setting traps for them. (Botwin, 2022)

Similarly, Àngels Barceló, director of the radio programme *Hoy por hoy*, also engaged in the posts under study:

> Political corruption in this country, in addition to being enabled by certain politicians, would only have been possible with the involvement and collusion of
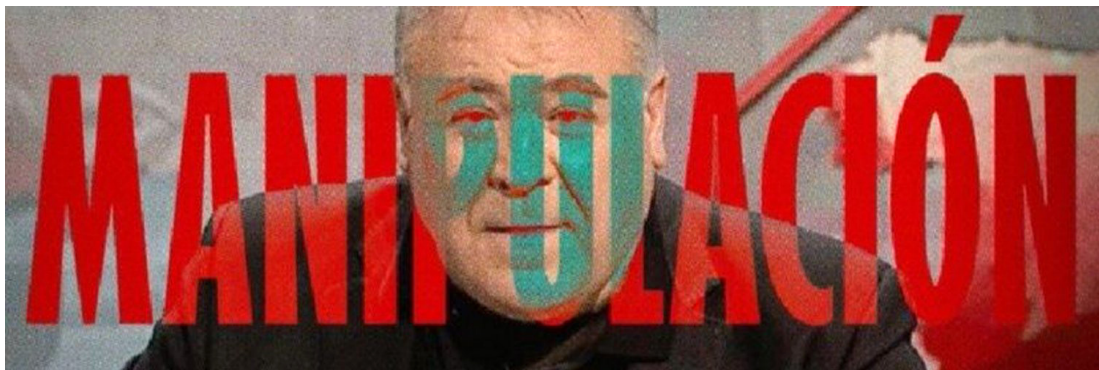


**Figure 1.** Profile image of @HPodemita.

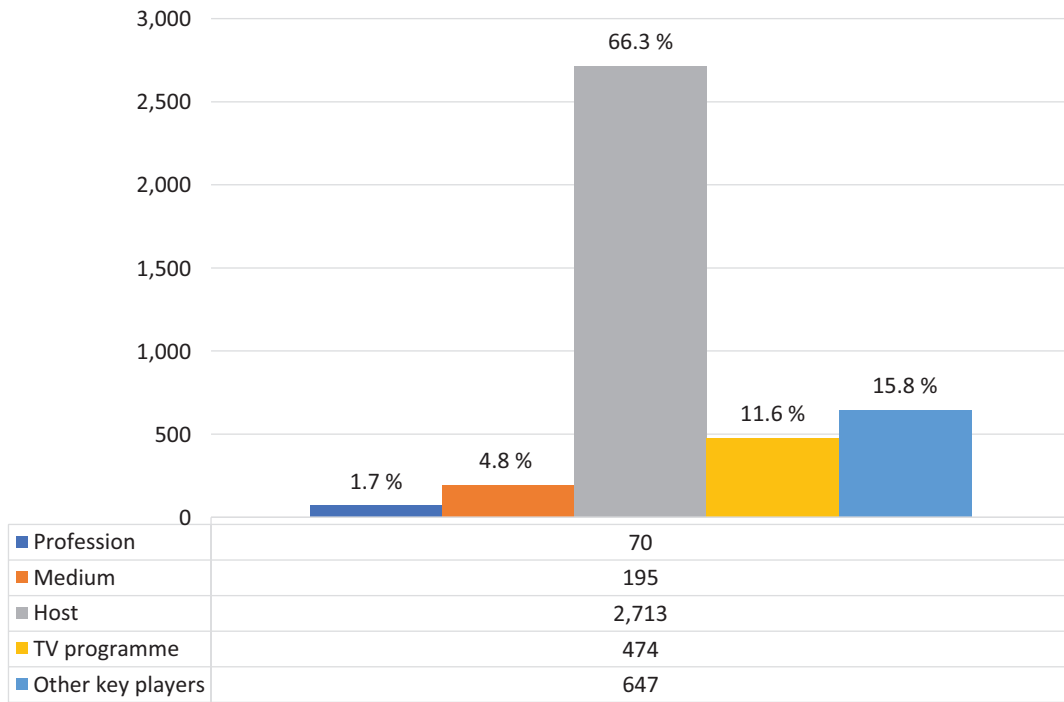| | |
|---|---|
| ■ Profession | 70 |
| ■ Medium | 195 |
| ■ Host | 2,713 |
| ■ TV programme | 474 |
| ■ Other key players | 647 |

**Figure 2.** Main target of criticism.

other actors. It would have been impossible without the support of certain police officers, of a certain business class, of some judges, and indeed, without the support of certain journalists. ("Vídeo. La reflexión de Àngels," 2022)

Even though this type of message was aimed at exposing the situation and bringing about constructive change, most of the tweets were not. Indeed, 81.47% of the

tweets discredited those involved in the scandal, without any attempt at suggesting improvements. These figures were consistent with the high level of polarisation on social media.

On a different note, this study identified the shortcomings observed by consumers of an infotainment show involved in a reputational crisis. The sample in this study directly attacked a political infotainment programme. This served to identify the viewers' perceived



**Figure 3.** Example of a tweet calling Spanish journalism into question. Note: "In response to @DebatAlRojoVivo. Great challenge, bringing dignity back to journalism. Ferreras to Villarejo: 'Do you know where we killed Monedero? The lunch between the host of *Al Vivo Rojo* and director of *La Sexta*, Antonio García Ferreras; his [...]'" (authors' translation).

shortcomings, which they then reported. In this case, media professionals were criticised as much for their lack of credibility as for their lack of independence. To a lesser extent, professional protectionism and partial news content also came in for criticism, hence the demand that Antonio García Ferreras abandon journalism on 605 occasions (Figure 4).

Twitter users mostly posted original text messages but sometimes included original audio-visual content, in line with the creative audience (prosumers). This "memetisation" of the object of study, as shown in the following figures (see Figures 5, 6, and 7), helped to increase the virality of "Ferrerasgate" and become part of pop culture. The content of these could be categorised. All of them (45) were used with negative intent. In turn, the purpose of ridiculing (75.5%) the key actors involved was clearly the main category found, well above those images that included elements of criticism with some hateful content (24.5%).

### 3.3. Purpose of the Tweets: Crypto Hate Speech?

Even though audio-visual editing lowered the tension in the Twittersphere, the tone used was aggressive and sometimes infringed on the individual's right to honour. This type of tweet was classified in the "groundless arguments" category. Sketch Engine was used to analyse the discourse of the posts in this category without researcher bias. When conducting a simple thesaurus search for "Ferreras," the results showed the correlation between this term and other nouns such as "*chufla*" (joke), "*mierda*" (shit), "*asco*" (disgust), and "*vergüenza*" (shame), as evidence that all these words were used in a similar context, coming to function as synonyms (Figure 8).

The in-depth analysis of the discourse generated by Sketch Engine and the search for the main qualifiers used to describe the host of *Al Rojo Vivo* revealed some negative terms that were also used to attack his physical
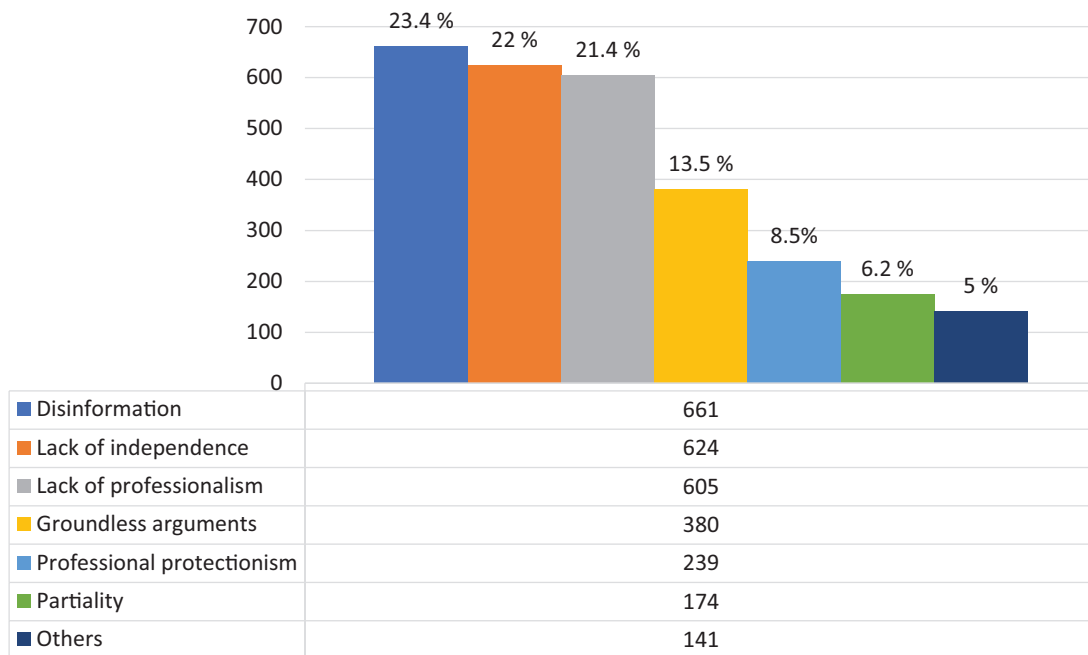


| | |
|---|---|
| ■ Disinformation | 661 |
| ■ Lack of independence | 624 |
| ■ Lack of professionalism | 605 |
| ■ Groundless arguments | 380 |
| ■ Professional protectionism | 239 |
| ■ Partiality | 174 |
| ■ Others | 141 |

**Figure 4.** Arguments used in tweets.



**Figure 5.** Inside the sewers (authors' translation).



**Figure 6.** Generating and disseminating fake news (authors' translation).

**Figure 7.** Out-of-context attack: Using this attack, any argument of your opponent is automatically invalidated (authors' translation).



**Figure 8.** Synonyms of "Ferreras" generated by Sketch Engine.

appearance: scoundrel (nine); disgusting and dishonest (seven); corrupt, liar (five); arsehole, vile, and trashy (four); revolting, repulsive, mafia-like, fat, pathetic, terrorist, and repugnant (three); cowardly, shameless, despicable, contemptible, outrageous, and delinquent (two).

## 4. Conclusions

The emergence of Twitter and other social media platforms has meant that the journalism ecosystem has expanded, thus conveying information to a greater number of people with less effort. However, journalism has also succumbed to the threats inherent to those platforms. With the advent of Web 2.0, the media have found that a new actor has taken away the prominence they used to have when it came to persuading public opinion, the users. The influence of users, also erected as prosumers, is stronger than ever. Not only do they have the ability to select which media are worthy of their audience, but they also have a much greater critical capacity. This, on the one hand, affects the journalists' practices and, on the other, raises the standards of quality that the profession should have. In this context, new alternatives need to be provided that are focused on extending the use of discourse analysis. Due to the qualitative nature of this method, the use of programmes such as ATLAS.ti (Chavez-Montero, 2021) has sometimes been widespread without resolving the shortcomings that are observed when the sample is as broad and heterogeneous as the one selected (*N* = 2,846). The three variables that underpin this analysis (object, argument, and purpose) have made it possible to examine the most important connotative components of Twitter messages. This was combined with the use of the
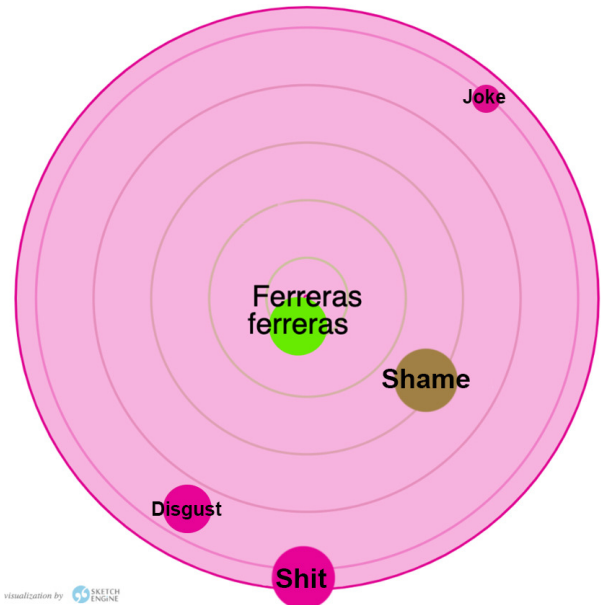
software-based algorithmic functions in Sketch Engine, which made it possible to circumvent the second problem that is perceived in work of this type: researcher bias (Dosouto, 2009).

"Ferrerasgate," a political-media scandal that reverberated around the Twittersphere, is a perfect example of how these users-prosumers commented on an event that had great repercussions. A series of conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the selected content. Firstly, in terms of the object of the criticism, the discourse was found to be highly personalised. It focused on the presenter and key player in the scandal, Antonio García Ferreras, who was the subject matter of most of the comments. Ferreras was the person who was finger-pointed most often, along with other professionals from the media industry and some politicians. However, a significant number of messages were critical of his programme, the television channel, and the journalism profession in general. This served to identify some of the problems of journalism, as well as the demands of users. They ranged from the demand for adequate information (truthful and objective, prevailing over entertainment)—to outright respect for journalism ethics, professionalism, and the diligent use of information sources, among other conditions.

According to the arguments used, problems such as lack of independence, misinformation, and an absence of professionalism revived old debates and revealed a threatened profession, trapped in a systemic crisis (Bazaco et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2016; Cabezuelo & Manfredi, 2019). Not surprisingly, the same threats pinpointed by users had already been evaluated as decisive factors in the recent loss of credibility in the journalism world and its professionals (Sixto-García et al., 2021). It is

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true that the component of aggressiveness prevented any constructive approach to these problems. But this was simply a consequence of the nature of Twitter as a sounding board and an ideal space for confrontation (Chen et al., 2022). It is therefore important to note that the rhetoric analysed had a totally destructive purpose, where hollow discourse and name-calling became the prevailing features. This, strongly fed by the dynamics of polarisation and ideological quarrels that pervade the digital environment, makes it necessary to categorise this discourse or, at least, to identify it as a phenomenon. Insofar as it does not refer to vulnerable groups, it cannot quite be defined as hate speech, although the purposes it serves, mainly discrediting and disqualifying, bring it very close to this category. So much so that the latest academic contributions have suggested that this aggressive discourse should be referred to as crypto hate speech and encouraged researchers to study its possible consequences. The term "crypto hate speech" was coined by Herrero-Izquierdo et al. (2022) and may be useful when it comes to solving the terminology conundrum that exists in research related to hate and polarisation (Galán-Muñoz, 2020).

Regarding this last point, it is worth highlighting that emotional argumentation prevailed over rational argumentation in the construction of digital messages, which inevitably connects with the growing use of hate and intimidation on the internet as an intentional or unintentional way of putting an end to any kind of debate. It is not surprising, therefore, that this crypto hate speech may continue to evolve through avenues that are as yet unknown, which may accentuate the existing difficulties in having peaceful coexistence in social media. The confirmation of the three initial hypotheses invites further reflection on the challenges that this type of attitude poses for democracy and, by extension, for journalism. In today's context, marked by the hegemony of the internet as a communication channel, the conflict caused by this type of phenomenon seems difficult to solve. Studies, such as this one, establish an initial basis for delimiting intangible content such as hate rhetoric while, at the same time, identifying some of the challenges facing journalism. While social media and the cybersphere have provided an exceptional opportunity for society in terms of how it communicates, it is no less true that the different forms of hate and intolerance continue to have an increasingly greater range of manifestations. Identifying them will require further research.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Selfies and Speeches of a President at War: Volodymyr Zelensky's Strategy of Spectacularization on Instagram

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## Abstract

The spectacularization of politics is not the exclusive patrimony of the media in their news coverage. Leaders from all over the world have successfully incorporated this "communicative style" into their own strategies, a style that finds a suitable space in visual social networks such as Instagram, in dynamic formats such as video, and in crisis contexts. This article analyzes the "spectacularization" of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's through Instagram. The methodological proposal is based on the study of the 5W in relation to the digital image and investigates the leading role, the staging, the space, and the technical resources of the videos. Thus, a content analysis is applied to a sample of 143 videos published by the president on his official profile in February–March 2022, when the conflict between Russia and Ukraine began, and in September–October 2022. We observed that Zelensky uses video in an intense and "spectacular" way: He exploits his figure in a professional style, strategically combines careful staging with amateurism, and uses resources such as subtitles to internationalize his discourse.

## Keywords

celebritization; Instagram; politainment; political communication; pop politics; social media; spectacularization; Ukraine; war; Zelensky

## Issue

This article is part of the issue "Political Communication in Times of Spectacularisation: Digital Narratives, Engagement, and Politainment" edited by Salvador Gómez-García (Complutense University of Madrid), Rocío Zamora (University of Murcia), and Salomé Berrocal (University of Valladolid).

## 1. Introduction

The war that began in February 2022 between Russia and Ukraine has been the subject of great attention by western media, who have put their focus on the president of the invaded country, Volodymyr Zelensky. During the conflict, this president, an actor by profession, has managed to expand his popularity in Ukraine beyond borders and build a powerful leadership through images—especially videos—that have been key to informing and mobilizing during the conflict, taking advantage of the capacity of social networks to make anything go "viral" (Specia, 2022). According to experts, Zelensky has drawn up an effective communication strategy that conceives social networks as one more part of the battlefield, the

success of which is based on five pillars: the personal story that drives him, his mastery of speech, his staging in heroic style, permanent streaming through video selfies, and the projection of his image as an atypically close leader (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2022). All these features are linked to a communicative style of growing importance, based on the so-called "spectacularization of politics," or politainment, which is part of the digital landscape of our days.

The first analyses carried out by political communication professionals on the great impact of Zelensky's publications on Instagram, the visual network par excellence, have proposed to examine the profile of the Ukrainian president on this platform. Coming from an academic point of view, our research aims to shed a little more light

on this recent and still developing phenomenon, complementing studies from before the war that already assess the strategic and successful use of the digital image by Volodymyr Zelensky. In this article, videos published by the leader both during the first days of the war and eight months later are examined to verify the existence and evolution of features of a political spectacularization present in his audiovisual messages with the war scene as a backdrop.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Political Spectacularization on Instagram

For some time now, political communication has been equated with a plethora of terms and expressions from the world of entertainment. In this sense, it has been metaphorically suggested that politics is nothing more than a representation, a drama in which various characters intervene, governed by a script and a singular story that is staged to provoke emotions in a group of spectators (Arroyo, 2012). Although this parallelism is not new and could be traced back to the context of classical Greece, the truth is that it is still valid in the collective imagination and the academic literature of our day. Del Rey Morató (2011, p. 109) brings up this historical thread when he states that, today, "as in the Athens of Pericles, power depends on rhetoric," one more leg of the show understood as something "that is offered to the eye or to the intellectual contemplation and is capable of attracting attention and moving the spirit by infusing it with delight, astonishment, pain or other more or less vivid or noble affections" (Espectáculo, n.d.).

The spectacularization of contemporary politics is associated with mediatization, that is, the scenario characterized by the central and indispensable weight of the media in the political sphere (Mazzoleni, 2008). More specifically, behind this process is the preponderance of television, which parties have used to communicate with a massive audience since the 1960s (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). How politics has mutated in order to adapt to television grammar is labeled as "politainment" and is reflected, for example, in the appearance of candidates in entertainment programs such as talk shows (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2022) or in the transience and instantaneity typical of audiovisual language transferred to speeches. Politainment, the reverse of infotainment (Ferré-Pavia, 2013), is also present in the prominence given to entertainment, emotion, trivialization, and the personalization of messages (Durántez-Stolle & Martínez-Sanz, 2019). Entering the agenda and receiving the attention of the spotlights goes through prioritizing a light approach to the issues, focused on the leaders and their personal traits, on humanized stories, and spectacular anecdotes that break with the ordinary. The role of the leader is fundamental, but political training or the ability to manage public resources is not enough for him to succeed; it is also necessary that

he has communication skills, aesthetic appeal, telegenic and rhetorical skills, and other similar qualities (Berrocal-Gonzalo, 2004). That is why some authors speak of "pop politics" (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009) or celebrity politics (Richardson, 2015) to refer to this communicative scenario.

Online pop politics (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019) would be the continuation of this style in the virtual sphere. In a hybrid communicative scenario (Chadwick, 2017), where traditional media complement and coexist with social networks, the latter has allowed numerous actors to gain autonomy and voice in the public sphere. Not only have citizens once marginalized and reduced to the role of a passive audience been given visibility through the use of 2.0 platforms, but so have political parties gained this visibility and learned how to captivate the electorate using these tools, especially since the electoral campaign of the 2008 US elections (Bimber, 2014). One of the strategies identified by various studies of online political communication is the spectacularization of the content of involved actors, which is closely linked to the use of image and video (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). The visual format plays a central role in the construction of the political image (Schill, 2012) and its captivating nature allows political actors to create almost personalized bonds with the audience (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2020). From the point of view of the latter, another resource related to the use of the image in the context of politainment in the online sphere is memes, the power of persuasion of which are no longer ignored by parties (Zamora et al., 2021).

Instagram maximizes the ability of candidates to self-represent and can thus easily lead to their spectacularization. In this social network, candidates can make themselves known professionally or from a personal point of view through the deliberate selection of the elements they include in their images, such as symbols or location (Bellido-Pérez & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2022; Gordillo-Rodríguez & Bellido-Pérez, 2021). Instagram's visual nature is the key to its success among parties and candidates at the international level (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2020) because it allows these users to build an image of leadership based on positive attributes such as honesty, sincerity, credibility, kindness, or leadership ability (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). In this way, Instagram functions as a "virtual billboard" (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 22) where self-referential staging is displayed and programmatic content is left aside (Ferré-Pavia & Codina, 2022).

Spectacularization on this platform can be identified based on four key features: the importance and focus given to the visual (the image), the simplification of messages, intense personalization, and the strategic use of private life (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). As a consequence, politicians are immersed in a process of celebritization (Oliva et al., 2015) that they take advantage of to humanize their figure (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017) and activate empathy and citizen

mobilization (Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017). The characteristics of Instagram, associated with image and visual performativity, favor this "construction of authenticity" that can lead to the depoliticization of content (Ekman & Widholm, 2017).

## 2.2. The Spectacular Communication Strategy of Volodymyr Zelensky: From Peace to War

The current president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, is a significant example of a leader who has known how to read and take advantage of social networks from a "spectacular" point of view, using them at the service of his political cause. This communicative strategy has not been limited to the war context that constitutes our study period. Its precedent dates back to 2019 when Zelensky acceded to the presidential mandate through national elections. These elections are precisely his political debut; until then Zelensky was mainly known in his country for his work as a producer and actor, having starred in the successful series *Servant of the People*, in which he plays the president (Ryabinska, 2020). Zelensky's media notoriety meant that, once he made the leap to politics from the world of entertainment, his candidacy was widely supported by the population, who valued the figure of an outsider at a time traditional parties were viewed with growing discredit (Rohozinska & Shpak, 2019). This is how the fictitious president became real and the Servant of the People party went from the small screen to the Verkhovna Rada, setting itself up as a paradigm of celebrity politics and evoking the role of figures such as Ronald Reagan in the US.

Volodymyr Zelensky's campaign for the 2019 presidential elections was focused on the digital sphere, to the detriment of traditional media (Liubchenko et al., 2021). Communication with Ukrainian voters had a special role on Instagram, a platform on which Zelensky was already popular and afforded him multiple advantages. Among them were its mostly young audience and the low degree of polarization compared to other platforms such as Facebook (Dorosh et al., 2021). In this regard, both Instagram and Facebook had more prominence than Twitter, where Zelensky's electoral communication played a very secondary role (Tkachenko et al., 2020). These differentiated preferences can also be attributed to the visual nature of Instagram, given that the image and video were the formats par excellence with which the candidate launched his messages to the public (Dorosh et al., 2021). Zelensky's television experience, and his rhetorical and staging skills, fit with the preferred choice of this type of audiovisual message, marked by an emotional style based on attraction, theatricality, and entertainment (Likarchuk et al., 2022). This particular style, together with the constant appeal to the participation of the audience in networks, has earned Zelensky's strategy the qualification of a "performative populist social movement" by some authors (e.g., Hamel, 2020). In short, he used a connective logic based on the

spectacularization typical of a president who has built his political position off a television profile and not so much on an ideology, which has turned out to be a successful formula to generate engagement in the digital arena and, ultimately, votes in the offline public sphere (Doroshenko, 2022).

More recently, the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought Volodymyr Zelensky under the international spotlight. The war has not severed the link between the president and his social networks; rather, it strengthed it, becoming Zelensky's preferred channel of communication with the population. The investigations that have been carried out so far confirm that Instagram continues to establish itself as the most important platform in Zelensky and his communication team's strategy. Through this tool, the president has raised awareness and mobilized citizens beyond Ukrainian borders, and kept the media and other politicians informed in real-time of the progress of the war and the decisions made. In short, he can control the narrative without intermediaries, on his own terms—something that is not possible in traditional media—and to a great probability of "going viral" (Olivares et al., 2022).

Through videos where he displays emotion, empathy, and charisma, Zelensky generated great support among international public opinion. He called on the Ukrainians to resist the aggression and appealed to the solidarity of the rest of the countries. His speeches make use of specific references to attacked cities, towns, villages, people killed and their respective stories, all the while employing powerful words such as "justice, truth, evil, courage, tyranny, democracy, power, leadership, friendship, betrayal and God" (Dyczok & Chung, 2022, p. 149), generating closeness. Some level of performativity is also used in which both verbal and non-verbal resources are important.

Mastering the story and controlling the discourse in a war is crucial, and it has been so especially since the mass media have coexisted with conflicts. Today, as the war between Russia and Ukraine is showing, social networks are the digital extension of the physical battlefield. In this "21st-century war," aspects such as the cult of celebrity and the democratization of information become relevant since the audience can share their opinions and participate directly in the war by turning to one leader or repudiating another (Serafin, 2022). At the same time, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that not only information is democratized but so is disinformation, by all parties involved (Donofrio et al., 2023). New ICTs present challenges due to the multiple threats of hybrid warfare since traditional propaganda is now channeled without control at all levels (Arcos & Smith, 2021; Yevstafiev & Manoilo, 2021).

For all these reasons, the role of social media and ICTs in conflicts and crises is a subject that has roused the interest of the academic community, which has investigated contexts as varied as the war in Syria (Rohde et al., 2016), the Palestinian conflict (Wulf et al., 2013), the

dispute over Jammu and Kashmir (Gabel et al., 2020), the war for Karabakh (Chernobrov, 2022), among others.

## 3. Methodology

The main objective of this work is to detect the features of political spectacularization that characterize the videos published by Volodymyr Zelensky on Instagram. A secondary purpose is to compare the strategy of spectacularization by Zelensky at the beginning of the war and several months later, to check if there is any evolution in his digital communication. Based on these premises, it has been decided to approach the object of study from a quantitative approach. Specifically, the content analysis technique is used (Igartua, 2006), a method that "studies and analyzes communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner with the purpose of finding measurement variables" (Busquet & Medina, 2017, p. 231).

The quantitative analysis protocol of spectacularization in audiovisual messages on Instagram is directly inspired by the model proposed by López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2018, 2019, 2021) for the study of political photography and video on social networks. The proposal of these two authors is based on the classic 5W in journalism and translates into five variables of the same name adapted to the characteristics of visual messages: The variable "what" examines the theme of the image and its functions; "who" explores the protagonists and attributes of the leader; "when" represents the staging; "where" refers to the space; "how" refers to the technical aspects and the rational or emotional character of the content. Table 1 summarizes the result of the adaptation of the aforementioned methodological proposal to our case study.

For this research, the variable "what" has been dismissed, since the theme of all the publications is the war itself. Other minor modifications have been made to the original model to adapt the categories to the particularities of the sample; for example, the cinematographic staging is added as an original tag.

The sample on which the analysis has been applied consists of a total of 143 registration units, which corresponds to the videos shared by President Zelensky on his personal official Instagram profile (@zelenskiy_official) during two different periods:

- From February 24 to March 8, 2022, both days inclusive, 13 in total, 72 publications are extracted in video format. These dates correspond to the first days of the Russia–Ukraine war.
- From September 25 to October 10, 2022, both days inclusive, 16 in total, 71 videos are collected from Volodymyr Zelensky's account. At this point, 229 days after it began, the conflict is still ongoing.

The videos were manually extracted, uploaded, and managed through the Google Sheets tool. The first selection

took place on March 20, 2022, while the second took place on October 10 of the same year.

## 4. Results

From February 24 to March 8, 2022, Zelensky posted a total of 138 posts on his official Instagram account, which means an average of 10.6 posts per day. Of these, 72 are videos (Figure 1), so this tool prevails over photography and constitutes 52.17% of the publications during that period. The prominence of the video format increased with the progress of the war since between September 25 and October 10, 2022, the president of Ukraine disseminated 107 posts, 71 of which were videos, that is, 66.36%. However, the number of daily publications is reduced to an average of 6.7.

The results presented in the next section derive from the analysis of the 143 videos published in the two periods under analysis and are divided according to this time criterion to observe similarities and differences over time. References to the first period include the days of February and March; the expression "second period" is used for publications selected between September and October.

### 4.1. Protagonism and Leadership Attributes: A Protective Statesman

The personalization of political messages is one of the features associated with spectacularization and includes a sense of "omnipresence of the leader" and a construction based on personal or professional attributes. Concerning the first aspect, it is observed, in effect, that most of the videos in the sample of the first period are of Zelensky himself (95.83%). Of these, the president shares space with other people—foreign politicians or members of the government—in 5.8% of cases. The remaining small percentage of videos where Zelensky is absent shows civil society (2.78%).

Analyses of videos from the second period reveal that the president is still their main focus, although with a slight decrease in percentage. Zelensky is present as the "protagonist" in 84.51% of these videos, of which 35% also show international politicians or citizens. Civil society takes a more important "role" in publications done in September and October (8.45%); other videos appear without a clear leading character (7.04%).

Regarding attributes, Zelensky uses Instagram to promote his professional life and not from a personal point of view. Results obtained from an analysis of videos from the first period show that the president presents himself above all as a statesman (75.36%) in the many speeches with which he addresses Ukraine and the world in the first days of the war (Figure 2) and telematic meetings with other leaders. On the other hand, the heroism of his figure is suggested in 11.59% of the cases, for example, when he spreads selfies recorded on the street to show the people and Russia that he has not fled and will

**Table 1.** The 5W of spectacularization in digital video: The case of Volodymyr Zelensky.

| | Variables | Categories |
|---|---|---|
| Who | Protagonist | Zelensky<br>Civil society<br>Other |
| | Other characters (YES/NO) | Civil society<br>Government's members<br>Other politicians<br>Other |
| | Attributes | Statesman<br>Crowd leader<br>Hero<br>Protective<br>Communicator<br>Personal<br>Other |
| When | Staging | Institutional<br>Strategic spontaneity<br>Amateur<br>Cinematographic<br>Other |
| Where | Space | Official<br>Public<br>Media<br>Private<br>Other |
| How | Video length | Equal to or less than 30 seconds<br>Equal to or less than 1 minute<br>Equal to or less than 3 minutes<br>Equal to or less than 5 minutes<br>More than 5 minutes |
| | Source of the images | Government<br>Zelensky<br>Civil society<br>External institutions<br>Media<br>Other |
| | Predominant shot | Full/mid shot<br>Wide<br>Close-up<br>Other |
| | Predominant angle | Neutral<br>High angle shot<br>Low angle shot<br>Other |
| | Lightning | High key<br>Low key<br>Neutral<br>Other |
| | Use of music (YES/NO) | |
| | Use of subtitles (YES/NO) | |

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the model of López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2021).
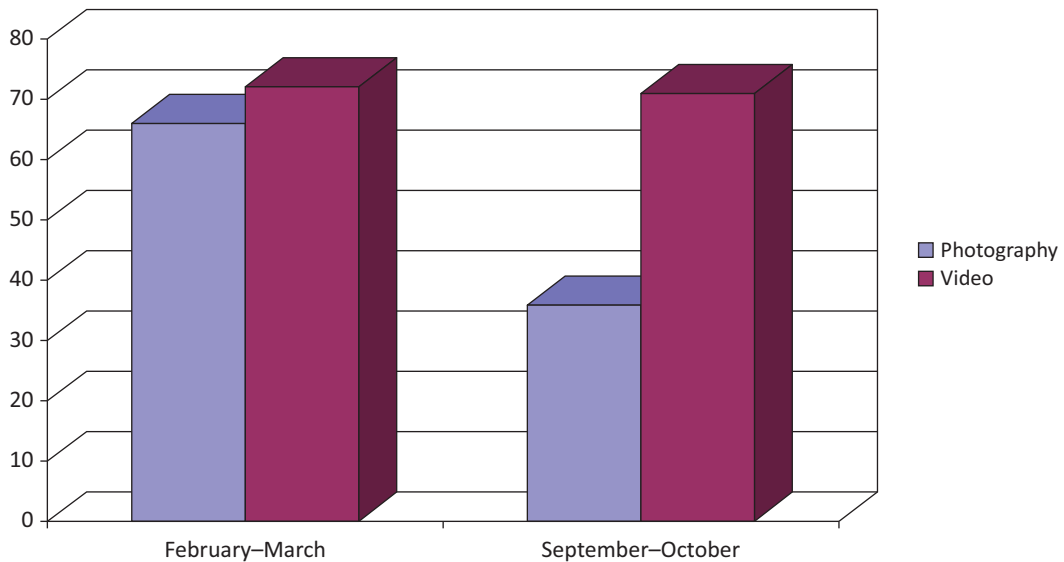
**Figure 1.** Videos and photographs published in the two periods under analysis.

not flee the country (Figure 3). Other notable attributes are those of protector (4.35%), as when he speaks to sick civilians or soldiers, and communicator (8.70%), a side that he displays in his relations with the media.

The second period, again, reveals differences from the first. The percentage of videos associated with the attribute of the statesman is reduced to 56.67% and, instead, the protective or compassionate character of Zelensky is valued (35%). During the course of the war, the leader often addresses the Ukrainian people directly, without intermediaries, to comfort them and create

closeness. The videos labeled with the attribute of heroism are 8.33% of the sample.

### 4.2. Staging: From Professionalization to Strategic Amateurism

Given that most videos from the first period are formal speeches, the staging is usually in accord with institutional standards (79.17%), that is, Zelensky is shown well framed, with a neutral angle, and illuminated by spotlights, in a classic political scenario where official symbols



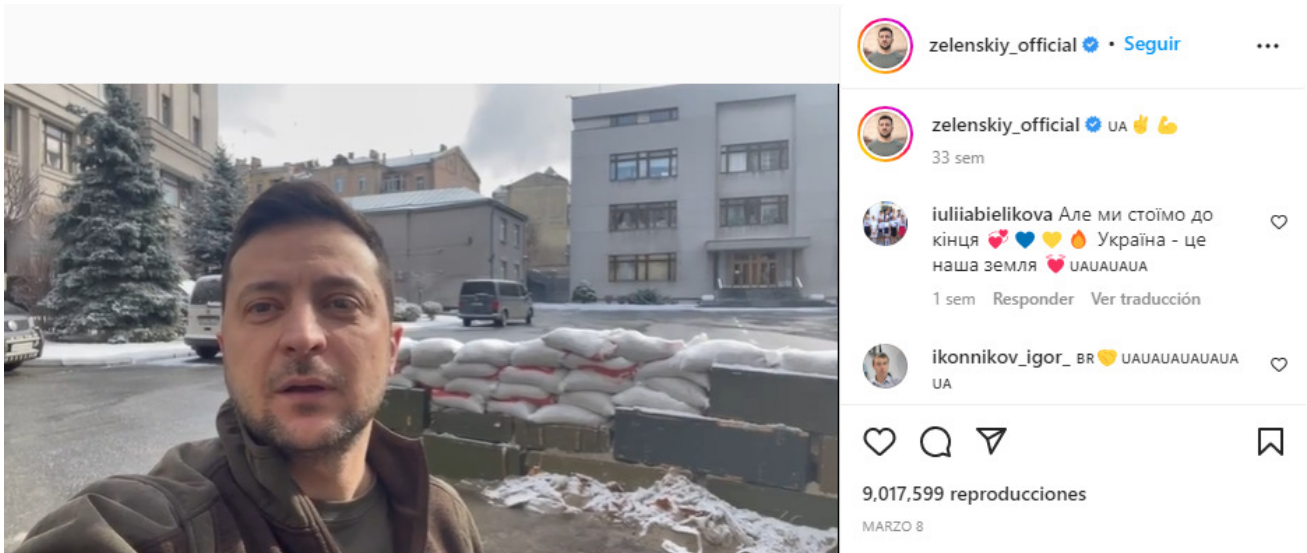**Figure 2.** Role of statesman with institutional staging (March 2, 2022).

**Figure 3.** Role of hero with amateur staging (March 8, 2022).

usually appear. Contrasting with this professionalization is the relevant presence of videos of an amateur nature (15.28%) recorded with a mobile phone, without juxtapositions or filters, and with reduced image quality. In some cases (1.39%) "strategic spontaneity" is used, a style in which the visual elements are planned in detail, even though the appearance of the final video is that of a spontaneous one. This cinematographic staging borrows its name from cinema and television, where elements and techniques like image quality, music, and montage are typically used in post-production to enhance the narrative (Figures 4 and 5). Although this type of publication is less prevalent (1.39%) on Zelensky's Instagram, the greater their complexity, the stronger their impact. Finally, it has been detected that 2.78% of the videos do not fit with the other categories, since it is a new format based on animated infographics (Figure 6).

We then move to the second period: At this stage of the war, Zelensky changes his strategy and moves away from more "sophisticated," "professional," and "institutional-looking" videos to greater amateurism. Thus, the "institutional-looking" videos decrease from 79.17% to 35.21% and the "amateur" videos increase from 15.28% to 35.21%, so both categories are balanced. Cinematographic staging also acquires a significant role (18.31%), followed by the aforementioned category of animated infographics (8.45%) and strategic spontaneity (2.82%).

### 4.3. Spaces: Officiality Without Giving Up the Street

The management of spaces is another aspect to take into account in the political spectacularization of the digital image. In the sample of the first analyzed period,
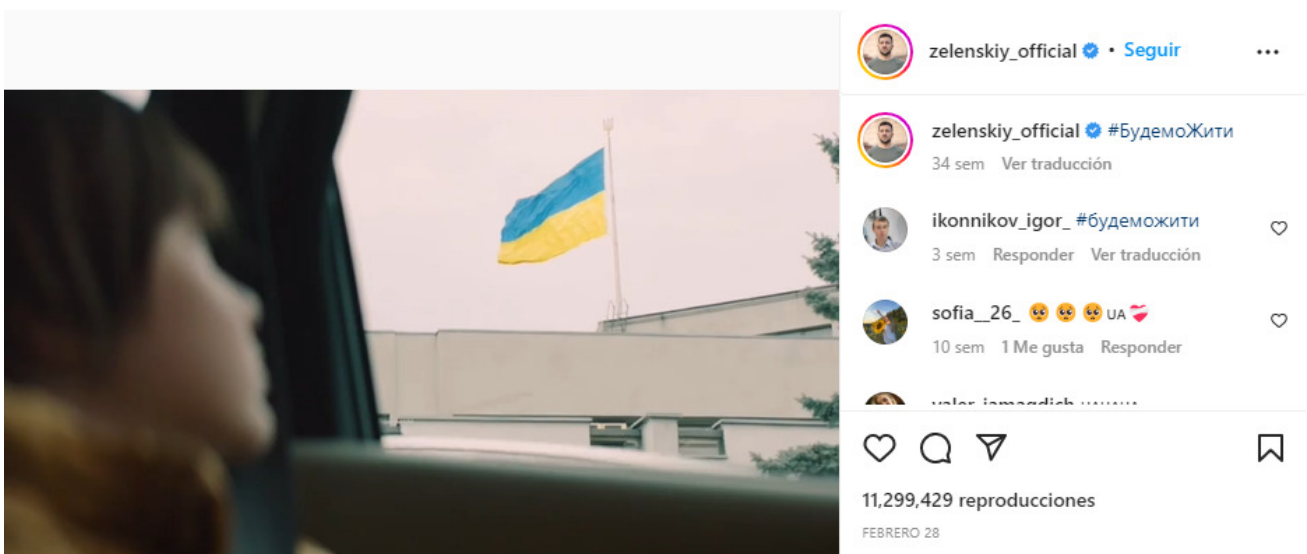


**Figure 4.** Cinematographic staging of an institutional spot shared by Zelensky (February 28, 2022).
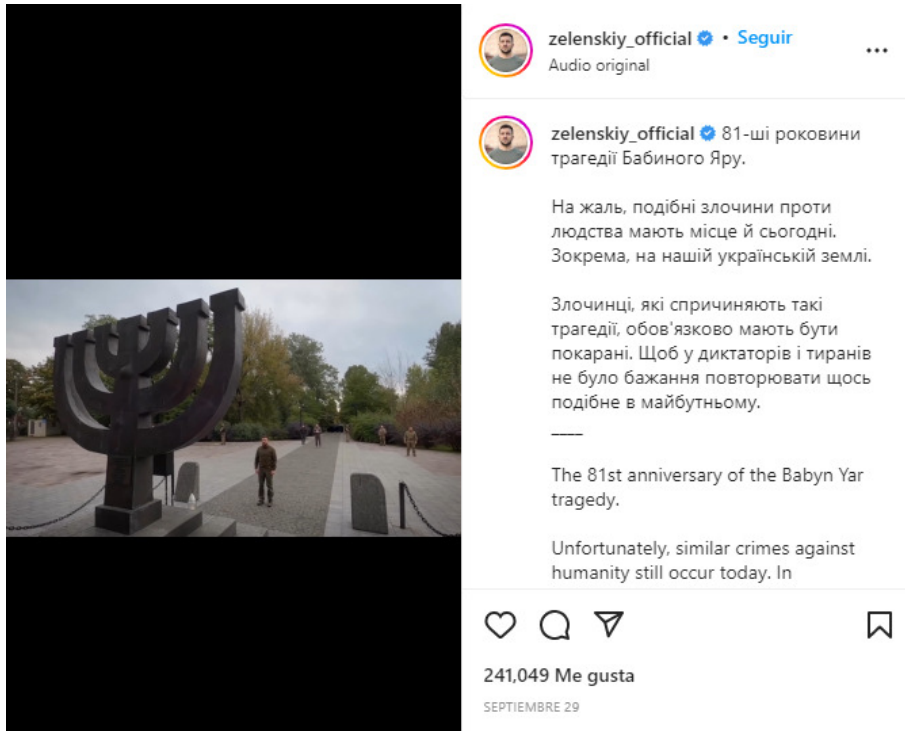
**Figure 5.** Cinematographic staging of Zelensky in a protector-compassionate role (September 29, 2022).

91.67% of videos were recorded in official places: Zelensky's office, the press room of the presidential palace, foreign institutional spaces, among others. Only 8.33% of the scenes were filmed in public spaces, on the street, or in other types of non-institutional buildings (Figure 7).

In contrast, the most recent sample is made up of 63.38% of videos taken in official spaces, 19.72% were filmed in public places, and 11.27% have a private space as their background. The other category (videos which cannot be labeled as official, public, or private) is identified in 5.63% of the cases. We see, therefore, that places
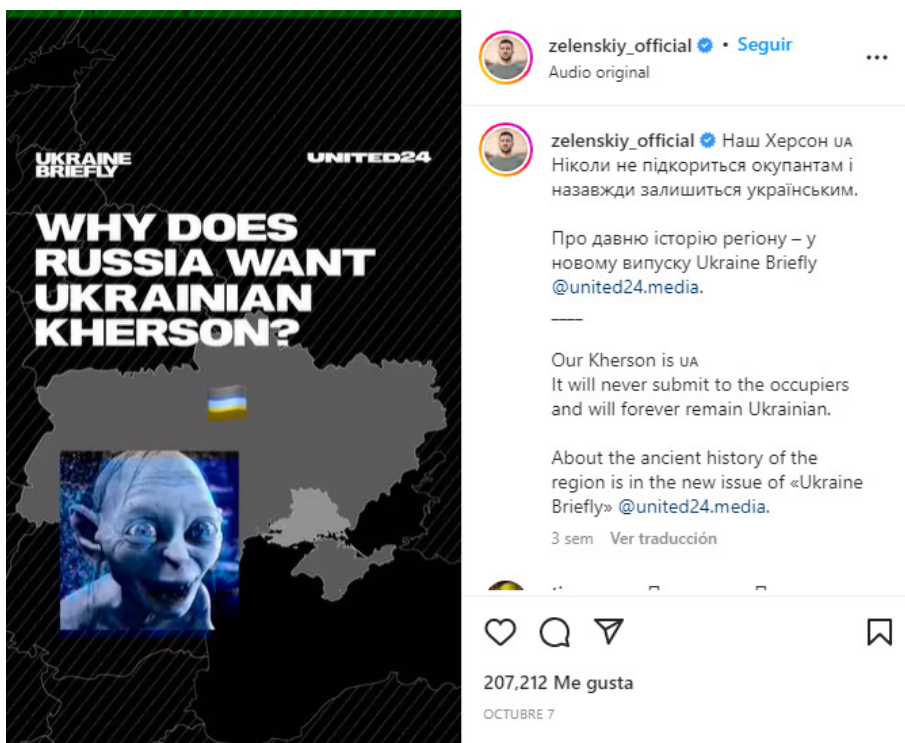


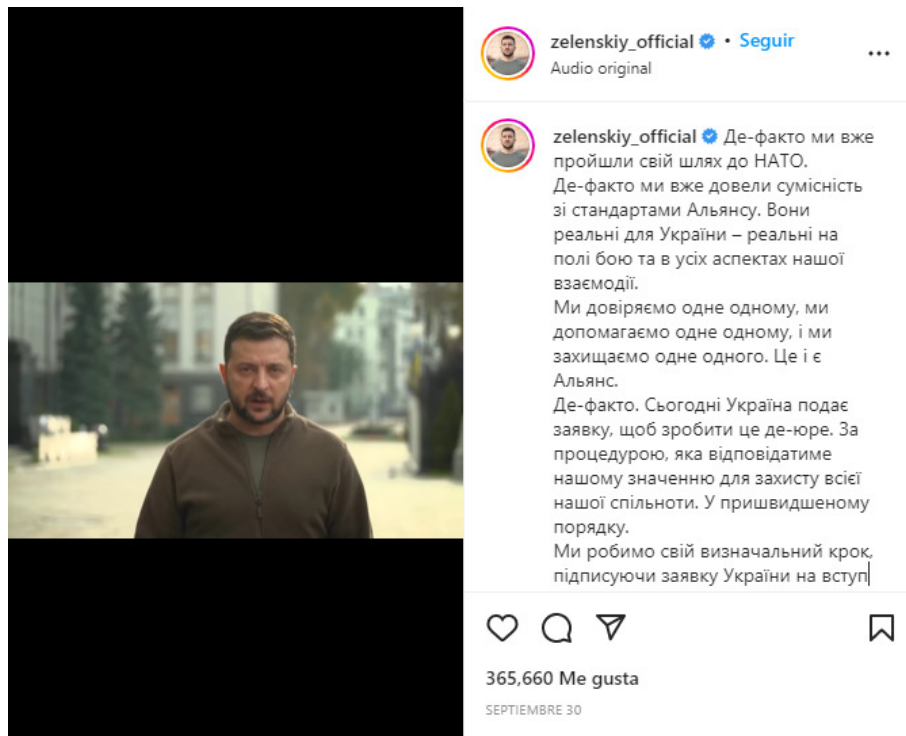**Figure 6.** Animated infographic made with images from the media (October 7, 2022).

**Figure 7.** Zelensky in a public space with a staging based on strategic spontaneity (September 30, 2022).

used in the second period are diversified compared to the first.

### 4.4. Technical Resources: The Versatility of Video at the Service of the Message

Talking about technical resources implies analyzing the duration of the videos, the source of the images used, the types of shots, their angle and lighting, as well as the use of subtitles and music. These aspects denote the degree of professionalization of the content, its adaptation to the characteristics of Instagram, and ultimately, the level of spectacularization through which the political leader can captivate the audience.

Regarding the duration, it is observed that 61.11% of the pieces from the first period under analysis last 5 minutes or more; 16.67% of the videos last between 3 and 5 minutes, followed closely by those that last between 1 and 3 minutes (11.11%) and are more in line with the platform standards. Videos of a short nature are the exception: 6.94% last between 30 seconds and 1 minute and 4.17% are 30 seconds or less in length. From the second period under analysis, the proportion of videos lasting between 1 and 3 minutes increases (28.17%), but the majority continues to exceed 5 minutes in length (57.75%). Some videos still last between 3 and 5 minutes (11.27%), while very short pieces barely have a presence (2.82%).

If we look at the source of the images, in February and March the largest proportion (80.56%) of them are of the Ukrainian government itself, following our observation that the majority of the sample are official

speeches. Although much less frequently, images produced by Zelensky himself with his cell phone (15.28%) and audiovisual material from citizens (2.78%) are also used. Finally, in certain cases, the source is a media outlet (1.39%). The analysis of the second period reveals that Zelensky reiterates his presence on Instagram using images of "government origin" (33.80%) and of his own authorship (32.39%). Videos from external institutions are also frequently used (21.13%), 9.86% are reserved for the media, and only 2.82% of images originate from civil society.

When it comes to framing these images, in videos from the first period, medium or full shots predominate (80.56%). Occasionally, spaces are recorded using full shots (4.17%), the frame containing various elements; somewhat more frequently, the scene is framed in a close-up (15.28%), especially when Zelensky records his face up close with his mobile. This last type of shot predominates in the second period (47.89%), followed by medium to long shots (36.62%). Wide shots remain an exception (9.86%).

Regarding lighting, in the sample from the first days of the war, there are no videos in low-key lighting or that are poorly lit; the opposite is prevalent (70.83%), followed by videos that take advantage of neutral or natural light (29.17%). Finally, the vast majority of the videos (84.72%) are shot from a neutral angle (front, at eye-level). Only in the amateur videos does the angle appear high (2.82%) or low (12.50%). In the second period under analysis, the camera angle remains neutral for the most part (60.56%), leaving aside high-angle shots (2.82%) and, somewhat more frequently,

low-angle shots (30.99%). However, given that, in this portion of the sample, Zelensky publishes fewer "official" speeches and more selfies, the videos tend to have more neutral lighting (59.15%) and use high key lighting less often (32.39%).

To finalize the analysis of the technical resources, results are obtained on the use of subtitles and music. The latter is not usually used in the first period and is only heard in videos whose staging is cinematographic (2.78%). As for subtitles, a third of the videos include them (33.33%). These are pieces that have been published twice, once without subtitles and another with English subtitles to increase their impact (Figure 8). The sample for September and October includes more music videos (26.76%) and more videos with subtitles (42.25%).

In Table 2 we have synthesized the aforementioned results to clearly see the changes in the two periods.

## 5. Conclusion

Political spectacularization, or politainment, is a clearly identifiable style in the publications of President Zelensky during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Instagram is exploited in an intense, strategic, and successful way, and Zelensky takes advantage of its visual potential to promote his image as a leader, reporting to the citizens in times of emergency, make war reports, internationalize the conflict, persuade public opinion, mobilize the Ukrainian and world population, attack and hold the enemy accountable, and call for help from other countries. The war, therefore, is the main axis of his speech, and he speaks

about it in a digital communication style that has helped to show himself as a committed and involved president in the war context. Contrary to what some studies refer to concerning the use of Instagram as a political communication tool in recent years (Cartes-Barroso, 2018; Moreno-Díaz, 2022), the moving image is used in this case more than the static image. Thus, the growing importance of video over photography is confirmed, the former being a format that accentuates the effect of reality and space–time proximity to events.

One of the most notable characteristics of Zelensky's communication linked to spectacularization is hyperleadership: His figure, almost always without company, is present in the overwhelming majority of the videos broadcast. Only occasionally is the leading role shifted to the civilian population or shared with members of the government, citizens, or other politicians. This intense personalization occurs in a professional way, in the form of individualization and not privatization (Van Aelst et al., 2011): The intimate life and the most personal side of Zelensky does not transcend, unlike that of other international leaders such as Alexander van der Bellen and Justin Trudeau (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019, 2020; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017). On the contrary, it is his political activity that is at the center of his communication strategy, a common trend in the political use of Instagram (Filimonov et al., 2016; Peng, 2021; Pineda et al., 2020). In any case, the data indicates that in September and October, Zelensky opens the door a little more to share space with other actors.

Another clear feature of the "spectacular" in Zelensky's videos is the management of spontaneity



**Figure 8.** Amateur staging (selfie) with English subtitles and a natural use of light (October 7, 2022).

**Table 2.** Summary of the results based on the proposed methodological model (percentage concerning the sample of videos published in the corresponding period).

| | Variables | Categories | First period | Second period |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Who | Protagonist | Zelensky | 95,83% | 84,51% |
| | | Civil society | 2,78% | 8,45% |
| | | Other | 1,39% | 7,04% |
| | Other characters | Civil society | 0% | 19,05% |
| | | Government's members | 25% | 0% |
| | | Other politicians | 75% | 76,19% |
| | | Other | 0% | 4,76% |
| | Attributes | Statesman | 75,36% | 56,67% |
| | | Crowd leader | 0% | 0% |
| | | Hero | 11,59% | 8,33% |
| | | Protective | 4,35% | 35% |
| | | Communicator | 8,70% | 0% |
| | | Personal | 0% | 0% |
| | | Other | 0% | 0% |
| When | Staging | Institutional | 79,17% | 35,21% |
| | | Strategic spontaneity | 1,39% | 2,82% |
| | | Amateur | 15,28% | 35,21% |
| | | Cinematographic | 1,39% | 18,31% |
| | | Other | 2,78% | 8,45% |
| Where | Space | Official | 91,67% | 63,38% |
| | | Public | 8,33% | 19,72% |
| | | Media | 0% | 0% |
| | | Private | 0% | 11,27% |
| | | Other | 0% | 5,63% |
| How | Video length | <30 seconds | 4,17% | 1,41% |
| | | <1 minute | 6,94% | 1,41% |
| | | <3 minutes | 11,11% | 28,17% |
| | | <5 minutes | 16,67% | 11,27% |
| | | >5 minutes | 61,11% | 57,75% |
| | Source of the images | Government | 80,56% | 33,80% |
| | | Zelensky | 15,28% | 32,39% |
| | | Civil society | 2,78% | 2,82% |
| | | External institutions | 0% | 21,13% |
| | | Media | 1,39% | 9,86% |
| | | Other | 0% | 0% |
| | Predominant shot | Full/mid shot | 80,56% | 36,62% |
| | | Wide | 4,17% | 9,86% |
| | | Close-up | 15,28% | 47,89% |
| | | Other | 0% | 5,63% |
| | Predominant angle | Neutral | 84,72% | 60,56% |
| | | High angle shot | 2,78% | 2,82% |
| | | Low angle shot | 12,50% | 30,99% |
| | | Other | 0% | 5,63% |
| | Lightning | High key | 70,83% | 32,39% |
| | | Low key | 0% | 2,82% |
| | | Neutral | 29,17% | 59,15% |
| | | Other | 0% | 5,63% |
| | Use of music | Yes | 2,78% | 26,76% |
| | | No | 97,22% | 73,24% |
| | Use of subtitles | Yes | 33,33% | 42,25% |
| | | No | 66,67% | 57,75% |

and amateurism, which evolves throughout the war. Although the dominant staging is institutional, especially in the first period of February and March, the leader deliberately and occasionally uses the selfie format (of poorer quality in terms of resolution, framing, lighting, etc.) to articulate more directly and naturally with the public, which is somewhat risky, but effective. Given the success achieved with this type of piece, Zelensky ended up giving the same prominence to amateur selfies as to official speeches. Strategic spontaneity is also put at the service of closeness with his followers, through pieces as careful as they are simple, which are optimal for a platform like Instagram (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). In the same way, the management of spaces is interesting; although the actions generally take place in official places, public spaces are used strategically to show Zelensky close to the people.

The first days of the war are characterized by a certain waste of this social network when Zelensky abuses long, rigid, and sober videos in the use of resources such as music. On the other hand, in the second period under analysis, differences in this sense are appreciated; more short videos appear that are more dynamic, natural, and with music. Another prominent resource is the subtitles, which have also appeared more frequently in recent months to carry the message to a global audience beyond Ukraine's borders.

Although the main objective of this research was not to analyze the reception and impact of Zelensky's videos on Instagram, during the development of the work we have been able to observe some trends that we believe are interesting to mention so that future research can continue to deepen. The most striking is the significant impact in terms of likes, comments, and views that the president's publications have obtained, which in some cases reach millions. Traditional television news programs have been fed by these videos in an interesting hybridization process (Baptista et al., 2021). Secondly, although most of the videos published online by Zelensky are institutional speeches, the most successful formats are the most amateurish and easy to produce. This suggests that a more exhaustive production does not necessarily imply greater public interest and that the close nature of the selfie helps to connect with the audience. In this way, it seems that the staging is configured as one of the most valued 5W.

In short, this case study is paradigmatic of how spectacular narratives are inserted into the digital communication strategies of political leaders, especially in contexts of turmoil and uncertainty, such as war. The image and, specifically, the video in its short version is a fundamental tool in this sense, as it serves to channel messages that reach the audience with emotional force, humanize the politician, and generate a feeling of closeness and constant contact. Although "professional" and more "institutional-looking" videos continue to be a key element, in the case of Volodymyr Zelensky they strategically coexist with a more natural, amateurish

style of videos that suit the dynamism of Instagram and break with the usual orthodoxy. It is worth continuing to delve deeper, from an academic point of view, into how political spectacularization is manifested in the online communication of leaders from all over the world, especially through a booming format such as video (Plazas-Olmedo & López-Rabadán, 2022), and check whether this selfie-style amateurism is a resource for personal and political expression (Kasra, 2017) that is decisive when it comes to generating engagement among an electorate increasingly saturated with images.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# TikTok and Political Communication: The Latest Frontier of Politainment? A Case Study

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**Abstract**
TikTok is without any doubt the most popular social media among Gen Zers. Originally born as a lip-syncing app, it can be exploited in different ways; as such, it represents a new fertile space for political communication. In this vein, previous studies have shown that politicians all over the planet are joining the platform as a tool to connect with younger audiences. This study examines the use of TikTok in the last presidential elections in Peru. Following an affordance-based approach, we analyze all the TikToks published by the main candidates (Pedro Castillo, Keiko Fujimori, Rafael Lopez Aliaga, Hernando de Soto, and George Forsyth) during the electoral campaign, to understand if and how candidates have integrated this platform as part of their electoral strategy and what kind of content they publish and share. Through a content analysis that combines quantitative and qualitative elements, we demonstrate that, although all the analyzed politicians have opened TikTok accounts, they do not seem to take full advantage of the platform's affordances displaying a top-down communication style with almost no deliberative nor participative intentions. Political issues are almost absent since the platform is mostly used to display their personal life and enhance their political persona, with most of the content displaying a clear entertaining dimension. Some differences are discussed but, in general, results reveal that Peruvian candidates use TikTok almost uniquely for politainment.

## 1. Introduction

Already more than 30 years ago, political theorist Murray Edelman (1988) suggested that in the mass media society ideologically motivated actors create policy through the "spectacle" of dramatic public displays. The so-called "political spectacle" (Edelman, 1988) answers to two mutually influencing and interconnected dynamics. On the one hand, politicians need to reconnect with citizenship, in particular with young people (Collin, 2015); on the other, they are forced to keep up with the logic of infotainment (Mazzoleni & Sfardini,

2009). So it is that, as Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. (2022) point out, politics has become pop politics: Extreme mediatization demands politicians to imitate celebrities in a pop spectacle in which they become TV stars (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009).

The internet has generated a special breeding ground for this type of dynamics. Cyberspace constitutes a fertile territory for political parties, candidates, and media to deploy communication strategies aimed at having a powerful impact on users (Zamora-Medina & Rebolledo, 2021). Politainment (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2014) introduces an era of political communication clinging to the

spectacle, where the quest for engagement requires adapting to platforms' affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and adopting entertainment strategies, such as, among others, gamification (Gómez-García et al., 2022) or emotional appeal (Metz et al., 2020).

In this scenario, TikTok, the platform for dances and frivolous trends (Abidin, 2020), as an adaptive social media that can be exploited in many different ways (Weimann & Masri, 2021), is emerging as an opportunity for political communication (Cervi et al., 2021).

Whereas TikTok use is on the rise throughout Latin America—according to recent data TikTok is among the three applications with the highest growth rates in this area (The World Bank Group, 2022)—no study so far has analyzed in-depth how this medium is used in electoral campaigns. To fill this gap, the present work examines the use of TikTok in the last presidential elections in Peru, focusing on the political strategy and discourse of the candidates that achieved more than 10% of the popular vote: Pedro Castillo, Keiko Fujimori, Rafael Lopez Aliaga, Hernando de Soto, and George Forsyth. Therefore, our work aims at answering the following research questions:

RQ1: Are Peruvian candidates using TikTok?

RQ2: Do they adapt to the platform's specific affordances?

RQ3: What kind of content do they share?

RQ4: Do they use TikTok to interact with the electorate?

RQ5: Is the platform used for politainment?

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. TikTok and Political Communication

TikTok has grown into one of the most popular social media platforms, reaching over one billion monthly active users in 2021 (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021) and becoming the highest-grossing app in the world in 2022 (Perez, 2022). Around 80% of the users are between the ages of 16 and 34 (Iqbal, 2022), making TikTok Gen Z's favorite social medium (Abidin et al., 2022).

With the explosion of its popularity, the platform has somehow naturally mutated from a place for jokes, pranks, and viral dance challenges to an environment where Gen Zers rally around social issues (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). On TikTok, content is filtered creating personalized, algorithm-led experiences (Cotter et al., 2022): This algorithmic recommendation system potentially provides every user the possibility to go viral (Cervi, 2021), motivating creators to engage in politics by spreading their political stances "via audiovisual acts" (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020, p. 264).

Accordingly, young people are increasingly using TikTok for grassroots movements. The app has constituted a crucial instrument for Black Lives Matter, both in the US and worldwide (Eriksson & Åkerlund, 2022) and become pivotal for the anti-caste protests in India (Subramanian, 2021) and the global #StopAsianHate movement during Covid-19 pandemic (Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Jacques et al., 2022).

In the same vein, TikTok seems to be the breeding ground for climate change activism (Hautea et al., 2021) and activism related to LGBTQ+ has taken the forefront of the app (Simpson & Semaan, 2021).

Recently, the app, with hashtags such as #FreePalestine, has been the theater of an online dispute between Israeli and Palestinian youth, engendering what has been recognized as a new form of activism, "playful activism" (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022), which has granted Palestinian resistance increased and renovated exposure.

The app has also been used by creators to influence the result of elections: Besides turning into the *locus* of youth political discussion (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020), during the last US presidential election, TikTokers, especially K-pop fans, played a key role in organizing a mass trolling false-registration campaign for Donald Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which resulted in many empty seats (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020).

Even if TikTok has an explicit ban against paid political advertisements (Chandlee, 2019), this "Tiktokisation of global politics" (Ball, 2021) has stimulated political actors worldwide to join the app regarding it as a "unique opportunity to (re)connect with young people" (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021, p. 12).

Nonetheless, while general TikTok research is booming (Abidin et al., 2022), specific academic research about how politicians and political parties use the platform for promotion, communication, and especially campaigning is still extremely scarce.

In Europe, Bösch and Ricks (2021) and Zurovac (2022) have scrutinized TikTok usage by political parties in the last German and Italian elections respectively, reaching a similar conclusion: Political actors concentrate on the performativity side of the platform rather than using it as a tool for direct communication with the electorate. In the same vein, two studies in Spain (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Cervi et al., 2021) have analyzed political parties' use of TikTok finding out that very few of them have optimized the app's affordances to strengthen the dialogue with their constituencies, while most of them use it for a form of promotion that leads to politainment.

Finally, an emerging stream of literature is shedding light on how TikTok can also be a source of political polarization and hate speech (Weimann & Masri, 2021), converting into the hotbed for populist right-wing parties' communication (Castro Martínez & Días Morilla, 2021).

In Latin America, studies have concentrated on presidential communication (Figuereo Benítez et al., 2022) and how it has been successfully implemented by political actors for self-promotion during Covid-19 (Acosta & Acosta, 2022).

The very few studies focusing on political campaigns found that in Ecuador TikTok's presence has helped new or marginal candidates get in the spotlight (Muñoz, 2021). In Peru, Montúfar-Calle et al. (2022), analyzing candidates' adoption of different social networks, have concluded that keeping up with new cultural and technological innovations is still an unfinished business for most Peruvian politicians, while Calderón et al. (2022), examining only Conservative candidates, have disclosed that they have used TikTok mostly to fuel social division and to disseminate a polarizing discourse.

## 2.2. Social Media and Politics in Peru

Although data is not precise, with a steady rise in internet penetration—a 30% increase in the last 10 years—currently, a great majority of the Peruvian population has access to the internet and political engagement in social media significantly increased since 2016 (The World Bank Group, 2022).

Former President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski can be considered the first political actor who implemented a social media strategy: In his presidential campaign, he used social media to connect with young voters and humanize his political persona (Mäckelmann, 2017); during his time in office, he used Twitter and Facebook to share his daily activities to strengthen his image as an active, professional, and empathic leader (Mäckelmann, 2017). Kuczynski was so successful that a study found he became the third most popular leader in Latin America with 1.39 million followers on Twitter (Burson-Marsteller, 2017).

Social media have also had, and still have, a fundamental role in activism and social movements (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020; Salzman, 2019) enhancing political participation through humor and protest, especially among young people (Castro Pérez, 2019; de la Garza Montemayor et al., 2021). Social networking, for instance, had a central role in Lima's former mayor Villarán campaign that successfully won the "No" to the revocation process that aimed to oust her from office. Peruvian youth also used social media to organize massive and unprecedented protests against the former President of Congress Manuel Merino (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020; Dargent & Rousseau, 2021): #MerinoNoMeRepresenta (#MerinoDoesNotRepresentMe) and #MerinoNoEsMi Presidente (#MerinoIsNotMyPresident) were the prominent hashtags that lead the campaign (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020).

According to a recent study (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021), TikTok is used by 31% of Peruvians with internet access. The expansion of the use of the platform is largely due to the confinement of people to their homes during the Covid-19 pandemic (Calderón et al., 2022). TikTok is Peruvians' third most-used social network, behind Facebook and Instagram and before Twitter, and the preferred social network of 44% of teens

between 12 and 17 years old and 38% of Gen Zers (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021).

Considering the importance of the young cohorts in the electoral census—one-third of the Peruvian voting population, 6,928,324, is represented by citizens under the age of 30 years—and the increasing popularity of TikTok, it is no surprise that politicians have adopted this social network to connect with the younger audience (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022).

## 2.3. The Elections of 2021

The 2021 Peruvian elections occurred in a moment of deep political instability resulting from the swearing-in of four presidents in the previous five years (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022): President Kuczynski resigned in 2018 due to his involvement in the Odebrecht corruption scandal and Fujimori's pardon, and the Congress was dissolved by president Vizcarra in 2019, with Vizcarra himself finally being impeached in 2020 (Muñoz, 2021).

In a country devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic, President Vizcarra's impeachment worsened the already existing popular discontent towards Congress, especially among young people (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020; Dargent & Rousseau, 2021). After the dissolution of Congress and the election of a new one under the leadership of Manuel Merino, serious social conflict developed in the streets of Lima. The police repression of street mobilizations led to a national crisis that ended up in the death of two university students, missing protesters, president Merino's public resignation five days after his inauguration, and an even more unpopular Congress (Dargent & Rousseau, 2021). After Merino's resignation, Congress changed its leadership and elected Fransico Sagasti as president, a moderate intellectual that voted against Vizcarra's impeachment and managed to stay in office until the end of the presidential mandate despite several impeachment threats by Congress. Amidst this chaotic situation, President Martín Vizcarra initially presented legislation that would set the conditions for a snap election in 2020, but his proposal was rejected.

In addition to this structural crisis, Peru has been the most affected country by Covid-19 in Latin America (Varona & Gonzales, 2021). Because of the pandemic, the Peruvian Ministry of Health established a security protocol that restricted face-to-face electoral campaign activities: This peculiarity, together with the country's law that prohibits contracting political advertising slots on radio and television to regulate the financing of candidates and political parties, made social networks the core of the political campaign (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022).

Elections were finally held on April 11, 2021, in the year of the celebration of the bicentennial of Peru's independence, under the exceptional of 18 official candidates representing both "traditional politics" and newcomers.

The results were surprising: In the first round, Pedro Castillo, a newcomer completely unknown to the public,

received the most votes. In the second round, held at the beginning of June, he faced Keiko Fujimori, former president Fujimori's daughter, winning with 50.12% of the popular vote.

Castillo was eventually named president-elect by the National Jury of Elections on July 19, and inaugurated on July 28, after the official declaration by the National Jury of Elections was delayed following accusations of electoral fraud by opposition politicians.

## 3. Methods

Our analysis investigates the use of TikTok during the last electoral campaign. To limit the scope of our research, only candidates who have reached at least 10% of the votes have been taken into consideration.

As displayed in Figure 1, these candidates are: Pedro Castillo, a rural school teacher, trade unionist, and former member of Ronda Campesina, an organization that defended rural areas from Shining Path in the 1980s; Keiko Fujimori, contentious former president Fujimori's daughter, involved in the Odebrecht scandal, for which she has served in pretrial detention since 2018 with con-

ditional release in 2020; Rafael Lopez Aliaga, a conservative businessman who gained political traction due to his ultraconservative rhetoric and with a Trump-like political communication strategy (Zárate & Budasoff, 2021), self-proclaiming himself as "the Peruvian Bolsonaro"; and Hernando de Soto, a famous economist and policy advisor, founder of the Institute for Liberty and Democracy, an economic development think-tank based in Lima.

Moreover, we have purposely added George Forsyth, who, despite not reaching 10% of votes was one of the most mediatized candidates of this electoral turnout (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022) and perfectly embodies celebrity pop politics (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009): As a former well-known football player, he entered politics without any experience or political affiliation, as the mayor of a local district in Lima (O'Boyle, 2020), and later signed an agreement with the National Restoration party for his presidential run. Upon his registration, the party filed a name change and reorganized into National Victory for the general election.

All the content published by the selected candidates by the date of the data collection (April 11, 2021) has been analyzed. The unit of analysis is represented by
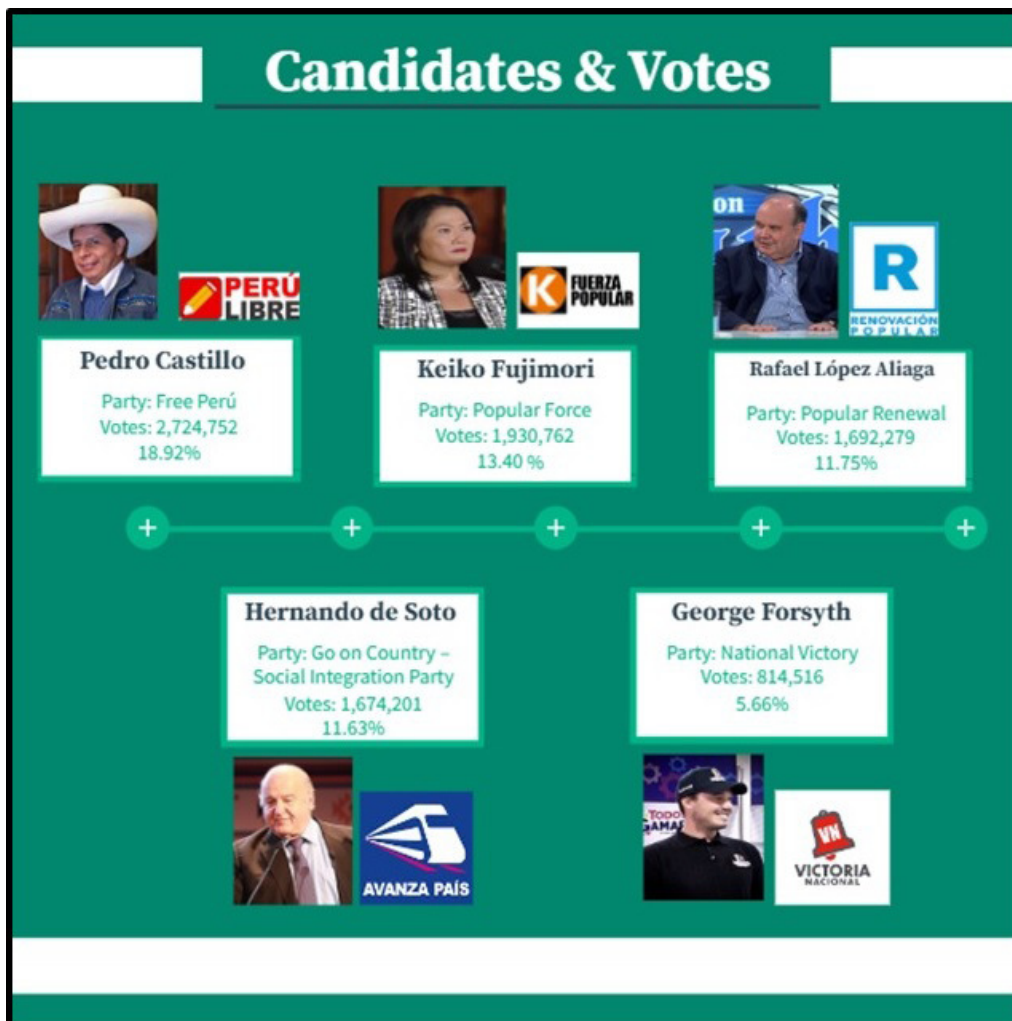


**Figure 1.** Candidates and votes. Source: Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales (2021).

TikToks, defined as both the video content, the music, and, if present, the accompanying text, excluding comments. Data have been manually collected by the authors due to the absence of any commercial API for the platform. The research methodology combines quantitative and qualitative (Jaraba Molina et al., 2020) multimodal content analysis (Serafini & Reid, 2019). The analytical variables have been built by adopting and adapting the methodology proposed by Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021) and are displayed in Table 1.

First, we have looked at the candidates' adaptation to TikTok's affordances, focusing on disclosing whether they fully understand and apply the platform's technical possibilities in creating their content. As per the content, we have distinguished Political, Personal, and Entertainment content. The category Political Content collects all the explicitly political videos. Following Dekavalla (2018), this category has been further sub-divided according to how politics is framed: In the "issue frame," content centers around political issues and concrete proposals, while in

the "game frame" the message mainly refers to the political game, representing politics as a battle or a war.

Moreover, acknowledging that any Presidential election is *per se* personalized, we have adopted the theoretical conceptualization of Metz et al. (2020), which allows differentiating between "professional personalization" and "private personalization." In the first type of personalization, qualities and individual activities related to the official role are highlighted, while the second capitalizes on the private persona of the candidates, concentrating on their personal life (families, hobbies) and characteristics.

Finally, the category Entertainment, which, as previously mentioned constitutes the main genre of the platform (Abidin, 2020), gathers all the TikToks that have no relation to politics at all and are shared only for their entertaining value (dances, pranks, jokes, etc.).

From the stylistic perspective, video shots have long been studied due to their key role in building a narrative (Rao et al., 2020) and the portrayal of situations

**Table 1.** Categories of analysis.

| Genre | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Video | | Duet | | | Challenge | |
| **Format** | | | | | | |
| Only video | Video with effects | Video with music | Video and text | Video with effects and music | Video with effects and text | Video with effects text, and music |
| **Source** | | | | | | |
| Party | | | Media | | Users | |
| Original | | Other social networks | | | | |
| **Content** | | | | | | |
| Political | | | Personal | | Entertainment | |
| Issue frame | | Game frame | | | | |
| **Style** | | | | | | |
| *Video shot* | | | | | | |
| Close up | | Full shot | Two shot | POV | | Wide |
| *Type of recording* | | | | | | |
| Selfie | | Homemade | | | Professional | |
| *Main ators* | | | | | | |
| Politician | Other politicians | Celebrities | Anonymous citizens | | Journalists | |
| **Interaction** | | | | | | |
| Information and promotion | | Deliberation and discussion | | Participation and mobilization | | |

Source: Authors' work based on Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021)

(Licoppe, 2015; Rao et al., 2020). We categorized the shots based on the work of Rao et al. (2020) adding more shot types that are present and popular on TikTok (Abidin, 2020). We included the close-up, which intends to establish the viewer's psychological identification with the character due to the facial non-verbal communication and to emphasize the identities of the characters (Rao et al., 2020); the full shot, suitable for portraying an event (Rao et al., 2020); the two-shot, which shows the candidate talking to someone in particular and enhances the dialogue (Cutting & Candan, 2015); the long or wide shot, noted as a tool to provide a zoom out perspective, such as collective participation (Licoppe, 2015); and the point of view (POV), one of the most popular shots on TikTok (Abidin, 2020) which besides emphasizing the character's perspective (Cutting & Candan, 2015) is known to foster the sense of authenticity (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2017).

In addition, recognizing that music is probably TikTok's most distinguishable affordance (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) and that, as a cultural form, it produces meanings, interpretations, and understandings not only by its producers but also by the way consumers interact with it (Garratt, 2019), it has been added as a category of analysis.

Music, besides functioning as a tool to capture audiences' attention who otherwise would neglect the political message (Way, 2019), can and has been used for political purposes such as propaganda (Street, 2013), but is also constitutive of political expression (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022), as it embodies political values and experiences and organizes political though an action (Garratt, 2019).

In the present study, we have divided music into two subcategories: global and local, which stand for global mass-culture music and Peruvian music, respectively. This choice of music, in the Peruvian context, especially the juxtaposition between global (mostly American) and local music, particularly indigenous popular music (Tucker, 2019), entails a culturally and politically informed communication strategy.

Furthermore, we have also identified the main character of each post due to its importance in the narrative and political message intended to transmit to the audience, as well as the recorder, a production feature which also provides information on the political communication style of each candidate.

Finally, to disclose and measure how/if candidates stimulate forms of interaction with the audience, the interaction scale proposed by Lilleker and Vedel (2013) has been implemented. According to Lilleker and Vedel (2013), the first and less interactive level is represented by information/promotion, in which political parties/candidates use social networks as they used old media, only to disseminate information, without promoting any type of interaction with the audiences. Deliberation or discussion is found when the party/candidate promotes a bilateral exchange through a request for feedback (for example asking the audience to give their opinions). Finally; "mobilization" is the higher level of interaction: Political actors openly encourage citizens to participate online, by sharing or creating content, and/or offline, by taking part in events, offering their support, etc.

Despite, as previously mentioned, the variables used are based on previous works (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021) in order to isolate and fix analytical items requiring changes or clarification, we have implemented an intercoder reliability test to an initial subset of the data (7%). The subsequent, and final, intercoder reliability test have met the kappa > 0.80 standard for all the variables (Cohen, 1960).

## 4. Results

All the analyzed candidates have adopted TikTok. Nonetheless, only Rafael Lopez-Aliaga, Hernando De Soto, and George Forsyth have a relatively decent number of publications, with 33, 41, and 35 posts, respectively; Keiko Fujimori only has 16 and Pedro Castillo three, showing a later adoption of the platform.

Regarding the TikTok genres, most of the candidates only post simple videos, not taking part in Tiktok's main viral formats. Challenges, in particular, were almost absent among all publications. Only Rafael Lopez-Aliaga launches his own challenge under the hashtag #HazLoTuyoChallenge (see Figure 2), while the others only applied it in less than 3% of his posts.

Therefore candidates do not seem to capitalize on TikTok's main and most viral genres.



**Figure 2.** #HazLoTuyoChallenge.

However, looking at the format, they tend to use all of TikTok's technical affordances: 95% of the content posted by the candidates displays a wide use of the different effects provided by the platform (music, special effects, etc.).

Regarding the sources, most of the videos are created especially for TikTok. Only Lopez-Aliaga and Forsyth use extracts from traditional media, such as television interviews, and share them on TikTok. On the other hand, only Lopez-Aliaga and Forsyth post content created by other users showing that candidates are not interacting with other content creators.

From a content perspective, as shown in Figure 3, there is a clear division: While in the case of Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori political content predominates, the rest of the candidates, especially De Soto

and Forsyth, also capitalize on their private persona and share purely entertainment-based content.

Accordingly, Keiko Fujimori mostly uses TikTok to document her efforts to personally tackle contentious issues (see Figure 4) presenting herself as the "mother of the homeland," the heir of former President Fujimori. Many of her posts show her campaign trips with her as the narrator of the events using the voice-over technique. This trait is very important to note because it matches with the frequent use of wide shots, both characteristics revealing the way she portrays herself and wants to be represented by others: as the omniscient narrator that controls her story and is above reality. In doing so, she also shows perspective and takes distance, and positions herself as an experienced leader that not only knows but controls what she is doing.
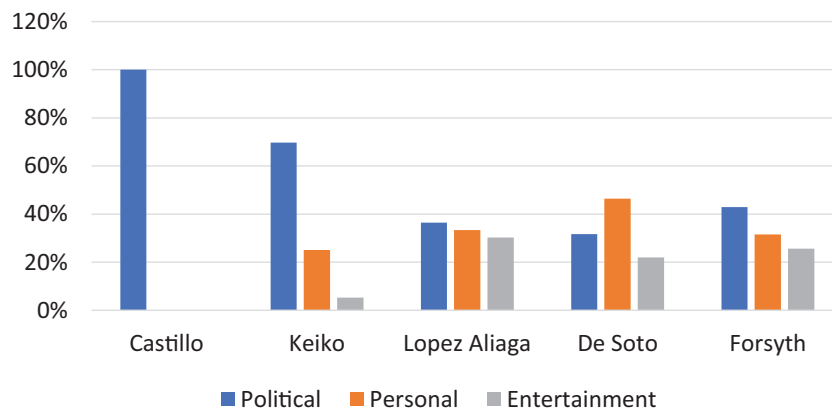


**Figure 3.** Content of the posts.



**Figure 4.** Fujimori's TikTok.

The challenger candidates, on their side, try to show their difference and their remoteness from the establishment and discontent towards political institutions (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020; Dargent & Rousseau, 2021) by focusing on their private personae.

In particular, De Soto positions himself as an academic (see Figure 5) expert whilst Lopez-Aliaga and Forsyth as morally clean outsiders who can fight the corrupted system that the other candidates allegedly represent.

Of note is the case of the latter, who endures his image of an outsider attacking "old school" politicians, by capitalizing on the entertainment and symbolical value of his sports career through the diffuse display of meaningful soccer symbolism, such as soccer teams t-shirts (see Figure 6). Forsyth, therefore, using the term "*mismocracia*," which refers to the traditional political leaders as part of an outdated and corrupted elite, positions himself as the only possibility for renewing the political system.

As for Castillo, the limited number of TikToks published does not allow low to draw any conclusions.

In the same vein, as illustrated by Figure 7, while Fujimori mixes issues with "game frame," the other candidates mostly frame politics as a battle to confront "traditional politics." In this sense, our results align with those of Dekavalla (2018), confirming that challengers tend to foster the representation of politics as a battlefield to strengthen their outsider position.
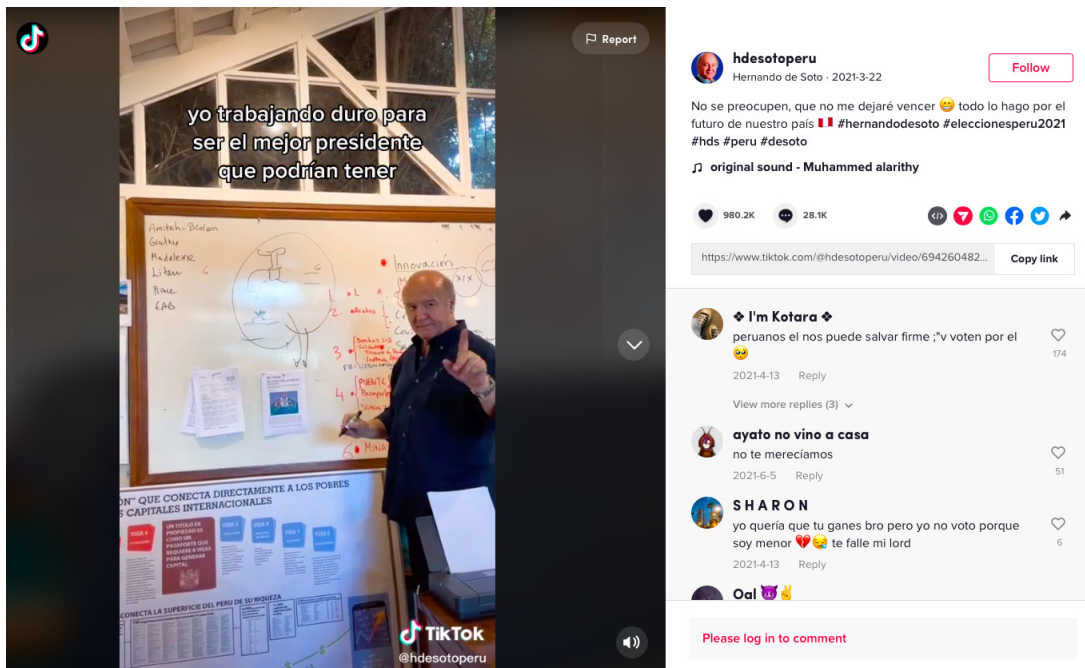


**Figure 5.** De Soto's TikTok.
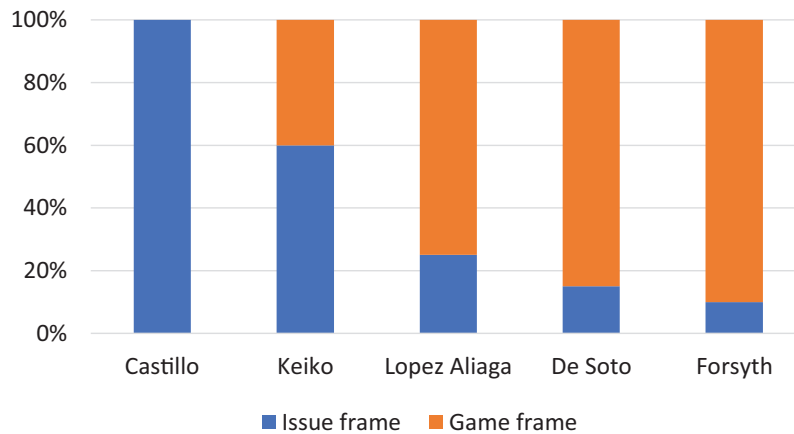


**Figure 6.** George Forsyth's TikTok.

**Figure 7.** Game and issue frames.

Professional recording is predominant in most candidates. In the case of Keiko Fujimori, the vast majority of her videos were professionally recorded (93.75%), which is very symptomatic of her political communication style, suggesting a planned, controlled and traditional strategy. Although the professional component prevails among the rest of the candidates, Forsyth, Lopez-Aliaga, and De Soto exhibited homemade videos in moderate but meaningful proportions with 28.57%, 24.24%, and 21.95%, respectively. These videos suggest the candidates' intentions to appear authentic and relatable, different from the traditional politicians (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2017). Finally, the use of self-recorded videos was very poor among all candidates (<15%).

Most of the candidates appear as the main character in their posts (Fujimori: 93.75%; Lopez Aliaga: 81.82%; De Soto: 80.49%; Forsyth: 82.86%), which strongly corroborates the predominance of personalist politics. Nevertheless, Castillo is completely absent in his publications as a character: His posts' characters are anonymous people, other politicians, and his pet.

As for the use of the camera, Fujimori is the candidate that applies the widest range of camera shots, although a great majority are wide shots (62.50%), showing her surrounded by crowds. The full shot and the close-up are the most used by all the other candidates.

POV, on the other side, despite being one of the most popular affordance of TikTok, is the less-used camera shot: It is not present in Castillo, De Soto, and Fujimori's content and only represents 17.14% and 12% in the cases of Forsyth and Lopez-Aliaga, respectively.

As previously mentioned, music plays an important role in TikTok and an even more important role in Peruvian culture (Tucker, 2019). De Soto, an internationally known intellectual, uses music to connect with young voters. Coherently he mostly uses global music, in particular reggaeton, not only adding it to his videos but also dancing to it. In that sense, music does not only involve the entertaining dimension, but it also embodies a vehicle for the candidate to express and laugh at himself, therefore humanizing himself. This allows for encoding a powerful bridging message to his target audience.

Fujimori, on the other hand, shows clearly differentiated uses of global and local music. Instrumental global music is played as the background of videos in which she narrates her campaign trips, while vocal global music is used in her behind-the-scenes videos, where she shows glimpses of her personal life such as her daily routine at home, her preparations for public appearances (debates, interviews, election day, etc.). Playing and dancing to local music is capitalized as a tool to connect with certain sectors of voters.

Similarly, Castillo's musical selection seems to answer to a clear strategy: Local music is used to advise and talk about local policy issues, whilst its global counterpart is the background for tackling wider topics, such as immigration.

The case Lopez-Aliaga appears particularly interesting since he is the only candidate with a sort of official soundtrack: the Looney Toons music. As previously mentioned, he constructed his political persona somehow imitating Trump and sharing an ultra-conservative populist discourse that created notable discontent, mainly among young people.

Because of that, critics online started—targeting his physical appearance—calling him by the nickname *Porky* (Looney Toons' piglet character). The candidate maximized social media attention economy by capitalizing on this nickname through humor by including Looney Toons music and cartoons-related humor in his posts, portraying himself as cute, harmless, relatable, and funny.

Finally, Forsyth uses popular music (both global and local) to appear "cool" and fashionable, exploiting his archetypical physical appearance—a young, handsome, sports star—to display himself as a sort of soap opera "prince charming." Figure 8, for instance, shows the candidate visiting a popular food market, while attacked by two young fans who wanted to hug him. The story is metaphorically accompanied by the song "Hero" by CNCO.

Finally, looking at interaction, a shattering majority of the posted content only vehicles information and promotion, that is to say, an old media style of unilateral communication (see Figure 9). Almost all the can-
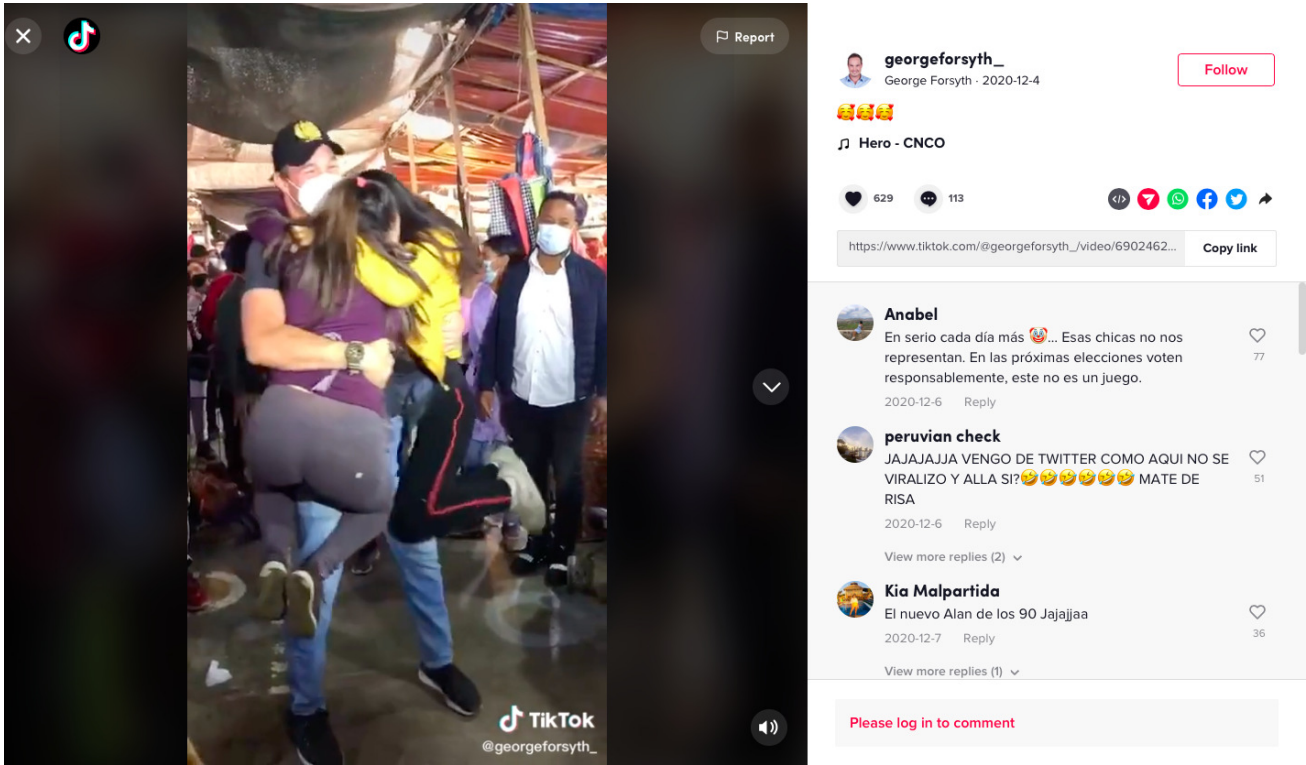
**Figure 8.** George Forsyth's TikTok.

didates only use TikTok uniquely as a platform for auto-promotion: No content asking for people's opinions nor any form of deliberation has been retrieved. Participation, although residual in most candidates (the case of Castillo cannot be considered representative since he only posted three times) is sensibly higher in newcomers.

However, it is important to stress that none of them ask for a real-life form of participation, rather they focus on a "share this" call for action, mostly geared towards engagement rather than purely political participation. This shows that Peruvian politicians use TikTok neither as a tool to foster dialogue nor participation, but rather they use it as a form of digital showcase that corroborates the previously noted top-down communication approach in Latin America, where politicians use social media to reach out to the public without having to deal with questioning and to attack their critics (Waisbord & Amado, 2017).
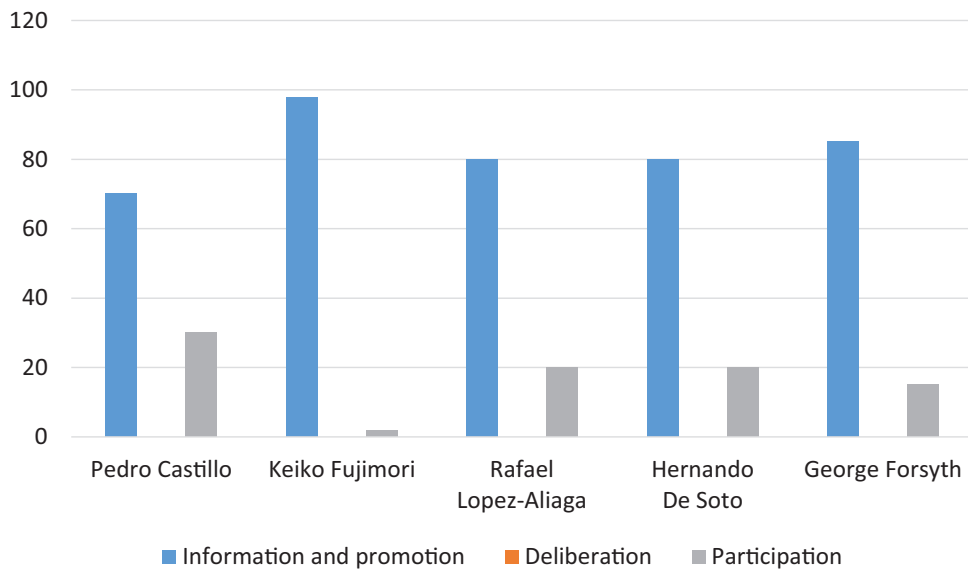


**Figure 9.** Information/promotion, deliberation, and participation.

## 5. Conclusions

Previous studies (Eriksson & Åkerlund, 2022; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020) have disclosed that the emergence of TikTok is transforming political discussion and participation.

Within this context, our work, using the case of Peru, intends to contribute to the emerging stream of literature focusing on how TikTok can be exploited for political communication purposes by political actors.

Our results reveal that in the Peruvian case, despite all the analyzed candidates having joined TikTok, they do not seem to have fully exploited the platform's wide affordances, since, as shown, hardly ever they used challenges or other TikTok trendy genres to engage their audience.

The same can be said about the interaction possibilities that the platform offers: Most of the candidates tend to use it as a unilateral tool for promotion, displaying a top-down communication style with almost no deliberative nor participative intentions. In this sense, our findings confirm what stated by Montúfar-Calle et al. (2022): Keeping up with new cultural and technological innovations seems to be unfinished business for most Peruvian politicians.

From a content perspective, however, a clear difference between "old school" politicians and newcomers and/or challengers can be noted.

Interestingly, Castillo, although unknown and actually embodying the only real challenge to the status quo, seems to use TikTok in a very similar way to Keiko Fujimori: They mostly use the platform as any other social media, to tackle political issues. Right-wing candidates Lopez Aliaga and De Soto together with the newcomer Forsyth, on their side, as challengers prefer the "game frame," representing politics as a battle, offering a dichotomous vision of the world where they are represented as heroes and traditional politicians as villains.

These aspects resonate with what previous studies have encountered in other countries—for instance, in Ecuador (Muñoz, 2021)—suggesting that TikTok can be an opportunity for marginal/challenger or emerging candidates to gain a place in the spotlight.

In addition, especially candidate Lopez-Aliaga, who humorously portrays himself like a cartoon character with the use of the famous Looney Toons soundtrack, together with Forsyth, able to take advantage of his pre-existing popularity and his physical appearance, seems to have perfectly understood that the best way to maximize TikTok's viralizing power is to "incorporate styles, narratives…of the world of spectacle and entertainment into their communicative repertoire" (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021, p. 12). In other words, it appears that politainment content, capitalizing on the platform's entertainment dimension, is the preferred type of content by candidates in their quest for visibility.

Altogether these conclusions are applicable beyond Peru. Aligning with previous works, such as Berrocal-Gonzalo et al.'s (2021), which analyzed new actors (native and peripheral) and their use of new strategies, we can expect that within this new platform, originally meant for entertainment (Abidin, 2020), politainment will become prominent.

In the same vein, recognizing that TikTok might have been "the first platform to remix and combine previously disparate affordances, but it will not be the last" (Guinaudeau et al., 2020, p. 22), we can expect a general increase of politainment content.

This trend should be validated by further research, tracking the evolution of TikTok's usage by political actors. In particular, future investigations should recur to international comparative research to confirm if politainment is becoming a global trend or if political actors' behaviour is still dependent on the type of political and media systems they operate in (Hallin & Mancini, 2012).

Most importantly, admitting the existence of an elective affinity (Gerbaudo, 2018) between populism and social media, it is seminal for future studies to examine whether TikTok's playful affordances and attention economy, which foster politainment, can serve as a loudspeaker, if not as a fertile "discursive opportunity" (Koopmans & Muis, 2009), for populist movements in Latin America—where populism is endemic (de la Torre, 2017)—and worldwide.

On another level, our research contributes to the existing knowledge about the communicative opportunities that TikTok can offer to political actors by positively testing the validity of the methodological framework proposed by Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021).

This affordance-based approach allows overcoming the complexity of investigating a platform that combines all the affordances of the other social networks in one app (Abidin, 2020, p. 84), providing a tool that grants researchers the possibility to work with both quantitative and qualitative variables, without losing the focus on the broader TikTok's cultural environment.

This methodology, nonetheless, suffers from the inherent limitation of being supply-side-centered. Specifically, not taking into consideration the users' feedback, it does not permit the evaluation of the effects of political communication.

In order to comprehensively assess both the efficiency and the efficacy of politicians' communication on TikTok, further academic analysis on the users' side is needed. Future works should explore not only comments but any type of interaction between political actors and their audience, deeping, in particular, on whether new affordances are able to engender a new form of political dialogue or (just) constitute an alternative promotional tool for political actors.

## Acknowledgments

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Securing the Youth Vote: A Comparative Analysis of Digital Persuasion on TikTok Among Political Actors

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## Abstract
In the context of "pop politics" and "politainment," the irruption of TikTok has changed the landscape of social media and become the fastest-growing application among young people. Based on the peculiarities of the social platform's affordances and the political personalization approach, we explore the differences between political parties and political leaders in terms of digital persuasion on TikTok in Spain and Poland. This work contributes to the scarce knowledge about the strategic use of TikTok for political purposes. It also attempts to fill the gap in the comparative research into the practical uses of TikTok in different political contexts. The study explores the three classical persuasion appeals—pathos, ethos, and logos—based on a visual, quantitative analysis of $N$ = 372 videos posted on the official TikTok profiles of the main political parties and leaders from January 1st to March 31st, 2022. Differences were found in how political parties and political leaders used TikTok's affordances as well as in the main rhetorical resource they use to persuade. We noted the use of more rational resources (logos) in the case of political parties and more emotional resources (pathos) for political leaders. Further, the rare presence of the personality in the videos of the political actors (ethos), along with their unusual privatization role, indicate that personalization on TikTok is far from being considered as part of their digital persuasion strategy.

## Keywords
digital persuasion; personalization; political communication; social media; TikTok; visual framing

## 1. Introduction

In the context of "pop politics" Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019) and politainment (Berrocal et al., 2021), visual images are gaining more importance (Veneti et al., 2019); consequently, the irruption of TikTok embodies a new challenge for political contexts (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). This short-video-based social network had an exponential growth in popularity during the global lockdown that took place in 2020, reaching two billion downloads and 800 million monthly active users worldwide by the end of 2020 and 205 million downloads in the second quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2023a).

The increasing importance of political spectacularization has led to alternative forms of political participation for audiences who were previously almost impossible to reach. Having first used Instagram and Snapchat, political actors are currently turning their attention to TikTok as the most relevant social network for communicating with younger people (Hortelano, 2022; "Internetowa ofensywa," 2022). In fact, 43% of TikTok's global audience is between 18 and 24 years old (Kemp, 2021).

TikTok represents the hyper-postmodern aesthetic based on visual components, orientated toward entertainment and playful political participation among the youth (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). It has been recognized as a grassroots social media platform that allows a collective political expression for the youth to play a role in political self-expression (Vijay & Gekker, 2021) or as a back channel (Seglem & Haling, 2018) for youth to share their points of view and to encourage free social conversations. Furthermore, this social network is even used for image management to create a closer and more humanized political image of populist leaders (Bianchi, 2020).

Previous studies on TikTok-based campaigns underlined how TikTok has been shown to be a new form of political communication to create, share, and diffuse information (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020) and how the platform's design and playful architecture shape political discourse and encourage participation among the youth (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). It is also demonstrated that the kind of personalization Generation Z wants to see from political actors on visual platforms is based on a backstage culture, showing not only their daily activity but also how they feel about it (Parmelee et al., 2022). Accordingly, how political actors are persuading on social media based on personalization represents an important research issue.

This article presents a comparative quantive content analysis of $N$ = 372 TikTok videos from political parties and leaders in two different European countries, Spain ($N$ = 214) and Poland ($N$ = 158). Our aim is to explore the digital persuasion potential of this platform in both countries based on Aristotle's three classical persuasion appeals—pathos, ethos, and logos. We focus on the presence of ethos, being one of the most common rhetorical strategies used by politicians in interactive spaces, to further ground our work on the personalization of political communication and to identify possible differences in the implementation of TikTok between political parties and leaders in each country. Specifically, we explore whether the political parties and politicians in Spain and Poland use the opportunities offered by TikTok and whether they use it as another traditional one-way communication channel.

## 2. Digital Persuasion in Social Media

For more than two thousand years, Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) rhetoric has been the foundation for the study and practice of the art of speaking and persuasion in different contexts (Dillards, 2019). Aristotle articulated three means of persuasion: (a) ethos, establishing the credibility or authority of the speaker, making the audience more likely to trust the speaker; (b) pathos, appealing to the emotions of the audience, trying to make them feel angry or sympathetic; and (c) logos, appealing to the audience's reason using logical arguments.

The digital transformation of visual politics and the blurring of the boundaries between persuasion and entertainment has been included in some relevant studies (Messaris, 2019). Although the current literature refers to online social networks as being the new rhetorical space of the 21st century, specific research linking the ethos, pathos, and logos modes of political persuasion and their use on online platforms is scarce (Fahmy & Ibrahim, 2021). Most of the studies on digital persuasion show that the most common rhetorical strategy used by politicians in interactive space is ethos, followed by pathos (see English et al., 2011; Johnson, 2012).

Concretely, studies focusing on visual rhetoric revealed that the appeal to ethos on YouTube political videos, measured as the credibility of the message source, was the most credible appeal, followed by logos and pathos in the 2008 US presidential campaign (English et al., 2011). On the contrary, studies focused on verbal rhetoric (Bronstein et al., 2018; Johnson, 2012) found that pathos is as relevant as ethos to persuade. Johnson (2012) specifically found that the motivation behind most of Romney's tweets during the 2012 US presidential campaign was to establish logical connections and to build credibility (ethos). Bronstein et al. (2018) revealed that pathos was the most important element in all the Facebook posts of Israeli political leaders during the 2015 general election, with the aim of creating an affective bond with the audience and the public.

In many cases, the use of pathos and ethos had a positive impact on audience engagement, while logos generated the lowest number of audience interactions. In this sense, Bronstein et al. (2018) revealed that both presidential candidates chose emotional and motivational approaches using the pathos element on their Facebook posts to lead users to identify with them during the 2012 presidential elections. Similarly, Samuel-Azran et al. (2015) found that ethos was the most prevalent rhetorical strategy used by Israeli politicians on their Facebook walls during the 2013 elections, while pathos-based appeals attracted the most "likes."

As the literature shows, there are no specific works on persuasion appeals on short-video-based platforms so far. This work aims to fill that gap using the case of a visual social network such as TikTok; we consider that the analysis of videos based on the three persuasion modes is the most appropriate framework to study how political actors are persuading on this platform.

## 3. TikTok's Affordances in Political Communication Contexts

Recent studies have focused on specific TikTok features through design and structural elements that can be strategically used in political contexts for persuasive purposes (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Vijay & Gekker, 2021). We consider TikTok's main affordances under the framework of digital architectures of social networks in general (Bosetta, 2018) as well as the efforts of other scholars to identify specific affordances of TikTok in political contexts (Guinaudeau et al., 2021; Hautea et al., 2021).

From the structural perspective, TikTok represents the hyper-postmodern aesthetic based on a "memetic text" (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) that encourages imitation and remixing on a platform level with a particular focus on influencer culture and popular culture. Compared to other social networks, TikTok videos provide a more viral and fully immersive experience since they incentivize users to create videos that will go viral (Guinaudeau et al., 2021). Through the algorithmic recommendation system, TikTok uses artificial intelligence that obliges users to follow an algorithmically generated feed of personalized videos through the "For You" page.

In this work, we focus on TikTok's functional affordances pertaining to how content is disseminated and spread on the platform. In this sense, Hautea et al. (2021) underlined the visibility, editability, and association affordances of TikTok as being the most important in facilitating interactivity and participation on social media. Political actors need to adapt existing content using these affordances in which mimesis, creativity, emotionality, and soft content play an important role.

First, visibility affordance is related to how to make content easily perceivable and locatable for other users through hashtags, as well as the number of shares, likes, and comments on these videos. Second, the editability affordance allows TikTok users to craft messages carefully based on a range of editing options, filters, and effects, like other popular visual platforms, and so it has become a place for creative expression and playful sociality (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). In this sense, the background music on TikTok videos represents the core message and may serve as part of a dance routine, a lip sync battle, or as the backdrop for a comedy skit, and so it plays a key role in the storytelling (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). Finally, association affordance enables users to take part in message co-creation by combining old and new content (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). In fact, one of the features that makes this platform distinct is the possibility for replication and virality (Vijay & Gekker, 2021) or "spreadability" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 3) since any TikTok video has the potential to prompt the creation of another.

Scholars have highlighted how TikTok is a user-driven platform that not only allows more creative expression but also better interactivity in comparison to other social media (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020) and the potential of the TikTok specific genres: "challenges" and "duets." Challenges are community-created hashtags (often sponsored) in which users are invited to create videos showing themselves attempting to do a certain action, dance, or trick proposed by others. Duets are based on users taking another person's video (original) and adding themselves performing the same action, scene, or choreography. Similarly, the stitch feature on TikTok allows one to splice together multiple videos to create a new one, so it was included here as a variation of the duet.

To understand how political actors use TikTok affordances to persuade their followers, we need to explore the potential uses of this platform in political contexts from a comparative perspective, including the profiles of both political parties and political leaders in different cultural and political contexts:

RQ1: Do political parties and political leaders significantly differ in using TikTok affordances?

RQ2: Are there significant differences between Spain and Poland in using TikTok affordances by (a) political parties and (b) political leaders?

By including political leaders' activity separately from political parties, we can identify how each of them is using this platform in functional terms. Previous studies focused on a single specific political actor, concretely Spanish political parties (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021), which showed that they mainly use this platform as a unilateral broadcasting tool for self-promotion and belligerently disqualifying and ridiculing political opponents. In the case of political leaders, the scarce evidence points to a low interactive use overall and with image management as the main function to create a closer and more humanized political image of populist leaders (Bianchi, 2020):

H1: Political parties and political leaders are not fully exploiting TikTok functionalities to create a more effective persuasive strategy.

## 4. Personalization as a Persuasive Resource on TikTok

*Personalization* of politics can be considered a social media strategy (Larsson, 2019; Metz et al., 2020) that includes a process in which "individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities" (Karvonen, 2010, p. 4). It has been defined as a multi-faceted concept that includes two overarching dimensions: (a) personalization as *individualization*, where individual politicians gain more media coverage than the parties they belong to, and (b) *privatization*, which points to "the rising importance of the politician as an 'ordinary' person" (Van Aelst et al., 2011, p. 206) by disclosing more details about his or her private life.

Previous research showed that social-media-based visual political communication is inseparable from personalization as a persuasive strategy (Lindholm et al., 2021; Metz et al., 2020). This trend allows politicians to show more personal lifestyle issues as part of a process of humanizing candidates, which has led to increased citizen identification and decreased psychological distance between politicians and potential voters (Vergeer et al., 2013).

Although scholars have highlighted the online personalization tendencies of either political parties or individual politicians (Hermans & Vergeer, 2013), only a few studies have focused on both groups to compare

differences in personalization. Furthermore, most of these studies have focused on visual platforms, especially Instagram. Only some recent studies on short-video-based platforms from the fields of marketing and advertising have started to explore the effects of personalized persuasive content on TikTok (Chu et al., 2022; Han, 2020).

In our study, we try to shed light on the use of personalization on TikTok as a persuasive strategy in political communication to explain to what extent it is related to persuasion modes, which is something that has not been studied before. Accordingly, we explore the relationship between both forms of political personalization and the use of personality (ethos), among other persuasion appeals for impression management:

RQ3: Do political parties and political leaders significantly differ in personalization in their use of TikTok?

RQ4: Are there significant differences between Spanish and Polish political parties and individual political party members in personalization in their use of TikTok by (a) political parties and (b) political leaders?

Previous literature that compares personalization between both actors detects some differences. Concretely, Larsson (2019) found that Norwegian party leaders were more successful than political parties in gaining audience attention on Instagram, and they offered a higher degree of personalized compared to parties:

H2: Political leaders significantly use more personalized communication than political parties in their use of TikTok.

We further explore the specific modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—used by political leaders and political actors on TikTok, following previous research on digital persuasion (Fahmy & Ibrahim, 2021):

RQ5: Do political parties and political leaders significantly differ in using persuasion appeals on TikTok?

RQ6: Are there significant differences between Spain and Poland in using persuasion appeals on TikTok?

In line with recent studies that have shown the kind of personalization Generation Z wants to see from political actors on visual platforms (Parmelee et al., 2022), we argue that TikTok's affordances can serve as a playful space for politicians. In other words, "adopting a backstage pass aesthetic when showing what politicians do on the job and how they feel about it" (Parmelee et al., 2022, p. 1) can be an effective way of presenting persuasive political communication on social media. Accordingly, we expect political leaders to use ethos as the most common rhetorical strategy in their TikTok videos, compared to pathos and logos:

H3: Political leaders use ethos significantly more than pathos and logos on TikTok.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Data Collection and Sampling

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of $N = 372$ TikTok videos from the official profiles of political parties and leaders in Spain ($N = 214$, with 174 videos from political parties and 40 from political leaders) and Poland ($N = 158$, with 63 videos from political parties and 95 from political leaders). These countries were selected based on different characteristics of (a) their political systems but similar (b) characteristics of their political media systems, and (c) social media use. Comprised of two parliamentary government systems based on a multiparty democracy with proportional electoral systems, with Poland being a republic and Spain a monarchy, the sample provides sufficient variation regarding their political systems. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), media systems in Spain and Poland reflect the characteristics of the polarized pluralist model. Spain presents a low degree of press circulation (contrasting with a high level of TV viewing), an authoritarian past in which part of the media was involved in the struggle for freedom, a low degree of autonomy among Spanish journalists under both political and commercial pressure, and a high degree of state interventionism in public media. Similarly, in Poland, journalism underwent a late professionalization and presents high levels of state intervention in public service, a strong tradition of advocacy journalism, and strong media politicization. Finally, in terms of social media use, there are also some similarities. In 2022, TikTok was the sixth most popular social network in Spain, with 8.8 million active users, while in Poland, the TikTok platform had 7.7 million users by that time (Kemp, 2022). In 2021, 41% of the adult users of the platform in Spain were people with ages between 18 and 24 years old. The usage of the video-based social network decreased according to age. Similarly, in Poland, TikTok was most popular among participants between 18 and 24 years, who made up 40% of the app's users in the first quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2023b).

For each country, we first selected the most popular political parties with an official TikTok account. In the case of Spain, five parties were included: Partido Popular (@partidopular), VOX (@vox_espana), Unidas Podemos (@ahorapodemos), Ciudadanos (@ciudadanoscs), and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (@psoe). In the case of Poland, three parties were considered: Platforma Obywatelska (@platforma.obywatelska), Lewica (@__lewica), and Konfederacja (@konfederacjawin). Two political parties in Poland—Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) and Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL)—did not have official accounts on TikTok. We also included in our sample the TikTok accounts of those political leaders and parliamentary representatives in each country

with an active official TikTok account and a minimum of three uploaded videos. We chose to extend the sample to include members of parliament due to the scarce presence of party leaders on TikTok, even though most political parties were active on the platform.

The units of analysis were all those videos posted on the official TikTok accounts during the first three months of 2022, from January 1st to March 31st. By that time, the main political parties and leaders in both countries had already gained some experience on the platform since most opened their official TikTok accounts in 2020 during the lockdown. Finally, our sample included *N* = 372 units composed of videos and their captions or textual descriptions. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample, including the accounts of candidates and political parties, with the number of videos in each case for both countries. In the total sample, 57.5% of the videos came from Spain and 42.5% from Poland. In the same period, political parties in both countries were more active (63.7% of the sample) than party leaders (26.3%). Those accounts that include a verified badge to confirm that the account belongs to the user it represents are shown with an asterisk. Political parties also represented a higher number of verified accounts compared to political leaders, as shown in Table 1. The rest of the unverified accounts were confirmed based on the description of the profile and also the content to ensure that they were authentic and could be considered official.

### 5.2. Coding Process

Following previous studies on the use of TikTok in political contexts (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020), we coded for format-related variables, content-related variables, and specific persuasion-related variables.

We first classified each unit based on the production techniques: (a) normal videos (no interactive and no political add style), (b) videos with a political advertising style, (c) still life photos (group of photos without motion), (d) videos with an interactive TikTok style. Based on Lilleker and Vedel's (2013) proposal to measure the interaction level on social media and adapting it to the TikTok context, we classified each unit depending on the functionality of the video: information diffusion, self-promotion, deliberation, criticism of the opposition, mobilization, and humor.

The coding included format-based variables linked to the three features highlighted by Hautea et al. (2021)—visibility, editability, and association. To measure the visibility of the videos, information about the number of likes, comments, and shares was collected manually, as TikTok does not provide a commercial application programming interface for sharing data on user behavior. For editability affordances, we used a series of dichotomous dummy variables to measure whether political parties and leaders have used TikTok's main genres and its main affordances. Hence, following Medina-Serrano et al. (2020), we recorded the different uses of music in the videos. The option of including text in the videos was recorded in two different ways: text in captions and text inserted into the video images. The use of special visual effects for customizing and adding details to TikTok videos was also coded, including the use of pinning stickers, which allow users to pin stickers and emojis on objects in their videos which track them as they move around a scene, thereby making the content more creative and fun. Finally, to measure the association affordance, hashtags were selected if the video included more than one hashtag in the text to help users to share and connect their content with similar conversations about topics of interest.

**Table 1.** Sample distribution of videos among political actors in Spain and Poland.

| Total sample (*N* = 372) | Political leaders | No. of videos | Political parties | No. of videos |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Spain (*N* = 214) | @gabrielrufian | 7 | @partidopular | 114 |
| | @irenemontero_ | 8* | @vox_espana | 7* |
| | @ierrejon | 4* | @ahorapodemos | 28* |
| | @ivanedlm | 5 | @ciudadanoscs | 16 |
| | @sandrage76 | 16 | @ _psoe | 9* |
| Poland (*N* = 158) | @borysbudka | 5 | @platforma.obywatelska | 6 |
| | @rbiedron | 18* | @__lewica | 8 |
| | @zandberg | 5 | @konfederacjawin | 49 |
| | @magdabiejat | 3 | | |
| | @beata_maciejewska | 24 | | |
| | @krzysztofsmiszek | 6* | | |
| | @arturdziambor | 8 | | |
| | @konradberkowicz | 8 | | |
| | @michal_urbaniak | 18 | | |
| | Total | 135 | Total | 237 |

Note: * = verified accounts.

In the second part of the coding, we ensue Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021) and Metz et al. (2020) by including categorical variables for measuring the personalization level related to the video content. Following Van Aelst et al. (2011), we first identified the main actor in the visual content to distinguish the *individualization* dimension of personalization, that is, the relevance of the political leader in the videos from that of the political party and the other actors. Then, the type of content was registered to measure the *privatization* dimension of personalization—professional content (explicitly political activities related to the official role) or private content (non-political activities or personal images presenting politicians as private individuals, including details about their personal lives). Finally, the main function of the videos was also coded to understand the real intention of each video.

For the persuasion analysis, we followed Fahmy and Ibrahim (2021) to code each video for the dominant persuasion technique: ethos, pathos, or logos. Ethos was selected for those videos that mainly focus on the credibility and trustworthiness of the content creator in order to engage an audience in a particular topic. Pathos was selected when the videos appeal to the emotions and deeply held beliefs of the audience in order to draw them further into the subject. Finally, logos was selected for those videos that mainly use logic, reasoning, evidence, and facts to support an argument. We also used categorical variables to identify the key elements of ethos (based on celebrities, authority figures, and credible figures, including the parties' own political leaders and testimonials), pathos (based on inspiration and hope, sadness, courage and strength, hatred), and logos (based on statistics, recorded evidence, historical data, or facts).

### 5.3. Intercoder Reliability

The coding of the 372 videos was conducted by two coders. To assess intercoder reliability, a randomly selected sub-sample of 10% of the sample ($N = 37$ videos) was coded. By using Scott's (1955) pi for calculating intercoder reliability, we found a satisfactory rate of agreement for all variables included. Specifically, for production technique, the agreement was 1; for the functionality of the video, 0.74; for music, 1; for text captions, 1; for text in the videos, 0.98; for the use of stickers, 1; for the use of visual effects, 0.94; for the type of content, 0.89; for the main issue, 0.82; for the main actor, 0.91; for the dominant persuasion technique, 0.74; and finally, for the tone of the visuals, 0.75.

### 6. Results and Discussion

This study aims to explain the digital persuasion potential of TikTok. In this section, we explain the main results related to our research questions based on the previous literature to discuss our findings.

RQ1 asked whether political parties and political leaders significantly differed in using TikTok affordances. We obtained simple frequencies for each feature in the three main affordances of TikTok highlighted by Hautea et al. (2021): visibility, association, and editability. Table 2 shows how each feature was used by political actors in each country. Overall, association was the affordance that scored the highest, although some editability features also were highly relevant.

In terms of TikTok's visibility features, our findings show how videos by political leaders got higher numbers of shares, likes, comments, and views compared to those by political parties. We found high statistical significance in the cases of the number of likes and number of views.

Regarding association affordances, the most prominent feature was the use of hashtags (89.8%). Videos of political parties (94.9%) used this option significantly lower than videos of political leaders (80.7%). The use of interactive TikTok genres (such as duets and challenges) was scarce, particularly among political parties (7.6%).

Focusing on editability, political parties significantly scored higher when compared to political leaders. Results indicated that the most important feature was the use of text in captions to explain the stories (99.6% for political parties and 90.4% for political leaders). Similarly, the use of text on images was often employed to feature the videos, with a significantly higher presence among political parties (81.7%) compared to political leaders (74.1%). The use of stickers in both text captions and text in the videos was not generalized, although it was also significantly higher among parties (53.2%) than among leaders (28.9%). Surprisingly, one of the most popular features of TikTok videos, the use of music, was included in only half of the sample, with a higher presence among political leaders (63%) than political parties (40%). The role of music in the videos was mainly used as a story builder. Finally, visual effects were seldom employed, especially by political leaders (4.4%). Figure 1 shows some examples of visual effects used by political parties.

RQ2 asked about significant differences between Spain and Poland in using TikTok affordances. As shown in Table 2, the visibility figures were much higher in Poland compared to Spain, but with similar differences among political actors. To answer to RQ2b, it was notable that the use of hashtags among political leaders in Poland was generalized (98.9%), but this was not the case for Spain, with only 37.5%. Similarly, there was a significant difference in the use of TikTok genres as interactive resources among Polish political leaders (29.5%) compared to Spanish ones (2.5%). In relation to RQ2a, we found similar patterns among political parties for editability affordances in both countries related to the use of text in images and text in captions, as well as the use of visual effects. The main difference was the use of stickers, which scored considerably higher among Spanish political parties (67.2%) compared to Polish political parties (14.3%).

**Table 2.** Percentages and averages by which visibility, association, and editability affordances were used in the TikTok videos of political parties and political leaders in Spain and Poland (*N* = 372).

| | | Spain (*N* = 214) | | Poland (*N* = 158) | | Total (*N* = 372) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Political parties | Political leaders | Political parties | Political leaders | Political parties | Political leaders | *p*-value |
| Visibility | No. of shares ($\bar{X}$) | 110.7 | 114.4 | 153.4 | 180.6 | 122.1 | 161 | ≤0.3 |
| | No. of likes ($\bar{X}$) | 1,510.6 | 1,678.8 | 2,529.6 | 5,721 | 1,783.8 | 4,566.1 | 0.00** |
| | No. of comments ($\bar{X}$) | 63.3 | 86.43 | 213.2 | 158.7 | 103.1 | 137.3 | ≤0.3 |
| | No. of views ($\bar{X}$) | 18,176.6 | 48,133.2 | 54,045.8 | 71,203.9 | 27,711.5 | 64,368.1 | ≤0.01* |
| Association | Includes hashtags (%) | 96.6 | 37.5 | 90.5 | 98.9 | 94.9 | 80.7 | ≤0.00** |
| | Interactive TikTok genre (%) | 7.5 | 2.5 | 7.9 | 29.5 | 7.6 | 21.5 | ≤0.00** |
| Editability | Includes music (%) | 46.6 | 52.5 | 25.4 | 67.4 | 40.9 | 63 | ≤0.00** |
| | Includes text in the video (%) | 82.2 | 85 | 96.8 | 69.5 | 86.1 | 74.1 | ≤0.00** |
| | Includes text in the caption (%) | 100 | 77.5 | 98.4 | 95.8 | 99.6 | 90.4 | ≤0.00** |
| | Includes stickers (%) | 67.2 | 22.5 | 14.3 | 31.6 | 53.2 | 28.9 | 0.00** |
| | Includes visual effects (%) | 12.1 | 5 | 11.1 | 4.2 | 11.8 | 4.4 | ≤0.01* |

Note: * = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01.

These findings support H1, which predicted that political parties and political leaders are not fully exploiting TikTok's affordances that could have aided more effective persuasion and continue to broadcast their messages using traditional practices. Most videos from political actors were lacking in key audiovisual elements in terms of editability, such as special effects and the use of music, and seldom included typical TikTok genres, such as duets and challenges, which are crucial for interacting with followers on this platform.

RQ3 asked about the differences related to how political parties and political leaders use personalization on TikTok for persuasive purposes. To address the first dimension of personalization, the *individualization* level, we first analyzed the main actor in each unit. While the videos of the political parties prioritized other politicians but not always the political leader (40.9%), the videos of political leaders focused on themselves alone (70.3%). For the *privatization* dimension, we analyzed the content of all the units to measure to what extent they included political or personal content. Results showed that 98.7% of the videos by political parties and 92.6% of those by political leaders included mostly political content. In other words, the presence of personal or private
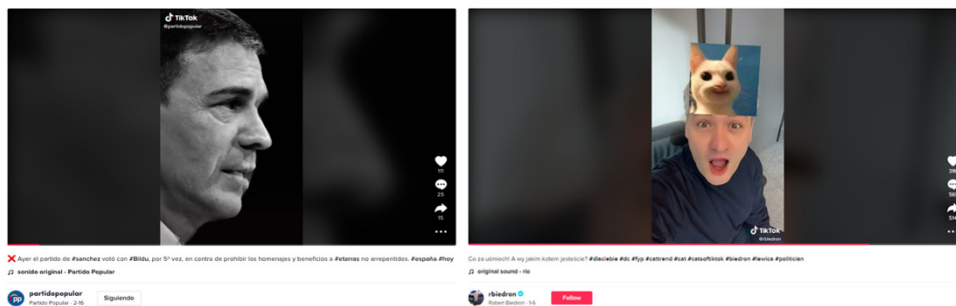


**Figure 1.** Examples of the use of visual effects on TikTok. Note: In the first video, the Partido Popular uses visual effects to transpose one image from the president of Spain onto another with the leader of Bildu, Arnaldo Otegui; in the second video, one of the leaders of Lewica, Robert Biedroń, is depicted with changing pictures of various cats. Source: Biedroń (2022); Partido Popular (2022).

content was scarce. Figure 2 represents one of the rare examples of a political leader using his TikTok account for showing personal or private aspects of his life, away from his political role.
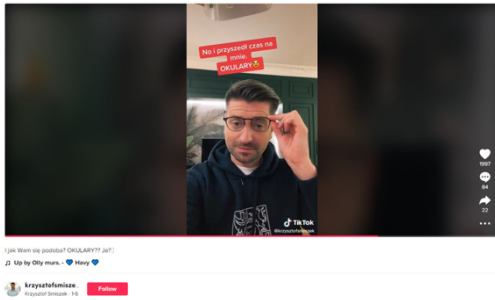


**Figure 2.** Example of non-political content on TikTok. Note: In this video, the Lewica politician Krzysztof Śmiszek is seen trying on new glasses with the caption, "Well, my time has come. Glasses." Source: Smiszek (2022).

As Table 3 shows, we also found significant differences regarding the main function of the videos, which helps to understand their persuasive role. While videos from political parties were used to criticize the opposition (48.5%), those from political leaders mainly focused on information diffusion (39.3%).

RQ4 inquired about differences in personalization levels among political parties and individual political party members in Spain and Poland on TikTok. Findings pointed out how political parties in Spain mainly depicted the presence of the political leader as the main actor (71%), even more than among videos from political leaders (RQ4a). In the case of Poland, this presence was even higher for videos by the political leaders themselves (88.6%). There were no significant differences in the type of content between both countries, with political content being the most relevant in both cases. However, the main purpose of the videos in each country differed, especially in the case of political parties. As shown in Table 4, half of all videos by political parties in Spain (55.2%) were based on criticism of other political actors, while political parties in Poland used TikTok videos mostly for information diffusion (42.9%). In both countries, videos by political leaders followed a similar pattern pointing to information diffusion as their main function (RQ4b).

**Table 3.** Percentages and frequencies of video functionality used in the TikTok videos of political parties and political leaders in Spain and Poland ($n = 372$).

| | | Spain ($N = 214$) | | Poland ($N = 158$) | | Total ($N = 372$) | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | Political parties | Political leaders | Political parties | Political leaders | Political parties | Political leaders |
| Functionality of the video | Opposition-focused (%) | 55.2 | 35 | 30.2 | 29.5 | 48.5 | 31.1 |
| | Information diffusion (%) | 18.4 | 42.5 | 42.9 | 37.9 | 24.9 | 39.3 |
| | Self-promotion (%) | 20.1 | 17.5 | 17.5 | 13.7 | 19.4 | 14.8 |
| | Mobilization (%) | 2.3 | 0 | 1.6 | 9.5 | 2.1 | 6.7 |
| | Humoristic (%) | 4 | 5 | 3.2 | 8.4 | 3.8 | 7.4 |
| | Total (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| | | $\chi^2 = 11.938$ $p < 0.018$ | | $\chi^2 = 8.024$ $p < 0.155$ | | $\chi^2 = 20.257$ $p < 0.001$ | |

**Table 4.** Frequencies and percentages of the most dominant persuasion technique in TikTok videos employed by political parties and political leaders in Spain and Poland ($N = 372$).

| | | Spain ($N = 214$) | | Poland ($N = 158$) | | Total ($N = 372$) | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | Political parties | Political leaders | Political parties | Political leaders | Political parties | Political leaders |
| Dominant persuasion technique | Ethos (%) | 63 (36.2) | 8 (20) | 6 (9.5) | 26 (27.4) | 69 (29.1) | 34 (25.2) |
| | Pathos (%) | 39 (22.4) | 12 (30) | 30 (47.6) | 44 (46.3) | 69 (29.1) | 56 (41.5) |
| | Logos (%) | 72 (41.4) | 20 (50) | 27 (42.9) | 25 (26.3) | 99 (41.8) | 45 (33.3) |
| | Total (%) | 174 (100) | 40 (100) | 63 (100) | 95 (100) | 237 (100) | 135 (100) |
| | | $\chi^2 = 3.922$ $p < 0.14$ | | $\chi^2 = 9.119$ $p < 0.01$ | | $\chi^2 = 5.977$ $p < 0.05$ | |

These findings partially support H2, which predicted a more personalized communication strategy among political leaders compared to political parties. In terms of individualization, videos from political leaders were clearly more focused on their own persona as the main actor compared to those from political parties, and they mostly used their videos to diffuse information, among other functions. However, in terms of privatization, no significant differences were found between political parties, and political leaders and most of the videos were based on political content.

RQ5 asked whether political parties and political leaders significantly differ in using persuasion appeals on TikTok. For this purpose, we measured the frequency of the dominant persuasion technique—ethos, pathos, or logos. As shown in Table 4, some significant differences were found between political parties and political leaders. While the former opted to persuade in their videos by using more rational resources (logos; 41.8%), the latter based their videos on more emotional resources (pathos; 41.5%). Unexpectedly, we should note the low percentage of ethos for both actors, which was particularly low among political leaders (only one in five videos).

RQ6 was also answered in Table 4. We found certain cultural differences by comparing to differences between Spain and Poland in using persuasion appeals

on TikTok. In the case of Poland, pathos was clearly the dominant persuasion technique for both actors (47.6% and 46.3%, respectively), while in the case of Spain, logos was more relevant (41.4% and 50%), although this last relationship was not statistically significant.

Of particular interest was the specific use of pathos, logos, and ethos in each video, as shown in Table 5. The analysis revealed that, in the case of pathos, hatred was the most common emotion in almost one out of two videos by political parties. This result was even higher among Spanish parties (57.5%) compared to Polish parties (27%). Although hatred was also evident in some of the political leaders' videos, they mainly used positive emotions, such as inspiration and hope (23.2%) in Poland or courage and strength (30%) in Spain. Figure 3 includes examples of the use of pathos, with both negative and positive emotions.

Regarding logos, as Table 5 indicates, the use of facts and historical data was frequently employed by political parties (34.6%), while political leaders opted for using recorded evidence in their videos, such as press clippings, audio, and live videos (35.6%). Once more, we found some differences. While the use of facts and historical data was the main persuasive resource in Spain for both political actors, in the case of Poland, the use of recorded evidence was more common. Figure 4 includes

**Table 5.** Frequencies and percentages of the three modes of persuasion in TikTok videos among political parties and political leaders in Spain and Poland (*N* = 372).

| Persuasion appeal | Spain | | Poland | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Political parties N (%) | Political leaders N (%) | Political parties N (%) | Political leaders N (%) | Political parties N (%) | Political leaders N (%) |
| Ethos | | | | | | |
| Celebrity/authority/credible figures | 114 (65.5) | 18 (45) | 48 (76.2) | 83 (87.4) | 162 (68.4) | 101 (74.8) |
| Testimonials | 18 (10.3) | 8 (20) | 1 (1.6) | 2 (2.1) | 19 (8) | 10 (7.4) |
| Others | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 9 (14.3) | 8 (8.4) | 9 (3.8) | 8 (5.9) |
| Not applicable | 42 (24.1) | 14 (35) | 5 (7.9) | 2 (2.1) | 47 (19.8) | 16 (11.9) |
| Total | 174 (100) | 40 (100) | 63 (100) | 95 (100) | 237 (100) | 135 (100) |
| | | | | | | |
| Pathos | | | | | | |
| Inspiration and hope | 29 (16.7) | 6 (15) | 10 (15.9) | 22 (23.2) | 39 (16.5) | 28 (20.7) |
| Sadness | 6 (3.4) | 4 (10) | 11 (17.5) | 16 (16.8) | 17 (7.2) | 20 (14.8) |
| Courage and strength | 17 (9.8) | 12 (30) | 7 (11.1) | 14 (14.7) | 24 (10.1) | 26 (19.3) |
| Hatred | 100 (57.5) | 10 (25) | 17 (27) | 15 (15.8) | 117 (49.4) | 25 (18.5) |
| Other | 22 (12.6) | 8 (20) | 14 (22.3) | 27 (28.4) | 36 (15.2) | 35 (26) |
| Not applicable | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 4 (6.3) | 1 (1.1) | 4 (1.7) | 1 (0.7) |
| Total | 174 (100) | 40 (100) | 63 (100) | 95 (100) | 237 (100) | 135 (100) |
| | | | | | | |
| Logos | | | | | | |
| Statistics | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 10 (15.9) | 10 (10.5) | 11 (4.7) | 10 (7.4) |
| Recorded evidence | 25 (14.4) | 5 (12.5) | 22 (34.9) | 43 (45.3) | 47 (19.8) | 48 (35.6) |
| Facts/historical data | 70 (40.2) | 14 (35) | 12 (19) | 5 (5.3) | 82 (34.6) | 19 (14.1) |
| Other | 9 (5.2) | 9 (22.5) | 5 (7.9) | 10 (10.5) | 13 (5.5) | 19 (14.1) |
| Not applicable | 70 (40.2) | 12 (30) | 14 (22.2) | 27 (28.4) | 84 (35.4) | 39 (28.9) |
| Total | 174 (100) | 40 (100) | 63 (100) | 95 (100) | 237 (100) | 135 (100) |
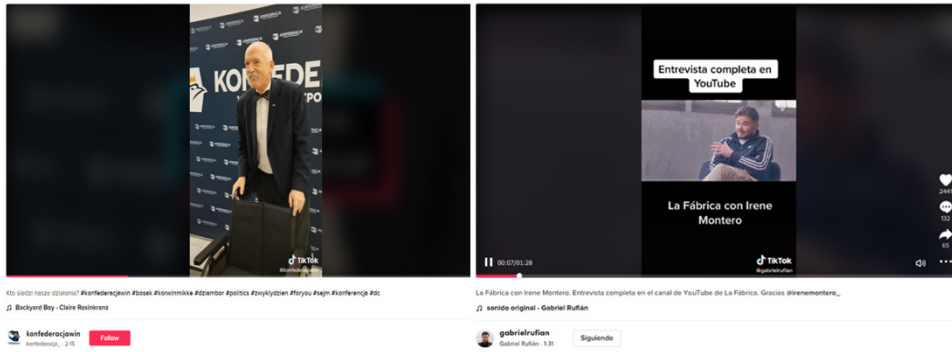
**Figure 3.** Examples of persuasion based on pathos on TikTok. Note: On the left, different politicians from Konfederacja party are shown in attractive scenes of their everyday lives, displaying positive emotions; on the right, Gabriel Rufián, shows his TV interview with Irene Montero where he calls politicians from the far-right VOX party as being "nazis," displaying negative emotions. Source: Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (2022); Rufián (2022).

an example of the use of historical data in a video by a Spanish political leader.

Finally, for persuasion based on ethos, the results show a common trend among political parties (68.4%) and leaders (74.8%)—the use of celebrities or authority figures who can persuade the audience with their credibility. Some of these authorities were the parties' own political leaders, as Figure 5 illustrates, or other political personalities who use their character to persuade. This pattern was similar in both countries.

With these findings, H3, which predicted political leaders would use ethos significantly more than pathos and logos on TikTok, was not supported. The presence of ethos as a persuasion appeal was rather scarce for both actors and unexpectedly low among political leaders. Instead of using their videos for image management based on their credibility as a persuasion feature (ethos), political leaders opted for more emotional resources (pathos), while videos from political parties used more arguments and evidence (logos) to persuade.

## 7. Conclusions

Our study explored the use of digital persuasion for political purposes on TikTok. Specifically, we examined the differences between political parties and leaders in how they used this platform's affordances to strategically frame their visual communication following the classical rhetorical persuasion appeals.

The visual analysis of 372 videos posted on the official TikTok profiles of the main political parties and leaders in Spain and Poland supports previous literature regarding the use of TikTok by political parties (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). Our findings confirm that political actors are not exploiting the full potential of TikTok's affordances and continue broadcasting their messages largely using traditional communication practices. Although this is a new scenario for online political communication for both actors, we can appreciate certain differences regarding visibility. Political leaders get more views and likes in their videos than political
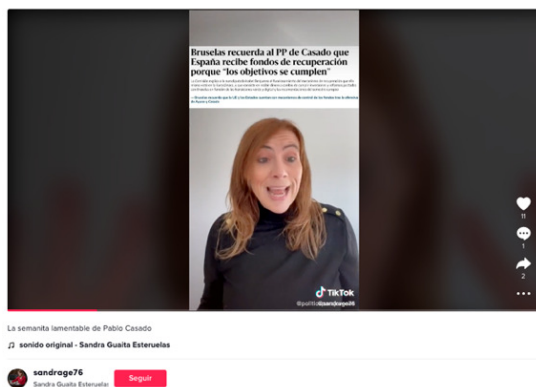


**Figure 4.** Example of the use of historical data as a logos resource to persuade on TikTok. Note: In the video, the political leader Sandra Guaita ironically explains how the Partido Popular channeled its opposition to the EU funds policy; she uses several newspaper clippings as evidence of the story. Source: Guaita Esteruelas (2022).
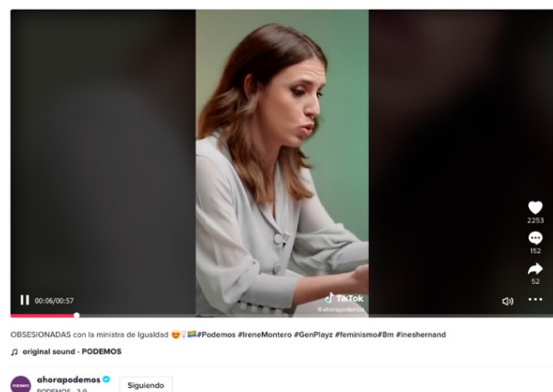


**Figure 5.** Example of persuasion based on ethos on TikTok. Note: In this video, Unidas Podemos uses the image and reputation of their political leader, Irene Montero, to explain the main feminist ideas. Source: Podemos (2022).

parties. In line with previous studies, we found that political parties used TikTok mainly for belligerently ridiculing political opponents (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). In the case of political leaders, we also confirmed the use of this platform as self-promotion for image management (Bianchi, 2020), with a very low degree of interactivity. Most videos were lacking in key audiovisual elements in terms of editability, with the absence of music being one of the most important factors. In terms of association, we found a scarce presence of the typical TikTok genres aimed mainly at encouraging interactivity between users. Only a few examples of creativity in the videos from political leaders were noted.

Our findings also contribute to the scarce knowledge about the use of personalization on specific short-video-based platforms as a persuasion strategy. Our study identified the use of personalization on TikTok among videos from political actors. However, we could not conclude that this political communication strategy was more determinant among political leaders compared to political parties. Even though political leaders offer more personalized content to gain audience attention compared to political parties, as shown on other visual social networks (Larsson, 2019), our findings did not support the use of personalization in terms of privatization. Political actors use TikTok to diffuse mostly political content but hardly any personal or private content. Overall, the findings reveal that political actors are not using personalization on TikTok as a strategy for humanization or identification with potential voters. Instead, they assume a conservative role or a more traditional use of this platform.

Regarding the relative use of personalization on TikTok, our main contribution focuses on the extent political actors use persuasion techniques in their videos. Based on the classical rhetorical resources of ethos, pathos, and logos, our study reveals some important differences. Evidence points to the use of more rational resources (logos) in the case of political parties, such as using recorded evidence, press clippings, and audio to persuade and more emotional resources (pathos) for political leaders. Moreover, positive emotions such as inspiration and hope were more frequently used by political leaders, and more negative emotions were employed when pathos was used by political parties, with hatred being the most common emotion among political parties. Unexpectedly, the scarce presence of the personality of the political leaders (ethos) compared to logos or pathos among political leaders for impression management could be explained by the relatively low use of both forms of political personalization (individualization and privatization).

Finally, this work further demonstrates that the political context really matters in order to understand digital persuasion on TikTok. Significant differences were found with respect to how this platform is used by political actors in two different European countries, Spain and Poland. Although we found similar patterns regarding the editability affordances in both countries, Polish political leaders show higher figures in terms of visibility and make better use of TikTok genres as interactive resources compared to Spanish political leaders. It is also notable that political leaders in Poland, more than in Spain, frequently appear as the main actor in their videos. However, the content of these videos was mainly political in both cases, and so the personalization trend was relative in both countries.

Perhaps the most important difference that we found is related to the mode of persuasion and the purpose of the TikTok videos in each country. Given that the presence of ethos was scarce in both cases, political actors in Poland base their persuasion appeals mostly on the use of positive emotions (pathos), while in Spain, the use of emotions, which were mostly negative criticism of their opponents, were combined with the use of arguments and evidence (logos). A different persuasion style in each country can explain this result since political actors in Poland follow a more idol-centric political communication style, whereas, in Spain, the more logos-centric style, where personality is less important than concrete proposals, seems more relevant.

In conclusion, this study represents one of the first attempts to explore the strategic use of TikTok for political purposes from a comparative perspective. Future online campaigning research may build on the findings of this study as well as address its limitations. This study represents only two specific countries, and so, for a comparative and more global perspective, it would be interesting to expand this work using international data from other political contexts. The authors are also aware of the limitations of the choice of using a method that is mostly used for still images to apply to moving images. Since the main goal of this article focused on content aspects instead of technical aspects, we consider that limitation doesn't affect the validity of the findings. Finally, it should be noted that some of the main political leaders from the most important political parties were not included since they did not have an official TikTok account at that time. Further research could also extend the sample to explore the role of short visual video platforms for political persuasion.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Populist Right Parties on TikTok: Spectacularization, Personalization, and Hate Speech

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## Abstract

Populist parties use social media as a fundamental element of their online communication strategies. This article aims to identify the strategies of right-wing populist parties and politicians on TikTok by measuring a set of features of their videos: It evaluates the presence of hate speech in these messages and the identification of certain groups as "enemies" of "the people," and also pays special attention to the differences in engagement according to the presence of hate speech and entertaining or humoristic features. We apply a content analysis to a transnational sample (*N* = 293) of videos posted by the following populist right-wing parties and politicians on TikTok: Vox and Santiago Abascal (Spain), José Antonio Kast (Chile), and the UK Independence Party (UK). Findings show that while Vox and UKIP use TikTok to convey their ideology and values and to target the state as the main enemy of "the common person," Kast used the same platform to build and project his image of leadership and to broadcast humoristic and entertaining content. Only 19% of the analyzed videos included hate speech elements. Not only was hate speech uncommon; it deterred engagement in terms of the number of comments as well. Contrarily, humour and entertainment favoured engagement. We conclude that TikTok might downplay the most controversial issues of the populist right.

## Issue

This article is part of the issue "Political Communication in Times of Spectacularisation: Digital Narratives, Engagement, and Politainment" edited by Salvador Gómez-García (Complutense University of Madrid), Rocío Zamora (University of Murcia), and Salomé Berrocal (University of Valladolid).

## 1. Introduction

Political leaders and parties are increasingly using social media to spread their messages (Estellés & Castellví, 2020). The rise of these platforms has shifted conventional practices in political communication towards politainment (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2014). One example in this regard is the growing personalization of politics attributed to the frequent focus of social media (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) on individual politicians instead of political parties (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), as well as the new possibilities for individual political brands provided by these platforms (Kannasto, 2020). Another example is the increasing use of user-generated content (e.g., internet memes; see Makhortykh & González-Aguilar, 2020) for public mobilization and the spreading of political messages.

An important consequence of the above-mentioned changes is the growing reliance on more emotional formats of political communication, which sometimes enter the realm of hostility and hate speech (Paz-Rebollo et al., 2021). Under these circumstances, social media are viewed as one of the key elements behind the ongoing rise of populist movements around the world

(Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). Some authors have called these new movements "technopopulist" parties, which in addition to the discursive elements of populism itself cannot be understood without considering their interaction with social media (Bickerton & Accetti, 2018). The success of these parties is attributed to the alignment between emotion-driven communication practices on social media and distinct features of populism such as the emphasis on simple and direct solutions (Hernández-Carr, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), the use of explicit language for disqualifying adversaries and praising leaders (Castro-Martínez & Díaz-Morilla, 2021), the use of aggressive and sometimes vulgar claims (Vázquez-Barrio, 2021), and sensationalist arguments (particularly in the case of populist right parties; see Castro-Martínez & Díaz-Morilla, 2021).

Among the many concerns related to the rise of populist movements, a prominent place is occupied by their frequent use of hostile rhetoric (Prior, 2021). Often, such rhetoric reiterates claims associated with nationalism (Krasteva & Lazaridis, 2016) or, in some cases, even racism and suprematism (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021) to attack or degrade the so-called "enemies of the people." Consequently, populist communication strategies often involve hate speech—i.e., the attribution of negative characteristics to a given group based on ideology, gender, or race (Piazza, 2020). Such involvement is particularly pronounced on social media, which are commonly employed by populist actors (in particular right-wing ones) to promote radicalization and discriminate against minorities. Social media have already become one of the main venues for such discourses to circulate and spread (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021), with significant consequences on public opinion (Cáceres-Zapatero et al., 2022) and contributing to a broad social polarization (Urman & Makhortykh, 2021).

Despite several studies looking at the use of social media platforms by populist right parties and leaders (e.g., Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Finlayson, 2022; Peck, 2022), most of them focus on a small set of platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube. We aim to look beyond the usual set of social media platforms discussed in the context of right populism and examine how populist actors and parties use TikTok. As a relatively new platform, it has become a promising medium for populist movements to spread their message (Weimann & Masri, 2020). Furthermore, TikTok is one of the fastest-growing social media services around the world (Cervi et al., 2021): Since its birth in 2017, it attracted more than one billion users, 39% of them aged 16 to 24 (Statista, 2023). Even though it shares features similar to other social media, such as Instagram and YouTube, some particularities of TikTok make it especially attractive and unique in the market, namely the short duration of the videos, their vertical format, and the addition of snippets of songs.

The distinct features of TikTok contribute to it facilitating the practice of "casual politicking" (Gekker, 2019),

which is sometimes argued to be a less genuine form of political communication because of its lesser attachment to particular ideologies (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). Such practices are particularly appealing to young users who "play" politics on social media platforms (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). At the same time, it does not fully exclude the possibility of using TikTok as a unidirectional broadcasting tool that relies on its politainment effect (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021) to promote biased and sensationalist narratives that can reinforce populist movements (López-Fernández, 2022).

## 2. Aims, Hypotheses, and Research Questions

We examine the strategies of a transnational sample of populist right-wing parties and politicians on TikTok. Specifically, we analyze accounts from two Spanish-speaking countries (Spain and Chile) and one English-speaking country (the UK). We have chosen a comparative study design due to the lack of such studies on this topic and the importance of comparative analysis to understand the differences and similarities in the tactics of the populist right and how these may differ even within the same platform. We believe that the comparison of different realities allows us to detect the most relevant common features or to transcend the particularities of each case, even if the analysis later reveals tendencies. The accounts chosen for the analysis are part of the official communication apparatus of political parties and leaders.

We decided to analyze populist right-wing parties because, according to Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo (2022), one of the Spanish parties with the most intensive use of TikTok is Vox, a populist right-wing party. For this reason, we thought it convenient to compare its activity with that of other parties from other countries but with similar ideologies to obtain more in-depth results on the topics and, above all, the engagement of their messages on this social network. Moreover, given that populist right-wing parties use social media intensively and quickly instrumentalize online practices for their purposes, research on their activity could be particularly relevant. We focused on Vox (Spain), the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and the Partido Republicano de Chile (PLR). The political parties we chose for this study share some common features. The first one is their rise in popularity in recent years. Two of them, Vox and the PLR, were founded less than a decade ago, while UKIP was founded in the 1990s. However, it was not until 2014 that it began to be treated as a "major party" and received increased press attention (Deacon & Wring, 2016). Another common feature is the relationship of these parties with social media as communication tools. All three have boosted their antagonistic and polarizing discourse in social media. In the case of Vox, it has done so through Instagram (Aladro-Vico & Requeijo-Rey, 2020) and Facebook (Ballesteros-Herencia & Gómez-García, 2020). In the case of UKIP (Karamanidou & Sahin, 2021)

and PLR (Durán & Rojas, 2021), Twitter stands out as the medium most used for these purposes.

Particularly, this study introduces the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main objectives of the TikTok accounts associated with populist right-wing movements?

RQ2: Which are the most frequent populist features in the content produced by these TikTok accounts?

RQ3: Who do these account target as "enemies of the people"?

RQ4: Do these accounts use hate speech against any minority?

We also expect that, as TiKTok is mostly used as an entertainment platform (Anderson, 2020), more humour-oriented messages will achieve a higher number of views, comments, and likes (H1). Similarly, we posit that, as hate speech is one of the main features of populist right communication in social media, such content will also generate greater engagement (H2).

## 3. Method

We analyzed 293 videos manually collected on 25 August 2022 from the five chosen accounts. For Vox we chose the account of the party and the political leader. For UKIP we chose the account of the political party (the UKIP leader[s] do not have individual accounts). Finally, in the case of PLR we chose the account of José Antonio Kast, founder of the political party and former candidate for the presidency of Chile (the party does not have an official account on TikTok). The number of videos includes all the videos of the analyzed accounts published up to this date. The account with the most videos was that of UKIP, while Santiago Abascal's account only posted 15 videos (see Table 1).

We divided the content analysis into three parts. The first part focused on the analysis of the video's characteristics. For this, we relied on the approach proposed by Casero-Ripollés et al. (2017) in their study of political communication on Twitter but adapted it to TikTok. We took the following categories from the latter's study: political achievement management, media agenda, agenda and mobilization of political actions, participation and mobilization. On the other hand, we decided to combine other categories from the same study to better adapt them to the characteristics and functionality of TikTok (electoral program with ideology and entertainment with humour). The second part of our analysis corresponded to engagement data (views, likes, comments).

Finally, we divided the third part of our analysis into two phases. First, we focused on the populist traits mentioned in several academic studies, such as the "construction of the leader" (Gurov & Zankina, 2013; Schmidt, 2022; Weyland, 2001), references to "the people" (De Cleen, 2019; Laclau, 2005; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021; Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2020), and the mention of the "enemies" of their movement, such as the state, political parties, or the media (Block & Negrine, 2017; Campos-Herrera & Umpierrez de Reguero, 2019; Wojczewski, 2020). On the other hand, we inquired whether the videos contained any hate speech. To this end, we added categories on vulnerable groups such as women (misogyny), migrants (racism and xenophobia), and the LGBT community (queerphobia).

Two of the three authors of the article coded the videos. We did the encoding of the videos in a non-exclusive way so that the same video could contain several characteristics. For this purpose, we elaborated the first pretest in which 70% of the coded categories reached Krippendorff's Alpha above 0.68. After that, we discussed some categories (participation and mobilization, enemies, racism/xenophobia) to refine details about their definitions and characteristics. Finally, we elaborated a second pretest in which 100% of the categories reached a Krippendorff's Alpha above 0.68.

### 3.1. Data Analysis

We used a Pearson's chi-squared association test to identify particular differences in the uses of TikTok by each account. This test compares the observed frequency of some variables—in this case, the presence of certain message features and the number of videos posted by each TikTok account—to a probabilistic expected distribution where the sum of messages including one given characteristic is directly proportional to each TikTok account according to the number of videos published in each one of them (see Table 3). Thus, the test allows us to identify whether the number of videos for a specific

**Table 1.** Videos analyzed per account.

| TikTok account | First post | Country | Political party | No. of videos |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| @vox_espana | 2020 | Spain | Vox | 73 |
| @santiabascal_ | 2022 | Spain | Vox | 15 |
| @joseantoniokast | 2021 | Chile | PLR | 84 |
| @ukindependenceparty | 2021 | UK | UKIP | 121 |

account is higher or lower than expected. The results of the comparison are summarized using the *p*-value, which can be roughly interpreted as the probability that such a distribution might occur if the null hypothesis is true (e.g., a *p*-value of .05 suggests that such a distribution might occur 5% of the time if the null hypothesis is true).

We also used a non-parametric test (Mann-Whitney U test) to compare the effect of hate speech and entertainment/humour in the engagement, given that the distribution of views, likes, and comments did not follow a normal pattern ($p < .001$ according to Shapiro-Wilk test for each value). This test, similarly to the chi-square test, provides a *p*-value that can be interpreted as the chance that the differences identified between the compared groups (in our case, the videos that included the considered feature or not) can be a product of mere chance. We follow the traditional threshold of significance of *p* equal or below to .05.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Analysis of Video Characteristics

Most of the analyzed videos addressed ideological and programmatic issues of the respective parties. The most common populist characteristics of the videos were references to enemies and leader construction. The more regularly identified enemy of the people was the state. Hate speech was relatively uncommon; videos promoting racist and xenophobic discourses were the most frequent in this category, but overall remained scarce. There were only a few videos expressing hatred towards other minorities (see Table 2).

Table 3 offers the disaggregated results for each category and provides a column for the theoretically expected percentage of messages within each category (see Section 3). Results were considered significant if $p < .001$.

Thus, we found that Kast's videos were particularly focused on projecting his leadership ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 208, $p > .001$) and to provide entertainment and humoristic content ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 244, $p > .001$).

UKIP showed the highest presence of calls to participation ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 62.2, $p > .001$) and mentions to external enemies ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 86.8) = 244, $p > .001$). Such enemies were identified mainly as the state ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 49.6, $p > .001$). The British party also was significantly associated with hate speech ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 47.9, $p > .001$) which took the form of racist and xenophobic messages ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 46.7, $p > .001$).

Programmatic and ideological content was especially associated with the Vox account ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 64.9, $p > .001$). This also happened with mentions to "the people" ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 66.2, $p > .001$). Vox also showed a tendency to denounce other parties as enemies of the "real" will of the people ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ = 293) = 25, $p > .001$).

### 4.2. Analysis of Video Engagement

Among the TikTok accounts analyzed, Kast's account generated the highest engagement in terms of the average number of views and comments. On the other hand, the Vox account was ranked as the one with the most likes (see Table 4).

We observed that hate speech played no significant effect on views ($p = .379$) or likes ($p = .849$), but it

**Table 2.** Frequencies and percentage proportion of video characteristics.

| Characteristic | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Program and ideology | 143 | 48.81 |
| Enemies of "the people" | 128 | 41.30 |
| "The people" | 75 | 25.60 |
| The state | 85 | 29.01 |
| Leader construction | 118 | 40.27 |
| Political parties | 36 | 12.29 |
| Entertainment/humour | 97 | 33.11 |
| Hate speech | 59 | 19.11 |
| Media agenda | 17 | 5.80 |
| Management of political achievements | 9 | 3.07 |
| Agenda and organization of political actions | 8 | 2.73 |
| Racism and xenophobia | 47 | 16.04 |
| Media | 7 | 2.39 |
| Misogyny | 6 | 2.05 |
| Participation and mobilization | 54 | 18.43 |
| Queerphobia | 6 | 2.05 |

**Table 3.** Disaggregated frequencies, percentages per account, and expected percentage of each video feature by account.

| | Jose Antonio Kast (PLR) | | | UKIP | | | Vox | | | Santiago Abascal (Vox) | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | *n* | % | expected % | *n* | % | expected % | *n* | % | expected % | *n* | % | expected % |
| Agenda and organization of political actions | 2 | 2.38 | 1.92 | 0 | 0.00 | 3.99 | 6 | 8.22 | 1.45 | 0 | 0.00 | 2.73 |
| Program and ideology | 11 | 13.10 | 34.44 | 78 | 64.46 | 71.51 | 41 | 56.16 | 25.99 | 13 | 86.67 | 48.80 |
| Management of political achievements | 1 | 1.19 | 2.17 | 1 | 0.83 | 4.50 | 6 | 8.22 | 1.64 | 1 | 6.67 | 3.07 |
| Media agenda | 1 | 1.19 | 4.09 | 6 | 4.96 | 8.49 | 8 | 10.96 | 3.10 | 2 | 13.33 | 5.80 |
| Participation and mobilization | 2 | 2.38 | 13.02 | 48 | 39.67 | 26.98 | 4 | 5.48 | 9.86 | 0 | 0.00 | 18.40 |
| Entertainment/ humour | 84 | 100.00 | 23.35 | 0 | 0.00 | 48.52 | 12 | 16.44 | 17.67 | 1 | 6.67 | 33.13 |
| Leader humour humour | 84 | 100.00 | 28.39 | 0 | 0.00 | 58.93 | 26 | 35.62 | 21.46 | 8 | 53.33 | 40.27 |
| "The people" | 0 | 0.00 | 18.06 | 29 | 23.97 | 37.51 | 35 | 47.95 | 13.65 | 11 | 73.33 | 25.60 |
| Enemies of "the people" | 0 | 0.00 | 29.15 | 77 | 63.64 | 60.50 | 36 | 49.32 | 21.97 | 8 | 53.33 | 41.27 |
| The state | 0 | 0.00 | 20.50 | 53 | 43.80 | 42.47 | 26 | 35.62 | 15.48 | 6 | 40.00 | 29.00 |
| Political parties | 0 | 0.00 | 8.65 | 18 | 14.88 | 18.03 | 18 | 24.66 | 6.55 | 0 | 0.00 | 12.27 |
| Media | 0 | 0.00 | 1.69 | 1 | 0.83 | 3.50 | 5 | 6.85 | 1.27 | 1 | 6.67 | 2.39 |
| Hate speech | 0 | 0.00 | 13.52 | 45 | 37.19 | 27.95 | 9 | 12.33 | 10.22 | 2 | 13.33 | 19.13 |
| Racism and xenophobia | 0 | 0.00 | 11.34 | 40 | 33.06 | 23.47 | 5 | 6.85 | 8.54 | 2 | 13.33 | 16.07 |
| Misogyny | 0 | 0.00 | 1.44 | 1 | 0.83 | 3.00 | 5 | 6.85 | 1.09 | 0 | 0.00 | 2.05 |
| Queerphobia | 0 | 0.00 | 1.44 | 4 | 3.31 | 3.00 | 2 | 2.74 | 1.09 | 0 | 0.00 | 2.05 |

did SO in the case of comments (*p* = .001). Yet we observed that comments were more common on videos that did not express hate speech (*avg.* = 851, *median* = 68, *SD* = 1720) than on those that did (*avg.* = 53.8, *median* = 27, *SD* = 58.5).

We also applied the Mann-Whitney U test for the effect of humoristic and entertaining content and we found values close to the highest threshold of signifi-

cance in the number of views (*p* = .005), likes (*p* = .036), and comments (*p* < .001). Humoristic videos reached higher engagement (see Table 5).

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, we analyzed the TikTok videos published by populist right parties and politicians. Our findings

**Table 4.** Mean engagement per TikTok account.

| | Views | | Likes | | Comments | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | *Mean* | *SD* | *Mean* | *SD* | *Mean* | *SD* |
| José Antonio Kast | 755,077 | 1,120.000 | 1,040 | 2490 | 2,162 | 2,388 |
| Santiago Abascal | 1,422 | 1,027 | 357 | 161 | 14.0 | 7.40 |
| UKIP | 2,303 | 2,276 | 115 | 123 | 32.4 | 41.4 |
| Vox | 999 | 2,439 | 2,422 | 2713 | 357 | 617 |

**Table 5.** Comparison of engagement data by the presence of humoristic or entertaining features.

|  | Humor/Entertainment | *Mean* | *Median* | *SD* | *SE* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Views | No | 1,879 | 789.0 | 2,387 | 170.5 |
|  | Yes | 653,929 | 687.5 | 1,070.000 | 108,528 |
| Likes | No | 889 | 138.0 | 1,885 | 134.6 |
|  | Yes | 1,124 | 79.9 | 2,498 | 254 |
| Comments | No | 115 | 26.0 | 328 | 23.4 |
|  | Yes | 1,951 | 961.0 | 2,306 | 234 |

highlight several points that can advance the current understanding of the complex relationship between populist parties and social media, in particular concerning the platforms that emerged in the last few years, knowing from other studies that social media give populist actors the freedom to articulate their ideology (Engesser et al., 2017) and that they sometimes use these platforms as a communication alternative to the "elite-captured" media (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020).

Our first point refers to the type of messages populist right-wing parties broadcast through TikTok. Some (Vox and UKIP) use TikTok to convey their ideology and values, while others (PLR) focus on promoting the leader's image. This deduction is mainly because PLR's account focuses on the individual while VoX and UKIP's accounts focus on the political party. At the same time, there are significant differences even within ideology-focused communication. While UKIP focused on attracting voters and affiliates, Vox focused on exposing its proposals, criticizing its opponents, and extolling its leaders. In this case, UKIP's practices within the platform respond to the party's scarce social and political presence in the UK. Its presence on TikTok leads us to think that the party is looking to target other affiliates. While Vox, as a consolidated party, uses TikTok as one more of its digital tools to communicate and disseminate its agenda.

Our second point relates to the differences in the use of populist claims. While Vox and UKIP reiterate in TikTok the classic populist discourse focusing on enemies (e.g., the state) and arguing that they are the true representatives of the people, PLR content does not include these features and focuses on entertainment and humour. The main populist characteristic of PLR videos is the emphasis on a single leader. In the case of Vox, our findings are in accord with other studies focused on social media such as Instagram (Aladro-Vico & Requeijo-Rey, 2020) or Twitter (Cepeda-García de León et al., 2022), where the party enhances this classic populist discourse feature of seeking blame either internally or externally.

Our third point is that the TikTok content we analyzed does not necessarily promote incivility and hate speech to the degree it could be expected from populist right content. Out of the three examined parties, UKIP used hate speech the most, usually in the form of xenophobic and racist claims. This observation raises a question about whether TikTok actually attenuates the populist right discourse. In this case, TikTok becomes not only a political communication tool but also a strategy to downplay the most controversial issues of populist right for the platform's audience ideology.

Our fourth point links to user engagement with the analyzed videos. It is important to mention that previous studies have found that issues related to politics (at least in the Spanish case) encourage user participation (Segado-Boj et al., 2022). From video engagement analysis, we can conclude that the success of Kast's account (PLR) may be due to two reasons: First, Kast became very famous in Chile after being named presidential candidate; second, the PLR account exploits the features of TikTok better than the other two. Based on our analysis, we also conclude that the presence of hate speech does not have a determining effect on the videos getting more views or more likes. However, this could also be due to the TikTok algorithm that downgrades these videos to prevent them from becoming viral, following the principle of "visibility moderation" (Zeng & Kaye, 2022).

It is also important to point out some limitations of our analysis. First, it is necessary to mention that the comparison by the presence of humour and entertainment in the videos could be biased. The only one who uses these resources is José Antonio Kast (PLR), and this account is the most popular, i.e., the one with the largest number of followers and the highest number of video views. Secondly, our article only analyzes a sample of right-wing populist parties and politicians. At the same time, it would also be essential to analyze left-wing populism for future studies to determine differences and similarities (if any) between populisms. Third, we did not consider particular possibilities offered by TikTok (e.g., filters or music) in our analysis nor did we analyze its specifically visual aspects. The use of these elements may be an important factor in generating greater engagement with the videos. It should be considered in future studies. Finally, we could mention that the sample is not uniform. The most convenient would have been to analyze three accounts of political parties and three accounts of political leaders. However, we could consider that TikTok is a platform still in a growth phase as a political communication tool, so several parties do not yet have a profile on this social network. Such is the case of PLR, where

the only verified account is that of José Antonio Kast, but there is no verified profile for the entire political party.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Music as Soft Power: The Electoral Use of Spotify

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**Abstract**
The changes brought by new technologies and the ensuing rapid development of the communication field have resulted in an increasing number of studies on politicians' use of the internet and social media. However, while election campaigns have been the predominant research area in political communication scholarship, music has not yet been taken as an object of study alongside spectacularisation and politainment. Aside from some preliminary studies, systematic research on music in politics is scarce. The literature holds that music is a universal language. Music in politics can therefore be deemed to be an identification tool that can help politicians connect with voters and bring together positions between the different actors of international relations. This is an exploratory study about the use of music in political campaigning. It is focused on the role played by the Spotify playlists created by the main political parties in recent election campaigns in Spain. The initial hypothesis is that some of the candidates strategically selected songs to be shared with their followers. A quantitative content analysis (*N* = 400) of some Spotify playlists showed that there were significant differences in the selection of songs among the different political parties. This research contributes to the understanding of how Spotify has been used for electoral campaigning, as well as shedding some light on the current communication literature on music and politics.

**Keywords**
electoral campaign; politainment; political playlists; pop politics; soft power; Spain; Spotify

## 1. Introduction

Part of human emotional language is intrinsically linked to the art of music and sound, which to some extent has an impact on the kind of lifestyle adopted by an individual, directly or indirectly related to their personality. No one today doubts that music is a crucial element of our daily lives, but only a few experts within the main currents of social and personality psychology seem to genuinely pay attention to this universal and omnipresent social phenomenon. Some studies have linked musical preferences to the personality characteristics of the population in general terms

(Barrett et al., 2010; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007; Herrera et al., 2018; Rentfrow, 2012), and there is a wealth of research specifically focused on the songs preferred by children, adolescents, and people under-25 (Delsing et al., 2008; Schwartz & Fouts, 2003). There are even studies that have taken Spotify playlists as a reference point to fulfil objectives as ambitious as trying to categorise social groups according to what the platform's users listen to on a daily basis (Anderson et al., 2021). However, until recent times, this proliferation of mature scholarship has not fully reached the vast area of political communication, apart from the existence of works such as that of Blankenship and Renard (2017),

Gorzelany-Mostak (2016), and other proposals that open the way and can be consulted in the references section of this article. The reason for the relative emptiness is that, despite the prominence of music in the preparation and conduct of any electoral campaign, the superficial approach often employed to address this subject may raise the suspicions of those who "have been arduously engaged in the endeavour of discovering the essence and being of the political" from their "wise doctrine" (Mantecón, 1950, p. 125).

The lack of a true bulk of academic contributions to lay the groundwork for unravelling the correlation between the public's musical tastes and their political opinions (Lacognata & Poole, 2021) has left a relative vacuum in the field. This compels us to expand the field of study with proposals that focus on the use of music as a soft power tool. Soft power is the combination of elements based on attraction rather than coercion. Thus, in situations of tension, political leaders have three options: They can resort to the use of military or economic force and harsh measures, that is, hard power; they may opt for conventional and classic political strategies; or they may exploit cultural resources (such as music) and appeal to common values of a social group or ensemble. The latter is what authors such as Nye (2004) call "soft power," whose meaning relies on the combination of cultural factors with moral values and ideological principles (Fukuyama, 2004; Nye, 2004, 2008). It is no coincidence that the new politics needs those aspects that are culturally appealing to the population and draw on art, fashion, sport, popular films, music, and all the trends showcased in the media in general and on social media in particular.

In this line, soft voters are characterised by being less politically committed than other groups of voters since they are not usually updated on parliamentary news and are less "sophisticated" and demanding in terms of education, habits, lifestyle, and cultural concerns (Baum & Jamison, 2011, p. 124). Theoretically, this type of voter is permeable to new persuasion tactics, with the possibility of modifying their vote based on the sympathy provoked by a candidate who is favourable to soft power (Kenski et al., 2010), and to be found among the new, young electorate. The importance of leveraging self-segmented spaces to apply micro-targeting techniques that help attract votes (Quevedo-Redondo et al., 2021) and the emergence of pop politics have made Spotify a possible space for electoral opportunities (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009). In light of a context where strategies linked to soft power are increasingly important, the aim of this study is to ascertain whether the Spotify playlists created by Spanish politicians (and their parties) fit a common pattern of being merely present on a popular platform (without applying criteria consistent with political marketing techniques other than creating a playlist within a campaign), or whether, on the contrary, playlists have differentiating characteristics depending on the ideology and type of audience they target.

## 1.1. Popular Music and Politics: The Rhythm of a Campaign

Popular music offers a wide range of opportunities for generational, cultural, emotional, and even political connections (Dunaway, 1987). It is therefore understandable that political advisors often want to use well-known songs in a campaign to try to connect the image of a president or presidential candidate with a title enthusiastically sung by people of all ages. The purpose is to lead the electorate to associate the success of this (often iconic) song with the political and social values that a given candidacy seeks to highlight.

Just as George W. Bush appeared before the media in 2000 while Tom Petty's "I Won't Back Down" was playing, in recent electoral campaigns it has become common practice for candidates to resort to melodies, choruses, cover songs, or any other type of musical rhetoric as a persuasion strategy often reserved for livening up rallies and creating advertisements without thinking of other options (Aguirre, 2021). Spotify and the creation of playlists have finally come to be used in Spain to broaden a candidate's horizons in ways similar to that of former US President Barack Obama (Gorzelany-Mostak, 2015; Zepeda et al., 2011), who in 2012 started a trend that has been followed in the US by Hillary Clinton, Mitt Romney, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, among others (Alaminos-Fernández, 2021; Kasper & Schoening, 2016). Following the shadow of American influence, Spanish political campaigns have been inspired to use playlists in ways first tested in the US (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1996). The creation of playlists by political parties in Spain was first used by the PSOE when popular music was linked to candidacies in the Iberian Peninsula in the general election held in 2019. While the use of songs in the US electoral scene has been viewed from a quasi-cultural perspective, in Spain there are two major limitations: the lack of unanimous approval of the codes related to the use of music for transferring communicative content from the song to the candidates and the traditional rejection of Spanish politics by pop and rock artists (mass phenomena and elements of connection with generations of young voters). This has posed an additional challenge for politicians, as their choices of potential songs are reduced because the communicative use they make of an issue can often be delegitimised.

When singers refuse any connection with a candidate, they limit the opportunities for campaign action and increase the symbolic distance between the values of the musical and political worlds. However, when they agree to the use of one of their songs in an electoral campaign, it can become a sort of unofficial collective anthem, as once happened with one of the most emblematic melodies of the Spanish transition to democracy: "Libertad Sin Ira," by the band Jarcha, which succeeded in evoking the achievement of freedoms (Peinazo, 2020, p. 363).

A song is all the more useful in electoral terms when it can activate socialisation codes; moreover, this effect increases when there is an interaction with the degree of knowledge that the public has of the lyrics and melody, together with the emotional effects that the combination produces (Alaminos-Fernández, 2020). Likewise, whereas a composition specifically conceived for electoral use conveys the values represented by the project or programme, when a song is "borrowed" the candidate must adapt to it. This is particularly important for understanding the scope of this study. It can also explain why a presidential candidate such as the Republican John McCain would include among his favourites some songs by The Beach Boys, Neil Diamond, and the Swedish group ABBA (timeless, with catchy rhythms and simple messages, and internationally known by the age group that coincides with McCain's own age group), while Barack Obama opted for Bruce Springsteen, the Rolling Stones, and U2 (iconic artists with nods to the American sentiment and linked to age segments that included a younger electorate), as shown in Table 1.

As will be discussed in Section 2, many aspects should be considered when unravelling the parameters followed by politicians when creating their playlists. However, the main hypothesis in this study is that their reasoned choice meets one or more of the following basic criteria: a popular song (whether old or recent, to promote political fandom), a melody that would span across different generations (potentially attracting the population segments of greatest interest to each party), and/or an opportunity to provide overlapping meanings (between the song's lyrics and the actual intentional political message).

## 2. Sample and Methodology

Content analysis was used for the variables and categories detailed in this section to check what criteria Spanish parties followed when creating their Spotify playlists.

*2.1. Sample Selection, Identification, and Features*

The sample was selected through an initial search on Spotify for keywords that included the names of the political parties currently represented in the Spanish political scene, as well as the names of their leaders. The search yielded a number of accounts related to political parties, including those of the Partido Popular (PP), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE; the most prolific party, with six public playlists), and Ciudadanos, as well as the personal profiles of some individual politicians, such as Alberto Garzón (Izquierda Unida, also known as IU), Pablo Iglesias (Unidas Podemos), and Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), among others. From this second list, only Alberto Garzón's account was selected, as it was the only one that had a playlist associated with an electoral campaign in which the platform user was running as a candidate (2015 general election). It should be noted that playlists that were not linked to an election were excluded from the study, as well as contributions from anonymous users such as Santiago Abascal's playlist.

Table 2 shows the playlists the analysis focused on; these belong to four political parties (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos, and IU, represented by Alberto Garzón), resulting in the study of six playlists with a total of 400 songs (of which only 23 were repeated) performed by 309 singers or bands.

The oldest playlist, "Campaña 20-D," was created by the leader of IU and consisted of 74 songs that Garzón selected between 20 November and 16 December 2015 for the general election that was held on 20 December 2015. It should be noted that, while no lists after that date have been found in his profile, Garzón did add three songs to his playlist in March 2016. The candidate described the playlist on Twitter as being "a collection of music to take with us" (Garzón, 2015). At the time of the analysis, the playlist had 1,038 followers on Spotify and lasted five hours and eight minutes.

The title of the playlist created by the PSOE, "La España Que Quieres/❤!," comes from the campaign

**Table 1.** Obama and McCain's favourite songs, as published in the *Blender* magazine.

| Barack Obama | John McCain |
| --- | --- |
| 1. "Ready or Not" by Fugees | 1. "Dancing Queen" by ABBA |
| 2. "What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye | 2. "Blue Bayou" by Roy Orbison |
| 3. "I'm On Fire" by Bruce Springsteen | 3. "Take a Chance on Me" by ABBA |
| 4. "Gimme Shelter" by Rolling Stones | 4. "If We Make It Through December" by Merle Haggard |
| 5. "Sinnerman" by Nina Simone | 5. "As Time Goes By" by Dooley Wilson |
| 6. "Touch the Sky" by Kanve West | 6. "Good Vibrations" by The Beach Boys |
| 7. "You'd Be So Easy to Love" by Frank Sinatra | 7. "What a Wonderful World" by Louis Armstrong |
| 8. "Think" by Aretha Franklin | 8. "I've Got You Under My Skin" by Frank Sinatra |
| 9. "City of Blinding Lights" by U2 | 9. "Sweet Caroline" by Neil Diamond |
| 10. "Yes We Can" by will.i.am | 10. "Smoke Gets In Your Eves" by The Platters |

Source: Gorzelany-Mostak (2015, p. 9).

**Table 2.** Playlists in the sample.

| Image | Playlist | Political party | Campaign | Number of songs | | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No self-image | Campaña 20-D (20-D Campaign) | Alberto Garzón (IU) | 2015 general election | 74 | | 18.5% |
|  | La España Que Quieres/❤! (The Spain That You Want/❤!) | PSOE | 2019 general election | 110 | | 27.5% |
|  | #ValorSeguro (#SafeValue) | PP | 2019 general election | 134 | | 33.5% |
|  The playlists of Edmundo Bal | Rock del Barrio (Neighbourhood Rock) | Ciudadanos | 2021 Madrid regional election | 22 | 82 | 20.5% |
| | Las Noches de Madrid (Madrid Nights) | | | 30 | | |
| | Jóvenes 30×30 (Youth 30×30) | | | 30 | | |
| Total | | | | 400 | | 100% |

slogan used for the April 2019 general election, with Pedro Sánchez as a candidate. The list consisted of 110 songs as a nod to the 110 measures that the party had announced in its electoral programme shortly before (PSOE, 2019). The resulting list consisted of approximately seven hours of music for its 1,636 followers.

The PP created the list entitled "#ValorSeguro" between 12 and 15 April 2019, also as part of the campaign for the 2019 election, with Pablo Casado as a presidential candidate. Like the PSOE's playlist, the title reflected the campaign slogan. The list consisted of 134 songs, lasting approximately 8.5 hours and was enjoyed by only 264 followers. As no publication announcing the playlist was found on the PP's social networks, the lack of dissemination could explain the small number of people interested in the playlist.

Ciudadanos presented a collection of three lists associated with the Madrid regional election held on 4 May 2021 under the name "the playlists of Edmundo Bal" (Bal was the party's candidate for the presidency of the Madrid region). The lists "Rock del Barrio," "Las Noches de Madrid," and "Jóvenes 30×30" were created on 20 April 2021 and were shorter than those collected by other parties. In contrast to the other playlists mentioned above, Ciudadanos wrote an accompanying text to the title of each playlist, introducing different ideas:

- The first of these, "Rock del Barrio," described the candidate as "a public servant, guided by his principles and convictions," who follows the difficult, but "only" right path. This was a rock list,

since this is Bal's favourite musical genre, as he acknowledged on several occasions (Ciudadanos, 2021). The playlist consisted of 22 songs with a duration of one hour and 32 minutes and only had 34 followers.
- Within the second playlist, "Las Noches de Madrid," Ciudadanos introduced some of its cultural ideas. The list had 24 followers, who could listen to 30 songs with a duration of one hour and 54 minutes.
- The last playlist, "Jóvenes 30x30," referred to "measures for young people in Madrid." Again, 30 songs were selected, with a duration of one hour and 41 minutes, and the playlist had 28 followers.

As with the PP's playlist, these musical suggestions were not mentioned in the social networks either, so the ability to harness soft power to connect with segments of potential voters was diluted.

### 2.2. Analysis Variables

The starting point in the content analysis were the songs in the playlists, which were taken as units and gave rise to variables and categories. Specifically, 21 variables were studied and divided into three groups according to their usefulness and the basic information they provided. Thus, the first group included identification data from the Spotify platform itself, such as the title of the song, the name of the playlist in which it was included, the name

of the political party that selected it, the date when it was included in the playlist, the length of the song, and the singer or band that performed it. The position that each song occupies in the list is not taken into account, since without conducting interviews with the author or authors of the playlists it is not possible to know if the order responds to a strategic criterion. These first data are extracted from the Spotify platform itself.

The second group of variables focuses on more specific data about the artist and song, such as the performer's gender, their political positioning (progressive, conservative, no positioning, or anti-political), the artist's popularity (internationally known, nationally known, or marginally known in their country, differentiating between Spanish and foreign artists), the potential consumer or listener, the period when it was composed, the song's language, and, finally, if the melody has been or was considered to be an anthem by a collective. Searches were carried out on the interpreters' official websites and different media to find out some of this data. Political positioning as a variable is only coded if it is known explicitly. Artists can be labelled as progressive, conservative, or antipolitical (those figures who declare themselves without a political position and/or usually present an antipolitical message) if they are not. Thus, they have been coded as no attribution. This fact is common in the Spanish context since artists prefer not to openly express their condition so that their vision does not affect the support of their followers, which often translates into greater silence among the centre-right segments of the electorate. It is also interesting to point out that, regarding the potential consumers, those under 50 years of age are differentiated from those who are older, as well as the group that brings together listeners indistinctly (for this, the information provided by the groups and artists has been taken into account). Although the ranges seem exaggerated, it is worth noting that life expectancy in Spain is 79.6 years for men and 85.1 for women (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2022) and that those under 18 years of age are not a target audience during an electoral campaign. So this division represents an intermediate point between both values.

The third group of variables and categories was finally made up of data linked to the information provided by the music and lyrics of the songs. In this way, each song was coded according to musical genre (as indicated by the performer, musical group or producer), the predominant theme or appeal, and the dimension that the theme evokes according to the listener's personality traits. In relation to this, Rentgrow and Gosling (2003) established four dimensions (Reflective and Complex, Intense and Rebellious, Upbeat and Conventional, and Energetic and Rhythmic) and related them to different personality traits, each of which covers different musical genres. Therefore, the preference of one gender over another by a political party, intentional or not, will make it reach a specific audience better. It is also coded according to the tone inferred from the lyrics since this allows us

to identify from a mere song with a plainly festive intention to seek a change rebelliously, the promotion of a feeling of individual empowerment, or the exaltation of patriotic values representative of a country. Whether the message delivered had a positive, negative, or neutral spirit was also analysed.

Finally, the analytical task deals with the possible reasons for including a song in the playlist and its purpose. This aspect entails detecting whether the songs are included for simple fame (at the time of inclusion of the list or timelessly, that is, that despite the passage of time it continues to be recognised by the new generations), if there is a firm commitment to topics with explicit political allusions, or, on the contrary, if there was more of a forced overlap of meanings between the message of a popular song and the message that a presidential candidate or their party intended to launch at a given point. When this occurred, the classification involved noting meaningful words or phrases to assist in the interpretation of results.

## 3. Results

The fieldwork showed that, while there were differences between the four political parties analysed (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos, and IU represented by Garzón), they also shared some similarities that went beyond a greater propensity towards specific languages and music genres in the criteria they used to create their playlists. There were exact matches, for example, in the decision to include the band Vetusta Morla in the lists of all parties, albeit with different songs. These similarities were mainly found between Ciudadanos and PSOE (17 matches in the artist/group and nine in the song), followed by Ciudadanos and PP (16 identical choices of artists and 10 songs). There were nine matches between PP and PSOE (none of them regarding the chosen songs) and, in the case of Alberto Garzón, the relationships detected could be considered mere coincidences due to the derisory number of matches. Perhaps the most remarkable match was that the song "Cayetano" was used by both the PSOE and Ciudadanos in two of their lists. This is not surprising, as this song by Carolina Durante satirised the stereotype of the patriotic *pijazo*—term to designate a person who boasts according to a wealthy economic position—and explicitly mentioned Ciudadanos as the party that this type of subject votes for ("¿Qué es un 'Cayetano'?," 2020). The difference was that the PSOE used the song as an attack on their opponent, while Ciudadanos, upon realising that their electorate had taken it as an anthem, used it to apply reframing strategies and turn weakness/attack into strength/defence.

### 3.1. Denotative Data on Songs and Performers

In terms of the basic general variables, the predominant language used in the playlists was Spanish (Figure 1),
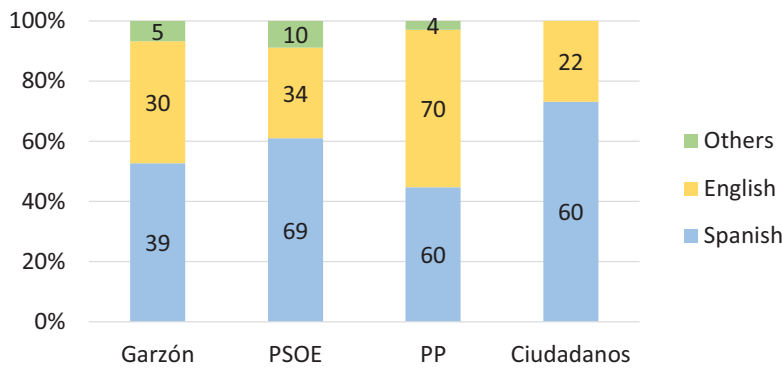
**Figure 1.** Song languages.

with the exception of the PP's list. This was something of a paradox: One of the themes of this party's campaign was the defence of the Spanish language; however, the songs in English outnumbered the rest by a small percentage. This was accentuated by the fact that of the four tracks were categorised as "belonging to other languages," one of them was in Galician ("Chove en Santiago," by Luar Na Lubre with Ismael Serrano, based on the poem of the same name by Lorca, as a nod to the Galician region, where the PP had governed since 2009). At the opposite pole was Ciudadanos, which showed a clear preference for the country's language, with one of its lists entirely containing songs in Spanish.

Although English and Spanish were the predominant languages in the sample, there were some songs in Catalan, Majorcan, and Basque (PSOE), as well as other non-Spanish languages such as Italian and French. For example, Garzón's list included the Italian song "La Rivoluzione," which, as its name suggests, calls for a revolution. This politician's list contained the widest variety of languages (English, Italian, German, and Portuguese).

While the non-Spanish bands included in the lists tended to be well-known internationally, the PP, PSOE, and Alberto Garzón included just some artists who are virtually unknown outside their country (Figure 2).

However, in the Spanish context, it is usual to include bands which are very popular within the country, despite not being internationally known.

The PP made the least risky choice, as 94.03% of their playlist songs were either internationally-recognised non-Spanish artists or nationally recognised Spanish artists. Alberto Garzón included a greater number of bands in his playlist whose popularity was anticipated to be lower among the Spanish public (22.7% of his choices were either non-Spanish performers who were only known nationally or little-known Spanish performers). Thus, the lists by Garzón, PSOE, and Ciudadanos included musical options categorised as "marginal" in that the artists included had a limited presence in the market (14.8%, 15.8%, and 18.1%, respectively).

In terms of ideological positioning, taking into account only Spanish bands or singers, Garzón's playlist was the most significant regarding his choice of artists openly aligned with his ideology as can be seen on Figure 3.

The results showed that Garzón was the most coherent (and least inclusive) candidate in relation to this variable. His playlist had 80.5% of singers or bands that could be considered/declared themselves to be progressive, and none of the performers on his playlist had ever identified themselves as liberal or conservative. There were
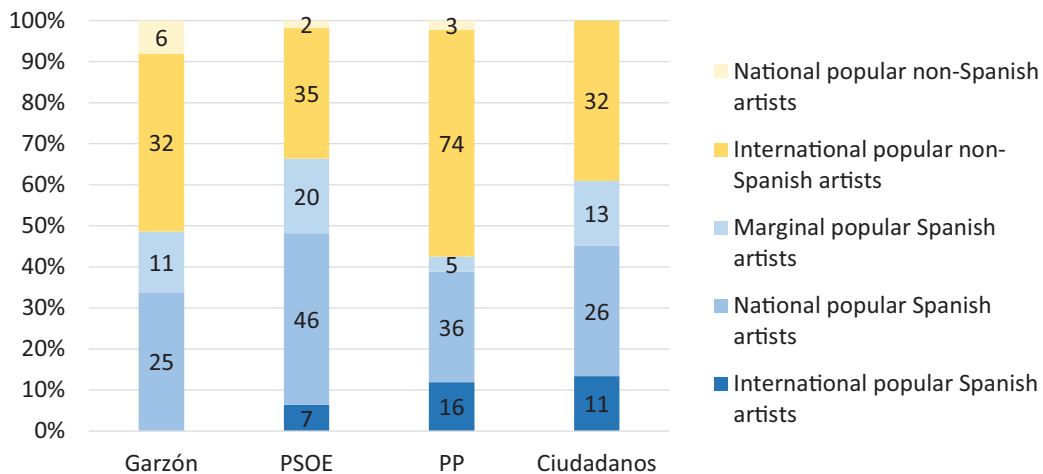


**Figure 2.** Popularity of singers and bands (distinguishing between Spanish and non-Spanish).
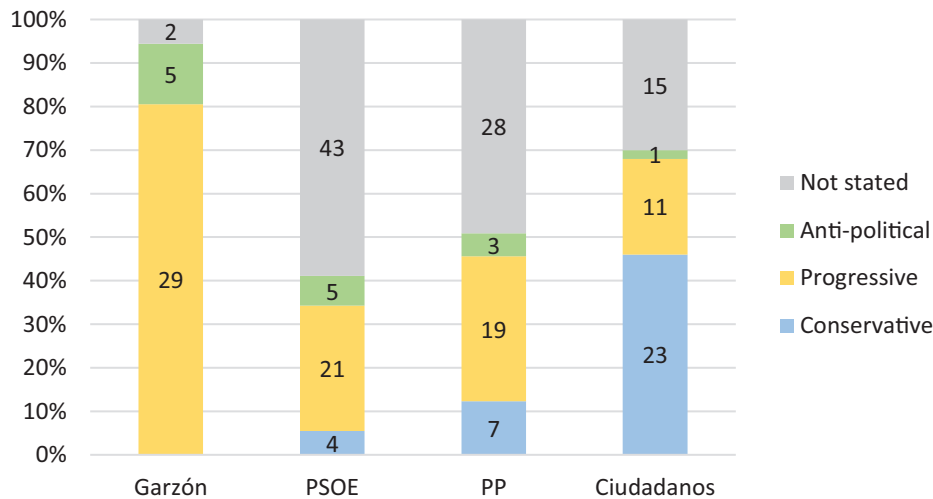
**Figure 3.** Political positioning of Spanish bands or singers.

even some non-Spanish bands with a clear progressive tendency and several who have spoken out against politics in general (anti-political).

From the 41.1% of PSOE's songs that could be analysed according to the criteria of ideological positioning, 28.7% of performers recognised themselves as "progressive" within the centre-left or left spectrum. However, 5.4% of artists were also labelled as "conservative." The latter group was part of the cultural movement called La Movida Madrileña (The Madrilenian Scene) who in recent years have confirmed their distance from the incumbent left-wing politicians. These are very popular icons of an era, representative of a generation, which is why the socialists chose to include them (bands such as Loquillo y los Trogloditas and Fangoria) in their playlists.

The PP were the party that least discriminated by the political positioning of the performers in the playlist, as it included a higher percentage of progressive groups than conservative ones (33.3% compared to 12.2%). Their list included Celtas Cortos, Pereza, and El Último de la Fila, bands that have proclaimed themselves to be left-wing sympathisers in media appearances and/or on social networks. Similarly, Ciudadanos also included progressive artists (22%), although there were more conservative musicians (46%) and included artists who are more recognised among the over-50s or were inclusive of all age groups (Julio Iglesias, Raphael, and Las Nancys Rubias are just a few examples).

If we look at the period when the songs were composed (Figure 4), different strategies were observed on the part of the various political options, which was important due to the relationship of this data with the the target audience.

Alberto Garzón's playlist showed a clear preference for songs composed in the first decade of the 21st century, followed by songs from the 1990s and those dating back to the last period of study (since 2011). Unlike the rest, this list did not include any song from the 1960s or 1980s, which confirms that the leader of IU prioritised

the song having a political message over other reasons linked to leveraging the popularity of a song.

The PSOE focused on more current songs, with a preference for the years immediately prior to the creation of the playlist. In contrast, the PP prominently used songs from the 1970s onwards, with very similar percentages up to the years of the list's creation (only the famous French rendition of Édith Piaf's "Je Ne Regrette Rien" dated back to the first period of study). As for Ciudadanos, its rock-based list was varied (with a preference for songs from decades prior to the 1990s), while the songs included in "Las Noches de Madrid" were mainly from the 1980s. The "Jóvenes 30×30" playlist was true to its title and, in accordance with the techniques of electoral micro-segmentation, incorporated current songs to attract new generations of voters.

These micro-segmentation techniques would explain why the PP focused on citizens over 50 years old in 59.7% of the cases, while the rest of the parties looked at younger age groups. In this context, Garzón had the most balanced collection by catering for all sectors, with a percentage difference of less than 10% in favour of the over-50s.

### 3.2. Data Related to Melody and Message

As can be seen in Figure 5 predominant musical genres were pop and rock. Of the total sample, 36.5% of the songs were pop songs and 31.7% were rock songs. These results are predictable in that these two music genres, as explained in the theoretical framework, were the most common and popular among the population.

Ciudadanos devoted an entire playlist to rock while reserving a notable space for songs belonging to the dance/electronic category (17%) and reggaeton style (10.9%) by performers as popular as Maluma. The most used genre in Garzón's playlist was rock (60.8%), a type of music traditionally linked to the left in Spain. Whereas no space was given over to pop, the list did include music
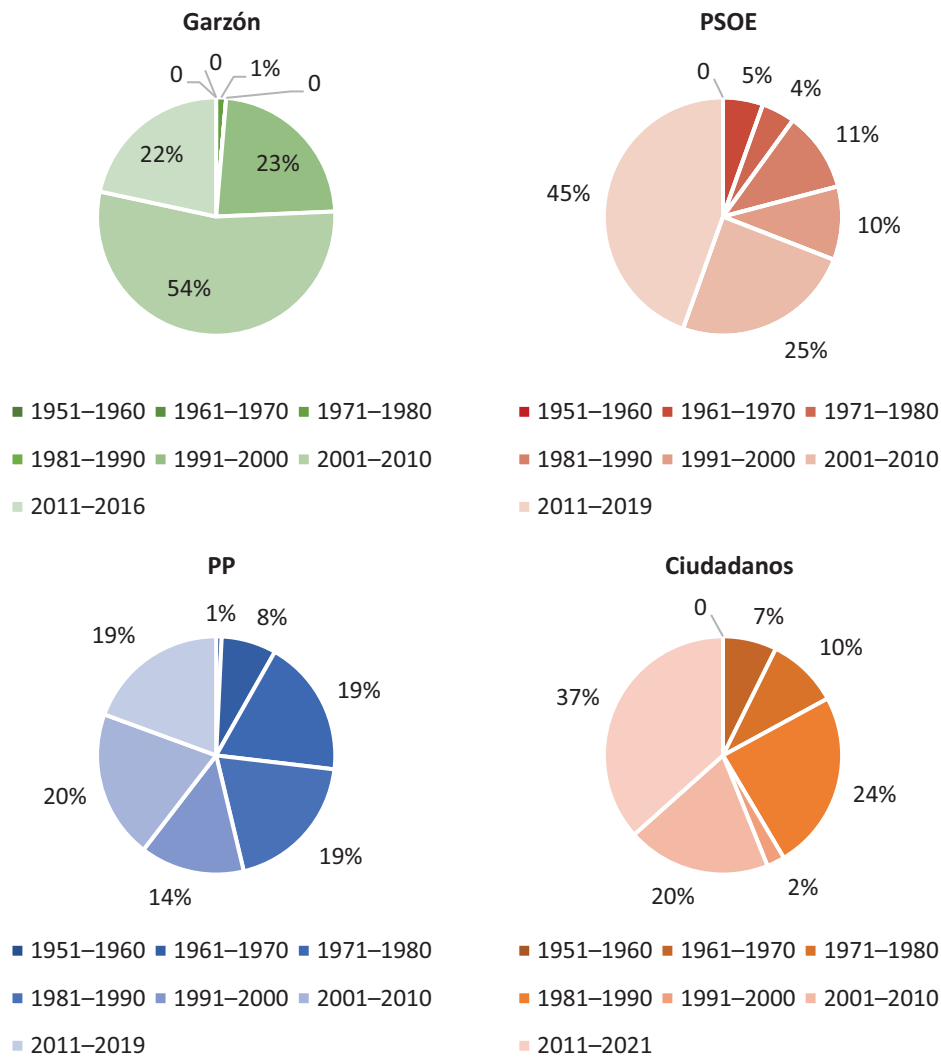
**Garzón**



Legend:
■ 1951–1960 ■ 1961–1970 ■ 1971–1980
■ 1981–1990 ■ 1991–2000 ■ 2001–2010
■ 2011–2016

**PSOE**



Legend:
■ 1951–1960 ■ 1961–1970 ■ 1971–1980
■ 1981–1990 ■ 1991–2000 ■ 2001–2010
■ 2011–2019

**PP**



Legend:
■ 1951–1960 ■ 1961–1970 ■ 1971–1980
■ 1981–1990 ■ 1991–2000 ■ 2001–2010
■ 2011–2019

**Ciudadanos**



Legend:
■ 1951–1960 ■ 1961–1970 ■ 1971–1980
■ 1981–1990 ■ 1991–2000 ■ 2001–2010
■ 2011–2021

**Figure 4.** Periods when songs were composed (by political party).

from the hip-hop/rap and heavy metal categories (14.8% for both genres), which, once again, are linked to IU's ideological spectrum. In fact, some of the rappers who sing protest lyrics and have been supported by Garzón on social networks have even been convicted by the Spanish justice system ("La música: ¿Un peligro para el poder político?," 2019).

The PP and the PSOE also opted for pop and rock music, although the PSOE also introduced indie songs by lesser-known bands. Regarding the music-preference dimension based on Rentfrow and Gosling's (2003) classification related to the rhythm and intensity of each song, the handling of these categories by the Spanish parties showed that they either intentionally sought all audience types, or none of them paid too much attention to the micro-segmentation that enables the soft power of music.

The two central categories stood out in the total sample (Figure 6), particularly Upbeat and Conventional (55.2% of the sample) and Intense and Rebellious (26.7%). These were categories that related to common preferences in the music world with which most

people identified, so no risks were taken with any of the playlists. However, Garzón gave his list over to a greater percentage of the first dimension, with songs like "Seguimos en Pie" by Ska-P and "Can't Stop" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

As can be seen, more songs that fell under the category of Energetic and Rhythmic were included in the lists by the leader of IU (17.5%) and Ciudadanos (25.6%). The former chose songs from the heavy metal genre (with bands such as Linking Park and Papa Roach), while Edmundo Bal's selection lent towards dance songs and electronic music (such as "Kings and Queens" by Ava Max or "Mocatriz" by Ojete Calor).

The dimension of Reflective and Complex was the least present in the sample and was only marginally used by the parties. The music in this dimension is slower, which may make it less useful for an election campaign, since the presidential candidates, far from wanting to convey calm, want to be proactive/energetic, even musically.

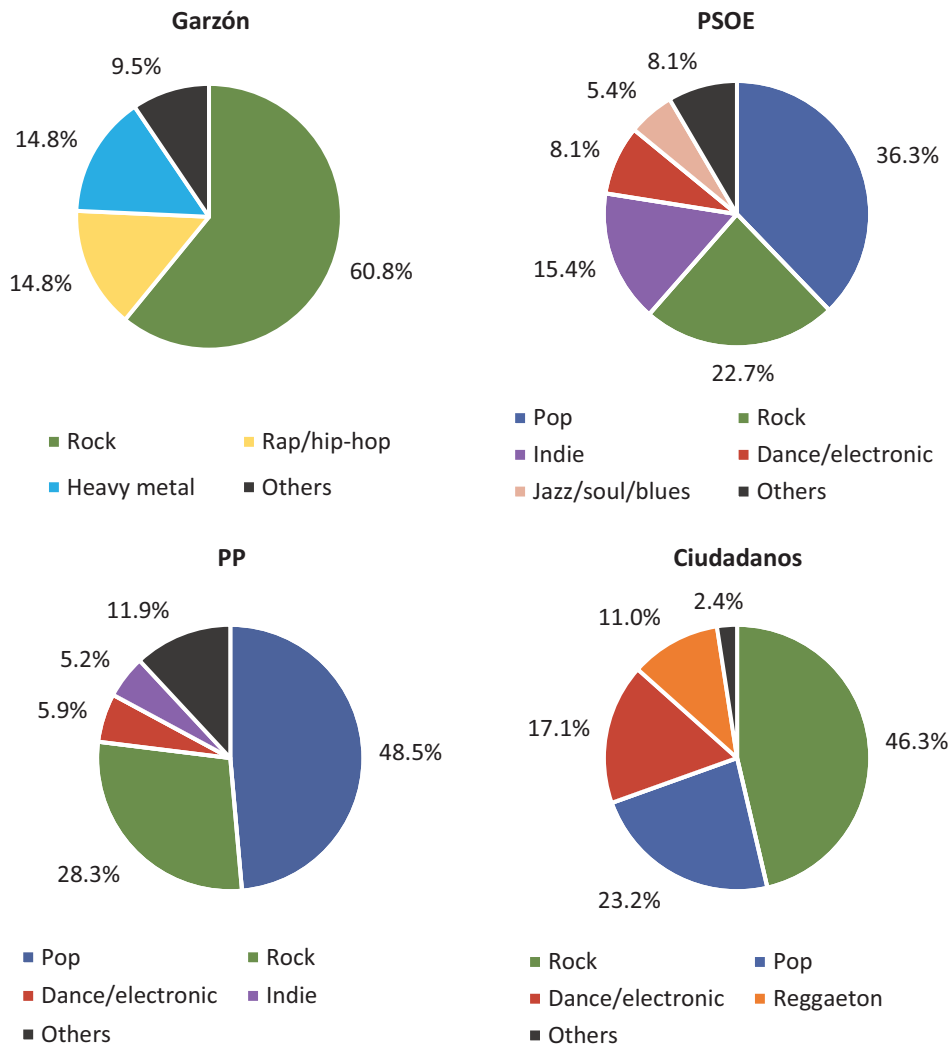After considering the inclusion criteria and completing the first part of the coding, several options

**Garzón**

9.5%
14.8%
14.8%
60.8%

- Rock
- Rap/hip-hop
- Heavy metal
- Others

**PSOE**

8.1%
5.4%
8.1%
15.4%
36.3%
22.7%

- Pop
- Rock
- Indie
- Dance/electronic
- Jazz/soul/blues
- Others

**PP**

11.9%
5.2%
5.9%
48.5%
28.3%

- Pop
- Rock
- Dance/electronic
- Indie
- Others

**Ciudadanos**

11.0%
2.4%
17.1%
46.3%
23.2%

- Rock
- Pop
- Dance/electronic
- Reggaeton
- Others

**Figure 5.** Music genres with the highest representation by political option.
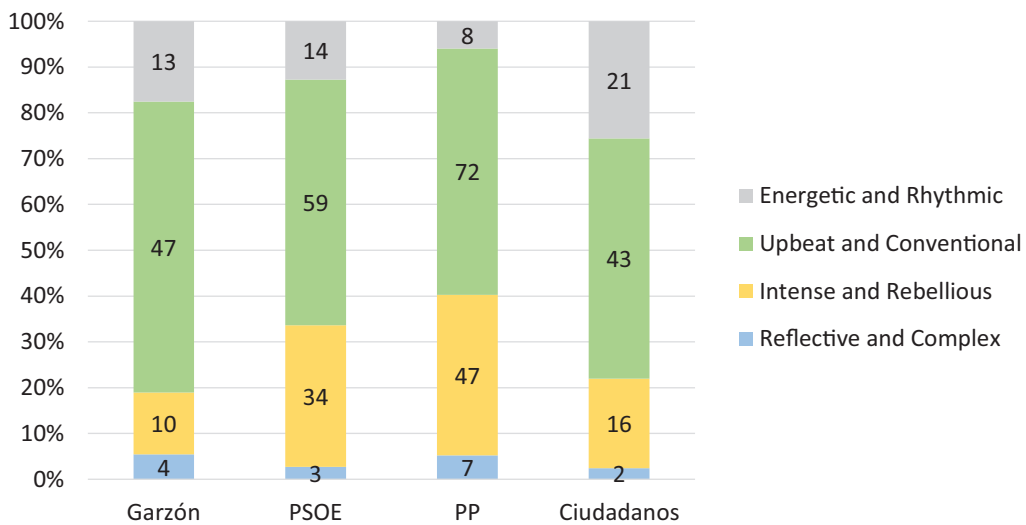


**Figure 6.** Dimensions of musical preferences. Source: Authors' work based on Rentfrow and Gosling (2003).

were identified that could explain why the songs were included in the playlists (Figure 7), beyond the fact that the songs were chosen by personal tastes (as is the case with the list "Rock del Barrio" by Ciudadanos and Edmundo Bal):

1. Either the song was popular at the time the playlist was created or the artist was a musical idol;
2. Either the song or the artist is timeless;
3. The theme appears in an advertisement or in a relatively well-known film;
4. Either the title or the lyrics have political utility (overlapping meanings);
5. None of the above.

Some songs could be assigned to multiple categories for this variable, as shown by the following case: The PSOE's playlist included "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor, both a timeless song and artist. This song has been covered by other performers but has also become better known by being featured in several films, series, advertisements, and even video games, so it would be categorised as meeting criteria 2 and 3 above. Likewise, the song "Cayetano" matched two codes, as it was a popular song at the time the playlist was created, as well as being clearly satirical of parties other than the PSOE. This explains why the figures in Figure 7 exceed the number of songs in the sample.

The results showed that the PP chose mainly timeless songs (61.1%). In other words, songs that are well-known despite the passage of time and have become part of the collective imagination (such as "With or Without You" by U2). In addition, the PP also chose songs that were popular at the time the playlist was created (22.3%), such as "Uptown Funk" by Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars, or songs that had become well-known due to their use in entertainment products such as series or films (20.9%). Again, as in the case of the artist's recogni-

tion variable, the PP compiled a list of easily recognisable melodies, regardless of whether the lyrics had political utility (14.9%). That is, there was no elaborate strategy in the creation of the playlists other than to please or entertain followers.

Ciudadanos had a similar percentage to the PP in terms of using timeless artists (62.5%), although with a higher percentage of songs that were popular at the time of creating the list than their opponents (24.3%). However, as 21 tracks (25.6%) had either a title or content that was clearly political, they showed that their playlists were not only intended for entertainment purposes but that they also wanted to convey a message. "Vente Pá Madrid" by Ketama or "Puede Ser Que La Conozcas" by Jorge Drexler and Marwan are some examples of the use of meanings to show that Madrid (the city which Edmundo Bal sought to represent) inspired positive feelings in Ciudadanos.

Political utility prevailed in the songs selected for the playlists compiled by the PSOE and Alberto Garzón: 60 songs out of 74 alluded to politics in one way or another (80%). An example of this was the track titled "Adiós España" by Tron Dosh with Nach, in which, apart from the explicit title, the content was a critique of Spanish society, emphasising the precarious employment situation of young people. Despite there being a better balance between politically motivated (39%) and timeless (37.2%) song choices in the PSOE's list, there was a clearer intention to gain an electoral benefit. For example, the lyrics of the song "Lisístrata," by Gata Cattana, openly attacked the right and aptly used soft power to convey the arguments defended by Pedro Sánchez's party.

The content analysis of the lyrics showed the themes addressed in the songs (Figure 8). This is important in order to identify those with no specific intention other than to entertain (either using festive or melancholic songs), or, on the contrary, songs aimed at conveying
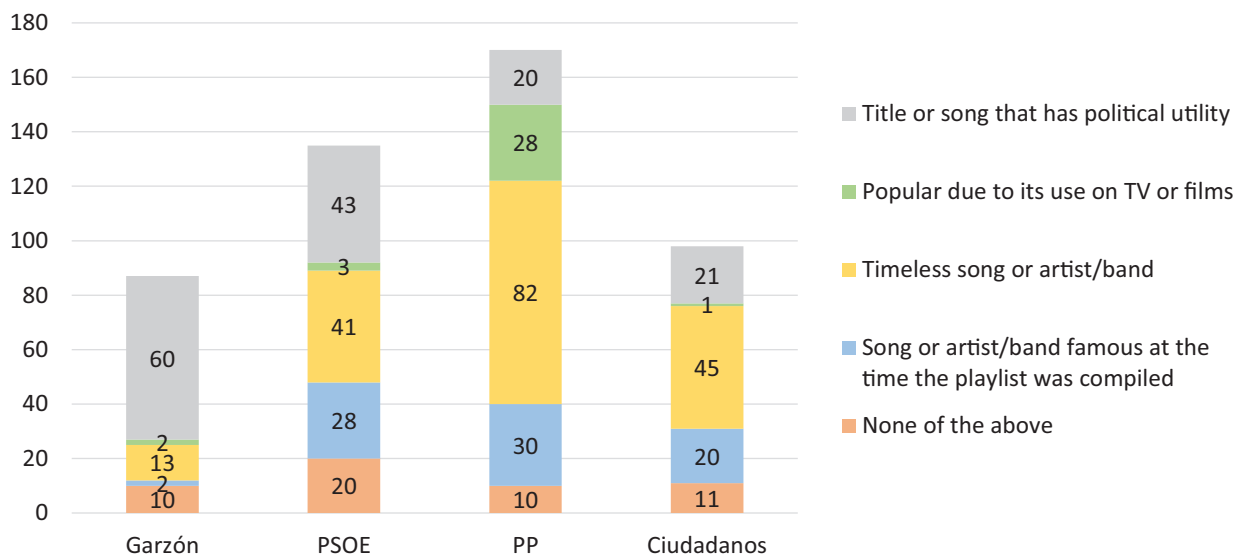


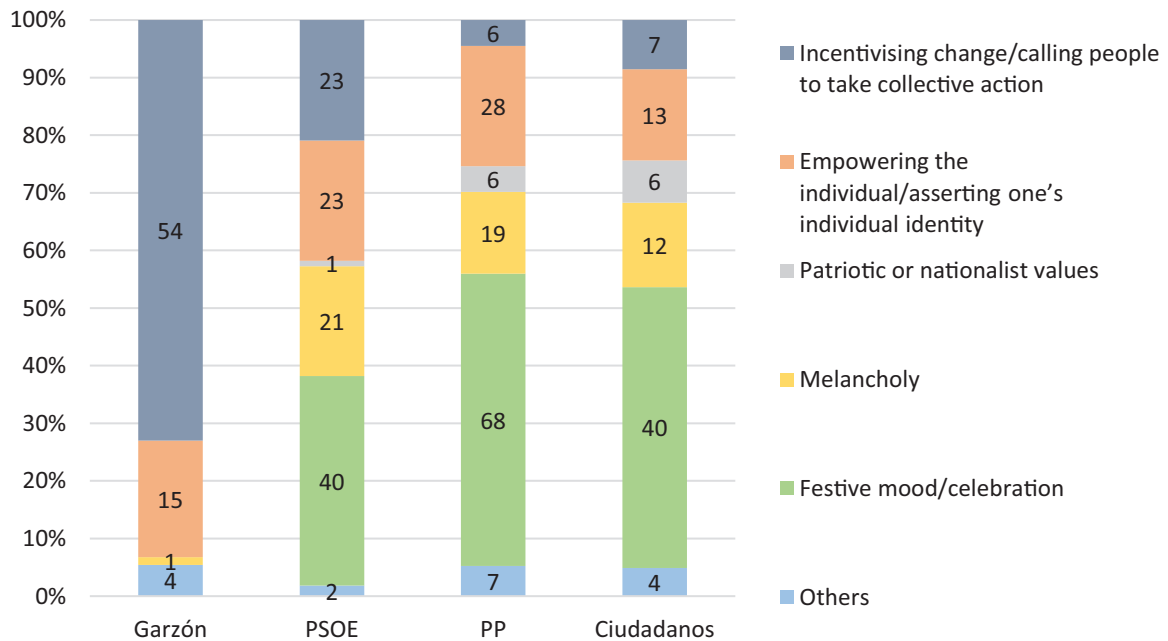**Figure 7.** Criteria for a song to have been included in a playlist.

**Figure 8.** Main themes in the songs.

the message that the parties wanted their audience to receive. Specifically, the following messages were identified: calling people to action to affect a (usually political) change by promoting individual empowerment or highlighting patriotic and/or nationally representative values.

The PP, the PSOE, and Ciudadanos mainly chose songs that sought to entertain. The PP included the most songs of this type (50.7% of its total). These were tracks markedly linked to party times ("La Macarena" by Los del Río, "Sólo se Vive Una Vez" by Azúcar Moreno, and "Antes Muerta Que Sencilla" by María Isabel fell into this category). Alberto Garzón, unlike the rest, used songs more focused on promoting a message that advocated change, something very popular in election campaigns. Examples were the songs "Rueda la Corona" by La Raíz, which is a criticism of the monarchy, and "Hipotécate Tú" by Def Con Dos, which addresses housing speculation and its negative consequences.

The second most common theme used to convey a message was empowerment. This category included songs whose lyrics had to do with self-improvement and self-empowerment. "Resistiré" by Dúo Dinámico, included in the PSOE list, and "A Quién le Importa" by Alaska y Dinarama, from the PP list, were examples of this. It is also interesting to note that the PP and Ciudadanos included the most songs with patriotic values (which matched their programmes and ideology), including "Mi Querida España" by Cecilia, "Madrid" by Ariel Rot and The Cabriolets, and "Sevilla Tiene un Colour Especial" by Los del Río.

Finally, it is worth noting the use of songs with a specific theme, usually of social interest. The PSOE included some songs that dealt with feminism (such as "Lo Malo" by Aitana and Ana Guerra), or that criticised violence against women ("Ni Una Menos" by Alejo Stivel and Miss

Bolivia). In contrast, the PP used songs linked to the concept of "freedom" (the leitmotiv of the latest electoral campaign for the election in the Madrid region), such as "Libertad Sin Ira" by Jarcha and "Libre" by Nino Bravo. As mentioned above, the IU leader's playlist was characterised by the inclusion of protest or political songs, although, curiously, it did not include any singer or band that was entirely made up of women.

## 4. Conclusions

This study has confirmed that music has been used as a source of soft power by Spanish political parties and candidates, but has also raised questions about their level of awareness when they compiled their Spotify playlists. The communication and marketing experts of the Partido Popular, the PSOE, Ciudadanos, and IU are clearly aware of the importance of having a presence on platforms that are popular among the main groups of soft voters. However, the lack of maintenance and updating of the playlists outside the contextual framework of a campaign (justified by the low number of followers that the lists usually have) denotes a certain lack of continuity and initiative regarding a strategy which requires little time and financial resources. The PSOE was the only party which, despite not extending its playlist, provides content to its profile through the podcast *Dónde Hay Partido*. Although the PP followed this line with the podcast *Activemos España*, it stopped publishing new content in February 2022.

The interpretation of the results makes it possible to argue that, in general terms, and based exclusively on the analysis of the songs selected by each party (or by its leader), Garzón sought to appeal to people's consciences using a selection of music with markedly

political (or anti-political) messages, in line with the tastes he presupposed would be popular among his supporters. Instead, PSOE, PP, and Ciudadanos used more entertainment-based approaches and focused on leisure goals. The PSOE's selection also looked at basic items of their programme such as defending feminism. There was a moderate percentage of songs used based on the appeal of overlapping meanings in all the playlists. This tendency was less pronounced in the PP, as the popularity of the songs was prioritised to ensure that the playlist followers would find familiar tunes that could be considered to be appealing to the average citizen.

The PSOE combined the intention to entertain, with making veiled or even satirical attacks on their opponents (by using songs like "Cayetano," by Carolina Durante) and appeals to segments such as feminists and regionalists. Ciudadanos, however, sought above all to make a generational connection, as explicitly stated in the title of the "Jóvenes 30×30" playlist, described as "measures/songs for the young people of Madrid."

To sum up, the Spotify playlists created by Spanish parties and candidates not only had a common pattern, namely, having a presence on a popular platform, but they also had differentiating characteristics depending on the ideology and target audience. Garzón (IU leader) resorted to more ideological filters in his selection of songs, while the PSOE attempted to strike a balance between a self-interested search for overlapping meanings and entertaining the masses. Ciudadanos, meanwhile, worked across generations (something useful for attracting soft voters). Whereas the PP seemed to aim for mere searches for unquestionably popular songs that would liven up any conventional event without applying criteria consistent with political marketing techniques, they appealed to their potential electorate by recommending songs and artists that were more closely related to the social imagination of the Spanish public.

In addition to the contribution made by the review conducted to provide a solid theoretical framework on the subject, the findings of the study have resulted in the creation of a proven analytical template that can be replicated in future research to further explore the use of music as a soft power tool. These results are therefore only an example of the avenues of research that can be pursued to further the current knowledge in this area.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Spanish-Portuguese Serial Fiction as a Politainment Tool: Representations of Politics on Iberian Television

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## Abstract
This article deals with recent Spanish and Portuguese political television series. Within this sub-genre, it is pertinent to consider the symbolic construction of politics, as well as the differences caused by each series' geographical adscription. Six Spanish productions have been selected—*Isabel* (Isabella the Catholic), *Carlos Rey Emperador* (Charles the Emperor King), *La Embajada* (The Embassy), *Crematorio* (Crematorium), *Vamos Juan/Venga Juan* (Come on, Juan/Let's go Juan), and *El Partido* (The Party)—along with three Portuguese productions—*A Rainha e a Bastarda* (The Queen and the Bastard), *Teorias da Conspiração* (Conspiracy Theories), and *Os Boys* (The Boys). The narrative of these audio-visual stories has been examined utilising qualitative content analysis, looking at the plotlines and characters involved. The type of characterisation of politics has been identified by means of the deconstruction of the main characters. The conclusion is that the evaluation is eminently negative, although differential frameworks are present, depending, in particular, on the fiction's genre, either historical drama, drama-thriller, or comedy.

## 1. Introduction

This work arose from the conviction that TV fiction has a double meaning: On the one hand, it is a text which reflects the concerns, prejudices, and hegemonic desires of its production context; on the other, it is a mirror in which viewers can both see and model themselves. It is thus more than a mere form of entertainment, and its ideological sense is beyond all doubt (Rosenstone, 2013, p. 72).

Secondly, the article considers continuities between Spanish and Portuguese television fiction, understanding that there are synergies between the two that have hardly been touched on by academia. Cultural and geographical proximity are key elements in understanding the ties between viewers and the audio-visual background. In this sense, the transference of fiction content from Spain to Portugal is noteworthy, whether as original products or through adaptations. Coproductions have recently given rise to several fiction products of double nationality.

Thirdly, the object of this study has figured in a sub-genre which has enjoyed relative growth, although its presence is still little more than testimonial: TV series dealing with politics. Though few in number, television fiction series have been identified in which politics occupies the centre of the narrative; it is the stage upon which the characters take their decisions and resolve their conflicts. This study concerns itself with the representations of politics and politicians proffered by these productions.

It strives to identify the narrative, social and psychological characteristics of the central characters in these stories, as well as the values related to the staging and practice of politics.

## 2. Research and Dominant Frameworks in Political Fiction

When talking of the creation of imaginary political worlds, the press has traditionally been considered the hegemonic medium. Consumption of the press is understood not only as a means of information and development but even as an unconventional way of participating in politics. The phenomenon of public opinion appears linked to the medium, not only in its genesis but in its development (Lippman, 1997; Tarde, 1989). However, this function can also be performed by other media and, more particularly, by the formats of TV fiction.

When analysing the media's influence on public opinion and political participation, the classical distinction between information and entertainment is not always operative (Mutz, 2001). It is worth noting how some research has highlighted the role of TV fiction in the political culture and education of the population, making sense of the concept of politainment.

Politainment is the conversion of politics into entertainment by turning it into a show business spectacle and personalizing it (Berrocal-Gonzalo, 2017). The digital society has imposed new forms of communication between politicians and citizens wherein emotions and anecdotes take precedence (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2022). In this setting, politics-themed TV series—where such elements come together—are a good example of the concept. Fiction, through its storylines and characters, makes a connection between viewers and reality, which allows fiction formats to act as a diffusor of values (Tous-Rovirosa et al., 2013, p. 71). It reproduces narrative conflicts similar to those occurring in the real world (Pantoja, 2015), focusing on issues that concern the population and transmitting an idea—positive and/or negative—of how power is wielded (Rodríguez & Padilla, 2018).

Thus, some of the classic contributions in communication theory have served as a methodological and theoretical framework in clarifying the role of TV fiction in political communication processes. Research in this area has been inspired by concepts ranging from agenda setting (Holbrook & Hill, 2005) to framing (Aitaki, 2018) or priming (Holbert et al., 2003). However, such studies have focused attention on the processes for receiving the message.

The relationship between fiction and politics has also been approached from the point of view of the message and its semantics. Here there have been interesting attempts to establish types of fiction, allowing for progress with analysis and in organising this vast and diverse area of output. Contributions have come from the most all-encompassing approaches down to the most focused and monographic contributions. The former

includes work such as that of Eilders and Nitsch (2015), covering a sample of 200 productions, which serve as references in the field. They point out how indicators such as political intensity and the degree of realism are relevant when evaluating the representation of politics in fiction. Other contributions, employing narrative and scriptwriting focuses, look more at technical questions, such as plot development, the construction of characters, or how the story is resolved, as elements which stress the viewers' emotional connection as well as the story's credibility (Cabeza, 2000; Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2013).

Also worthy of mention are the monographic studies which highlight the effect fiction can have on the behaviour and political attitudes of the population. Watching some of these stories may have a kind of illustrative role, providing interpretive keys for a complex reality (Porto, 2005, p. 355). Similarly, they may also work as a complementary source in the forming of political attitudes (Holbrook & Hill, 2005). Their clear nature as entertainment, in that they are tools of politainment, turns them into adequate texts for the reflection of matters of public interest with which the viewers may come to have an emotional attachment. They may serve to increase awareness of and interest in some of these collective matters, reinforcing an attitude of commitment to the public sphere (Nærland, 2020). Also well documented is their capacity to feed social representations and behavioural or relational models, as highlighted by research from the framework of cultivation theory (Saito, 2007) or even from feminist theory (Van Bauwel, 2018). Finally, they may also serve to reinforce the position of the group in power and to discredit the opposition, especially in situations in which democratic systems are not completely institutionalised (Ribke, 2021).

Though intended as entertainment, recent television fiction has shown interest in exploring politics as a subject. Some emblematic productions serve as good examples of the diversity with which fiction has focused on politics. Politics has been presented in a positive and mythical light in dramas such as *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006). This has been related to concepts such as professionalism, commitment, and qualification. In Europe, *Borgen* (DR1, 2010–) or *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016–), for example, grant protagonism to female figures and highlight the difficulty of balancing public and private life.

Secondly, the genre of drama sometimes frameworks politics as the stage for power struggles, where ethical norms are minimalised. Such proposals concentrate, especially, on politicians who triumph when employing their skills as pragmatic, Machiavellian villains. In this sense, *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) is one of the harshest formulations, apart from being one of the series of reference in the political sub-genre. Other less popular examples, such as the French *Baron Noir* (Canal +, 2016–) or *Marseille* (Netflix, 2016–), also tend towards the same forms of representation, confirming the idea that this perspective has a mythical and supra-cultural sense.

Thirdly, politics is susceptible to a more amusing focus through the genre of comedy, biting opinion, and satire. This presents a critical perspective and/or assumes a reality accepted via four elements: attack, opinion, playfulness, and humour (Gray et al., 2009). These formats utilise laughter as a weapon to pour scorn on a subject and create fun, contempt, ridicule, or indignation towards it (Abrams, 1999). The focus of the plot is usually incompetence (HBO's *Veep*, 2012–) or bureaucracy (Filmin's *Parliament*, 2020–).

Other focuses are possible. Politics has also been approached using issues or matters of public interest. In this sense, stories about terrorism are among the most common. *Designated Survivor* (Netflix, 2016–), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), or *La Unidad* (Movistar+, 2020–) present Islamic terrorism as a danger and point to law enforcement and political reactions. Particular mention should be made of some fiction narratives that, from the sub-genres of thrillers or science fiction, and using a dystopic or futuristic perspective, set out surprising or creative formulas of social organisation far from the norms of contemporary politics. Offerings such as *The Plot Against America* (HBO, 2020–), in which the story reinvents a North American past of dictatorship and the persecution of the Jews, or *A Handmaid's Tale* (MGM, 2017–), portraying a radical totalitarian future, are examples of this.

## 3. Political Fiction in Spain and Portugal

Politics as a subject has an unequal presence in Spanish and Portuguese fiction productions. Its absence was glaring for decades. Early television was born in both cases as a medium tightly controlled by the political powers, as is characteristic of dictatorial systems. Until well into the 1970s, the scarce domestic production adopted an eminently comical and trivialising approach (Diego et al., 2018; Palacio, 2012).

Francoist television served as a window to consumption, encouraging a desire to have and to purchase, along with political acquiescence (Callejo, 1995). The few domestic productions of the time (1956–1975) adopted an eminently trivial approach dominated by stories of romance and comedies. In later years, the creators of television fiction took advantage of these products to encourage values compatible with the coming democracy, though they did so subtly to avoid pressure from the censors (Chicharro-Merayo, 2018; Chicharro-Merayo & Gil-Gascón, 2022). In Portugal, RTP1 was the only television channel during the dictatorship (1933–1974), controlled by the political commissars running the news and programming directorates. It was "pastoral" television (Cintra Torres, 2011) tasked with fulfilling the regime's vision for the masses: educate, distract, and inform (but not too much). The first wave of renewal of the fiction genre occurred in 1969 when the dictator Marcelo Caetano succeeded the dictator António de Oliveira Salazar, and a programme generated a new audience phenomenon. *Zip Zip* was a live humorous talk show that commented on current affairs in a light-hearted way and became the symbol of a "small communicational revolution" (Cintra Torres, 2011). It was the first time the television audience escaped ideological indoctrination based on rigid doctrinal, aesthetic, and moral standards poured into literary and musical culture programmes that "put you to sleep" (Carvalheiro, 2018, p. 30).

In the 1980s, the consolidation of democracy in Spain went hand-in-hand with the production of stories concerning social matters (*Anillos de Oro* [Rings of Gold], TVE1, 1983–; *Turno de Oficio* [Public Defender], TVE2, 1986–; *Brigada Central* [Central Squad], TVE1, 1989–1990), ignoring their political dimension. Some formats were emerging in Portugal with a certain political slant. An example is the television play *A Senhora Ministra* (Madam Minister), about the political–sentimental lives of politicians and their wives towards the end of the constitutional monarchy. Broadcast in 1982, it inspired a sitcom of the same title, which parodied a minister whose chief aim was to do as little as possible. Although the subject matter was quite weak, this comical and satirical angle reinforced the stereotype of the lazy and deceitful political hack, though treating him relatively gently.

The 1990s would see the arrival of private and regional television channels. In Spain, this dynamic would lead to a boom in domestic fiction production. The most emblematic Spanish productions of the time avoided the "political question," turning to personal and professional stories more suited to all publics (*Farmacia de Guardia* [Duty Pharmacy], A3, 1991–1995; *Médico de Familia* [Family Doctor], Telecinco, 1995–1999; *Compañeros* [Pals], A3, 1998–2002; *Periodistas* [Journalists], Telecinco, 1998–2002). Portuguese production still gave pride of place to "moments, episodes and characters that personify the collective memory and national social imaginary" (Duff Burnay & Sardica, 2014, p. 15). An example is *Ballet Rose* (RTP1, 1998) which denounced the paedophile scandal, which involved several figures of the regime during the Estado Novo.

In the 21st century, politics assumed a moderate presence in fiction formats. A few Spanish sitcoms included some mentions of politics in their dialogues (*7 Vidas* [7 Lives], Telecinco, 1999–2006; *Aquí No Hay Quién Viva* [Who Could Live Here?], A3, 2003–2006; *Aida*, Telecinco, 2005–2014). Politics was explored as a central narrative axis in the comedy genre without gaining large audience shares (*Señor Alcalde* [Mr Mayor], Telecinco, 1998–; *Moncloa ¿Dígame?* [Moncloa, Hello?]; Telecinco, 2001–; *Plaza de España*, TVE 1, 2011–). In both countries, there was a proliferation of historical fiction productions evoking different ephemerides from the republican period (*La Señora* [The Lady], TVE, 2008–2010; *14 de Abril. La República* [April 14th. The Republic], TVE1, 2011–2019; *Noite Sangrenta* [Night of Blood], RTP, 2010–), the Civil War, and, even more so, the post-war—*Raia dos Medos* (Fear Alley, RTP, 2000–), *Amar en Tiempos Revueltos*

(Loving in Troubled Times, TVE1, 2005–2012), or *Amar es Para Siempre* (Love is Forever, A3, 2012–) are a few examples. *Cuéntame Cómo Pasó* (Remember When, TVE1, 2001–) and its Portuguese adaptation *Conta-me Como Foi* (RTP, 2007–2019) explored contemporary stories, turning to politics more as a contextual element than as the dramatic core.

From 2015 on, the emergence of streaming platforms, as well as new channels, has made for an increasingly complex televisual ecosystem. The Iberian audiovisual industries are integrated as producers for the platforms. At the same time, there is more cooperation through coproductions between Portuguese and Spanish public television, chiefly with TVG, the regional channel in Galicia.

In this context, politics is more clearly integrated into fiction, which serves as an expression of the social imaginary. An analysis of the most representative contemporary Spanish and Portuguese political fiction offers a singular outline of a shared perception of politics and politicians. Fictional televisual representations shed light on the role of the media in moulding political consciousness (Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2017). Analysis of the Portuguese and Spanish cases shows that new attitudes towards politics, resulting from a more cosmopolitan experience, continue to be anchored in persistent historical representations in the collective imagination of both countries. At the same time, as this work reveals, there is a creative exploration of sub-genres within political entertainment television. As is to be argued, this "cultural proximity" (Straubhaar, 1991) is manifest in the semantic and narrative continuities set out below.

## 4. Methodology and Corpus of Analysis

This article presents the results of a comparative study between nine series dealing with politics, recently produced in Spain and Portugal. The research looks at the keys to the representation of politics in recent domestically produced fiction. The media systems of both countries can be termed as polarised pluralism, characterised by deep social and political divisions, difficulty in achieving consensus, high degrees of apathy, non-participation in politics, and occasional legitimacy crises (Sartori, 2005). As regards the media, its conditioning by the market and political powers is worthy of mention, as well as its limited professional independence (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Thus, this article is underpinned by two main research questions:

RQ1: What are the keys to the representation of politics and politicians in these fiction products? Are the focuses and axes of representation synchronised or diverse?

RQ2: How are the characters on the political stage constructed? What are their principal features? What assessment does the series make of them?

The primary hypotheses are the following:

H1: The representation of politicians and politics is conditioned by the fiction genre. The fiction genre is a kind of frame which serves to ascribe meaning to politics.

H2: There are certain features which serve as commonplaces in the characters related to politics, contributing to the institutionalisation of a stereotype of politicians.

H3: Certain elements can be identified which serve to lend a positive/negative meaning to the character on the political stage (the character's motivation, development and ends, the relationship between public and private dimensions).

The corpus of analysis is made up of the few domestically produced fiction shows, which, broadcast from 2012 on, place politics at centre stage: six Spanish and three Portuguese (Table 1). The subject is approached from different genres—historical drama, drama-thriller, and comedy. The productions have been transmitted via diverse channels: open broadcast public/private channels (TVE1, Tele 5, RTP), online channels (Flooxer), and pay-per-view (TNT, HBO).

The unit of analysis is the lead character, a figure that is to be deconstructed in line with an analysis file containing over 20 fields relative to the character's psychological and social, private and public dimensions, as well as their narrative and semantic roles.

The methodology utilised follows the norms of qualitative content analysis, as well as the emergent designs typical of grounded theory (Andréu et al., 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There has also been a careful review and an interpretive reading of the corpus striving to identify the central axes or principal thematic levels of a text. This analysis has allowed the authors to establish categories from the content by virtue of inductive logic, seeking patterns and recurrences (Andréu, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. Frameworks Proposed by the Series

The genre norms that shape a fiction series serve to define the focus or framework within which politics and politicians are represented (Table 2). In this sense, historical fiction favours a nostalgic and idealistic vision, as well as a positive outline of the activity and its protagonists. Dramas in a thriller format turn to the figure of the politician as someone who moves in a world of power, as a narrative resource capable of generating uncertainty and intrigue, shattering expectations and articulating stories of corruption, betrayal, and disloyalty, thus being of great utility in creating narrative tension. Comedy, with

**Table 1.** Data on the series analysed.

| Title | Country | Genre/sub-genre | TV channel | Year of broadcast | No. of seasons/episodes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Isabel* | Spain | Drama/historical fiction | TVE1 | 2012–2014 | 3 seasons 13 + 13 + 13 episodes |
| *Carlos Rey Emperador* | Spain | Drama/historical fiction | TVE1 | 2015–2016 | 1 season 17 episodes |
| *A Rainha e a Bastarda* | Portugal | Drama/historical fiction | RTP | 2022 | 1 season 8 episodes |
| *Crematorio* | Spain | Drama/thriller | Canal + | 2011 | 1 season 8 episodes |
| *La Embajada* | Spain | Drama/thriller | Tele 5 | 2016 | 1 season 11 episodes |
| *Teorias da Conspiração* | Portugal | Drama/thriller | RTP | 2019 | 1 season 18 episodes |
| *Vamos Juan* | Spain | Comedy | TNT | 2020 | 1 season 7 episodes |
| *Venga Juan* | | | HBO | 2021 | 1 season 8 episodes |
| *Os Boys* | Portugal | Comedy | RTP | 2016 | 1 season 13 episodes |
| *El Partido* | Spain | Comedy | Flooxer | 2017 | 2 seasons 6 + 7 episodes |

its humorous outlook, is the best genre for a critical vision, especially as regards current events.

As is shown in the next sections, the genre or framework utilised by a fiction series is the frame necessary to construct representations and characters that offer different readings of politics.

5.1.1. Historical Drama or Politics as a Heroic Deed

The genre of historical fiction is especially apt for adding an epic dimension to a story. In this way, the choice of characters, historical period, and the events to be related usually corresponds to a wish to recreate scenes and characters known to the general public as they figure in brilliant episodes from history.

This is the sense of three of the fiction series chosen. *A Rainha e a Bastarda* evokes the late Middle Ages through the figure of King Dionis, whilst *Isabel* and *Carlos Rey Emperador* recreate modern Spanish history (the

reigns of Isabel la Católica and Carlos V). These stages, chronologically contiguous, not only present glorious historical moments in the two countries, but their protagonists are major figures in the construction of Spanish and Portuguese national identities and nation-states.

From these narrative and semantic keys, the three characters analysed are represented in largely positive terms. Trained in politics, they work as professionals, they develop and grow, and they triumph in the activity. Among their common characteristics, we find effort, merit, decisiveness, problem-solving ability, proactivity, ambition, and even obsession when pursuing their objectives, though the definition of the characters is nuanced, especially due to their gender.

In the case of the Portuguese main character, King Dionis, his artistic interests in music and poetry grant him a special sensitivity, as well as a superlative education. Such characteristics are coherent with the definition of a good manager who exercises transactional leadership,

**Table 2.** Genre/framework for representing politics and its protagonists.

| Politics in an epic/heroic key Positive assessment Historical drama | Politics as disloyal Negative assessment Drama-thriller | Politics from an amused/critical viewpoint Negative assessment Comedy |
|---|---|---|
| *Isabel* | *Crematorio* | *Vamos Juan/Venga Juan* |
| *Carlos Rey Emperador* | *La Embajada* | *Os Boys* |
| *A Rainha e a Bastarda* | *Teorias da Conspiração* | *El Partido* |

using positive and negative reinforcement (Bass, 2008). Nonetheless, the characters present certain emotional development in the form of humanity, empathy, defence of their family and lineage, and trust in providence and divinity. These abilities are particularly apparent in the figure of Isabel la Católica and serve to reinforce the character's femininity.

From a moral perspective, they are all, following Riesman's (1950) terminology, "individuals driven from within," moved by firm convictions and principles, which grant them independence along with a certain type of ethical legitimacy. Their religiosity, sense of state, and the references to honour and glory as motivations of their behaviour lend them an ethical dimension and nuances their cruel attitudes. Their ambition and desire for power is less an individual question and more a sort of collective endeavour. Material or economic considerations are absent from their discourse. Money and wealth are presented as a means to an end: the assumption of new enterprises that will bring an expansion of the nation's and the empire's power. They are not kind-hearted characters, but their sense of state and political intelligence give their decisions a veneer of morality.

The development of the characters of both Isabel and Carlos is narrated in terms of political apprenticeships. The two series show us the path by which the characters become professional politicians. The story focuses on their youth when they assume political responsibility. From that point, we are shown their teachers and the learning process: how they go gaining in confidence and experience and acquire leadership competences. The transformation arch of the Portuguese King Dionis implies he does not lose his political leadership qualities, but the exercise of power and the violence of his losses compromise his humanity, making him vindictive and cruel.

The fiction's political framework is further reinforced by the meaning granted to their private lives. The private sphere is part of the characters' public dimensions. In every case, family and conjugal relations are necessarily at the service of the reasons of the state. On the one hand, they can be instruments to maintain it or help it grow (such as arranged marriages). On the other, blood ties are no impediment to warlike confrontation when the maintenance of power requires it. There is no distinction between the public and private spheres, to the point that politics infuses all the dimensions of the character's existence.

This idea is slightly nuanced in the case of Isabel in that her womanhood is reinforced by maternity. Nevertheless, this is a secondary role in her character's construction and is not, in fact, the fundamental indicator of her femininity. From a clearly post-feminist outlook, Isabel revindicates a way of doing politics which distinguishes her from the male characters in highlighting the value of emotional abilities such as empathy, understanding, or intuition. Reliance on powerful and pioneering female characters is also apparent in *A Rainha e a*

*Bastarda* in the female protagonist, Isabel of Aragon, the Holy Queen, who plays a political role that was unprecedented in the 13th century.

### 5.1.2. Politics as Intrigue in Thrillers

*Crematorio*, *La Embajada*, and *Teorias da Conspiração* are three political thrillers which revolve around the struggle for power and where corruption and nepotism are the norms. They are inhabited by ambitious individuals whose only motivation is material, beyond any moral considerations. The setting and character typology is the ideal petri dish for stories full of intrigue, surprises, and plot twists.

The connections are clear between Rubén Bertomeu, the protagonist of *Crematorio*, and Pedro Soares, in *Teorias da Conspiração*, as political villains. Both characters come to the fore in a situation of international financial crisis in the 2010s, which called for the bailing out of the Spanish and Portuguese economies.

Bertomeu is a prosperous builder who triumphed in the real estate bubble of the 1990s. Intelligent, wise, and an excellent manager, his efficacy is renowned. His hunger for more leads him to assume and normalise illegal practices. He is immoral in his actions and cold in his relationships. The story gives a very clear idea of the development of the character of Bertomeu. Born of an impoverished bourgeois family, his youthful ambitions materialise in the creation of a political and financial web-based on corruption and mafia-like behaviour. There is hardly a trace of emotional abilities in Bertomeu; therefore, his relationships are entirely instrumental. Even his sentimental ties to his partner, Mónica, a young fortune-hunter 30 years his junior, seem to lie in that direction. Soares lacks any emotionality at all, and so has no private life. These failings manifest themselves in sexist, psychopathic attitudes, as well as in the absence of any kind of family or personal ties.

This characterisation is taken to an extreme in the figure of Pedro Soares, a lawyer who manipulates political life through all kinds of bribes and blackmail. Driven by overbearing ambition, he places himself on the other side of the moral fence, even committing murder. Soares' death in the final episode, murdered by his mother while dying in a hospital bed, is the possible redemption for a disaffected character who embodies absolute evil. His opponents, the couple formed by policeman José Madeira and investigative journalist Maria Amado, are the ones who suffer from the plot twists and emerge strengthened in their epic double struggle: to do justice and save their love.

This unreservedly negative characterisation of the two men is reinforced by their shared ending: Their death, as an inevitable result of their unscrupulous behaviour, but also as a sort of moral punishment.

On the contrary, the figure of Luis Salinas appears as an antagonist, an honest man of firm convictions, an ambassador in Thailand and the protagonist of

*La Embajada*. The character is encountered in a setting that evokes the same ideas of ambition and corruption, surrounded by political villains. The embassy is presented as one more piece in the puzzle of Spanish politics, like a microcosmos in which, despite its distance from the central government in Madrid, the same practices, mindsets, and perverse political usages are reflected. Luis Salinas is a complete outsider, representing the ideal of politics and building an image as utopian as it is positive. Law-abiding and free of any corrupt practices, he is driven by vocation, public service, civic commitment, and the defence of meritocracy and public interest. Moreover, that distinction is the root of the conflict that impels the character. His honesty, as well as his struggle against institutionalised corruption, earn him the animosity of those around him and push him to the limit.

Luis's decency makes him an atypical politician, a surprise for the viewer, extraordinary and epic. Highly qualified and a good manager, he exercises emotional leadership, involving the individuals with whom he has bonds of affection. However, the story points to how little "functionality" these characteristics have in the political terrain. The series highlights how the character threatens the inertia and the status quo of corrupt politics and how his character as a *rara avis* offers him few chances of survival in such a perverse environment.

As the series goes on, we perceive the character's transformation. In some ways, he is obliged to betray his convictions and rectitude. His family's well-being is the justification for his dishonest conduct. However, somehow, he resists to the end, and the final episode sees him achieving his goal of unmasking the corrupt and bringing them to justice.

Luis's positive characterisation is also reflected in the representation of his personal and family life. Empathic and committed, he draws a distinction between his personal and professional lives, giving priority to the former. In fact, the defence of his family is presented as the only limit to his convictions and honesty.

### 5.1.3. Politics as Comedy

Political satires cover controversial matters utilising parody. The humorous tone of these formats allows them to demonstrate and denounce questions that concern the viewer and tend to be highly topical. It is, therefore, a genre which says a lot about the identity, affinities, and antagonisms of a collective (Brassett et al., 2021).

Created at a time of considerable political disenchantment (Lorente Fontaneda & Sánchez-Vítores, 2018), *Vamos Juan* (which changes to *Venga Juan* in its second season), *El Partido*, and *Os Boys* offer characters and plotlines that respond to the public's alienation from politics.

The two Spanish programmes set out from the same comic premise: The protagonist, a character with a minor political post, is promoted to a position of power.

The weight of the humour lies in the protagonist's absolute incompetence when it comes to performing the tasks inherent to his new job, which gives rise to ridiculous and grotesque situations. The title of the Portuguese series refers to a popular expression for referring to those who support party elites. The protagonist is a man with a shady past who, having just arrived from Brazil, slips into Portuguese political life.

The characterisation of the three men is negative. Juan, the protagonist of *Vamos Juan*/*Venga Juan*, and Fernando from *El Partido* are both mediocre, anodyne individuals, unqualified people who are thrust into power. This is reflected in both the grammatical errors that pepper their speeches and in their lack of physical attractiveness. Juan is bald and capable of betraying everyone around him to get a hair transplant in Istanbul, and Fernando is baptised by the press as "the ball." César (*Os Boys*) assumes a role which is performed in the other two productions through minor characters: that of a manipulative and unscrupulous political advisor. Although his lean, incisive look reinforces his Machiavellian character, in reality, he is a lonely man whose only company at the end of the day is his friend Bombarda, with whom he criticises others and fuels palace intrigues.

None of the three protagonists is a leader, but upstarts, "straw men" controlled by those who really wield power. This means they never take the obligations to serve that come with their positions seriously. They do not think of the electorate, voters being an annoyance, especially the more needy collectives, whom the protagonists often mock. Verbal humour predominates in these series, based on overstepping the limits of the politically correct, which seems especially offensive coming from a profession from which one presupposes complete correction, at least in public. Access to high political spheres only exacerbates the narcissistic, immature, exhibitionist natures of these characters, plus their lack of ability.

This serves to strengthen the idea that power—or at least its proximity—perverts people. This image is reinforced by the rest of the cast—party colleagues, high-ranking people, and even the Prime Minister—who appear corrupt, implacable, and without scruples. As the advisors in *Os Boys* repeat ironically, "that's the country we've got."

The protagonists, to a greater or lesser degree, commit several crimes in order to keep their privileges: misappropriation, embezzlement, influence peddling, and bribery. With complete naturality and certain insouciance, Juan and Fernando dodge the law to their own benefit with no signs of regret or admission of guilt. In spite of the accusations of fraud that hang over Juan's head being authentic, he does all he can to evade justice and not go to jail. Fernando turns a blind eye to the problems that may be caused for the population of his hometown by a waste plant when he hears how much he is going to make from it. César does not hesitate to leak information—true or otherwise—about his opponents

to keep his party in power. In fact, as can be seen from the closing images of *Os Boys* or *El Partido*, the characters' ambitious natures are stronger than any impulse to do the right thing.

Fernando and Juan pass through similar changes. Although both of them know that not only do they not deserve the positions they have been put forward for but that their acceptance serves to cover up their parties' misdeeds. Nevertheless, they happily agree. The plots underline the characters' transformation: Their lust for power turns them from being diligent, committed men into someone driven towards prestige and recognition. However, César goes through a significant transformation. His awareness of having lost Iris' love, she being the journalist whose career he helped to flourish by exchanging favours, plunges him into a deep depression and precipitates his fall into the implacable world of politics. In the end, César makes himself worthy of Iris and regains some moral decency.

Juan, Fernando, and César's emotional competences are poorly developed and are chiefly portrayed in the relationships they establish with their teams. The almost unconditional support they receive from their advisors and other members of the political grouping helps the viewer relate to characters defined by negative traits. Similarly, the three programmes present female characters who are emotionally linked to the protagonists and who cause a positive change in the men.

As fine exponents of post-humour (Costa, 2010), Juan and Fernando are constructed to seek the amusing side of cringe-making situations and human wretchedness. They are corrupt politicians, but their ineptitude and lack of dignity are such that the viewer does not find them repulsive but feels a mix of pity and sympathy. Indeed, although not feeling close to the protagonists, the audience may see themselves in the characters' weak morals (Adarve, 2017). This point becomes clear in the closing titles of *El Partido*: "Spain loses a lot of money annually due to corruption. Over 300 politicians face charges. But some of them are likeable." Along the same lines, the characters in *Os Boys* are all but grotesque, and their actions so selfish and shameless that they provoke bitter, cynical laughter, fulfilling the old chestnut that the *boys* always have fun at the people's expense.

## 6. Conclusions

Politics, as a builder of our collective memory, has been introduced into Iberian fiction in the 21st century. Both societies share a dictatorial past that has bred a cynical political culture and distrust of the political class (Linz, 1978). Furthermore, the economic crisis that struck Spain and Portugal especially hard, and the consequent policies of austerity adopted in both countries, bred a climate of dissatisfaction exacerbated by successive revelations in the media of the corruption scandals involving politicians and bankers. This discontent has contributed to the creation of formats with very similar characters and characteristics in the two nations during the second decade of the 21st century.

Those politics-based series produced in recent years on the Iberian Peninsula reflect the people's weariness and their political disaffection. This is treated in two ways. On the one hand, leaders of the past are exalted, hailing their work ethic and commitment to the nation while ignoring fundamental questions of the time, such as inequality or the lack of freedom. On the other, the idea is consolidated that politicians are corrupt by nature and that, faced with this evidence, there is nothing that can be done. The assumption of this principle lets the population off their responsibilities and makes them, both in real life and in fiction, the missing player in the game of politics.

Stories from the past state persons, men and women, with a clear sense of duty which made them place the common good before individual gain. Their royal origins and their honesty freed them from material temptations of such importance to contemporary characters. They were born leaders, and their chief motivation was their commitment to the greatness of the nation. The characterisation of these individuals is eminently positive, despite their lack of connection to the people and their needs.

Meanwhile, other television fiction—thrillers and satire—demonstrate mala praxis in power and correspond to a collective catharsis. They are modern versions of 19th-century literary ideas common to both countries, which portray the country inevitably headed towards the governance of the most corrupt and inept. Thus, politics is presented as a distant place, far from the people, where the search for personal gain predominates. Manipulation and the lack of scruples are manifested as something consubstantial with this world, as can plainly be seen in the treatment meted out by the sector to Luis Salinas, one of the very few honest politicians in these stories.

Finally, it is important to underline that politics is presented, generally, as a male activity. The few female characters who appear are linked by affective ties and, on several occasions, are used as a trigger that makes the protagonists change their negative attitude. The figures of the monarchs Isabel, Queen of Castile, and Isabel, the Portuguese Holy Queen, hold power and show empathy and intelligence that, though it is presented as something positive, never stops belonging to a distinctly emotional sphere, which is not to be seen in the male characters. Politics is portrayed as an activity that essentially promotes but also corrupts men. The female characters are more sentimentalised and romanticised, and their political action is more relational and altruistic. These female characters show more diverse interests and are less focused on the selfish enjoyment of power. This vision coincides with dominant gender perceptions in Spain and Portugal, two countries whose accelerated cultural modernisation coexists with traditionalist representations of gender roles.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Digital Games as Persuasion Spaces for Political Marketing: Joe Biden's Campaign in Fortnite

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore how digital entertainment games are used as spaces for political persuasion in electoral campaigns, by examining Joe Biden's use of Fortnite during the campaign for the 2020 US presidential election as a case study. To date, the study of persuasive communication related to games has been mostly focused on persuasive games. This article approaches the use of entertainment games as spaces for persuasive communication answering the research question: How is political marketing—and electoral propaganda specifically—embedded into digital entertainment games? To answer this question, we have analyzed the persuasive dimensions of the Biden–Harris campaign in Fortnite using a qualitative mixed-methods approach that combined the identification and analysis of the persuasive strategies used in the game with a textual analysis of 19 articles discussing the campaign. The results of the analysis of the Biden–Harris campaign in Fortnite show that the persuasive efforts embedded in the game mostly made use of textual persuasion and procedural persuasion, relying largely on goal rules. The results of the textual analysis of the articles show that, although there is an appreciation of how the campaign links political persuasive goals with the challenges presented to the player, the lack of understanding of the persuasive potential of the game results in a gaming experience that in some cases does not meet the expectations of Fortnite's experienced and demanding players.

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

In his book *Making Democracy Fun*, Josh Lerner (2014) argues that democracy is not fun for most people, which leads to three major problems in our society: people are less engaged, less trusting, and less empowered. For this reason, Lerner proposes the use of games as a tool for making politics fun, based on the premise that games are inherently democratic as "they always involve participation and decision-making, by design" (Lerner, 2014, p. 16).

In today's political ecosystem, it is clear that political marketing strategists need to design new persuasive communication strategies to be deployed in the environment where their target audience is. Among the innovations emerging within political marketing, digital games are being used as an innovative tool to bring young people closer to politicians with successful results. Miller (2013) states that "by reaching out to them in their own element, campaigns and candidates can (hopefully) energize young voters and encourage them to be active in politics" (p. 327). In this regard, Neys and Jansz (2010)

demonstrated that playing a political game influenced players on their knowledge and opinion about the issue addressed in the game. Specifically, the 2008 Obama campaign marked the beginning of a "new era for the use of the Internet in political campaigns and marked the growing dominance of the medium as a political tool" (MacAskill, 2007, as cited in Miller, 2013, p. 332).

In the field of game studies, digital games have been defined as meaningful cultural artifacts (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The fact that games are able to harbor meaning allows them to be used to persuade specific audiences in specific situations (Bogost, 2007). In academia, the study of persuasive communication related to games has been so far mainly focused on the use of *persuasive games* (Bogost, 2007): serious games designed with a persuasive purpose. Nieborg (2004), for example, has explored *propagames*—games with propagandistic content—that can be understood as a subset of *political games* (Bogost, 2007). Furthermore, Bossetta (2019, p. 3,424) has studied political campaigning games: "advergames that promote a partisan political position in an electoral context."

However, studies on the use of digital entertainment games as persuasive communication spaces, in particular as political marketing tools, are still scarce. Therefore, it is important to understand how digital entertainment games are used to convey the persuasive messages defined in an election campaign. This article aims to expand the scientific knowledge about this topic by exploring how Fortnite has been used as a space for political persuasion in the 2020 US presidential election by addressing the following research question: How is political marketing—and electoral propaganda specifically—integrated into digital entertainment games?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Digital Games and Political Marketing

Lerner (2014) argues that both analog and digital games can be used for different political purposes. The author proposes three categories: games about politics, play as political action, and games as political action. Games about politics are defined as political games designed to educate, raise awareness or motivate players; these are related to serious games and social change. Play as political action involves incorporating game design principles into political practices. Finally, games as political action are games that can be integrated into political campaigns, meetings, actions, and debates. These games, unlike political play, are structured around specific rules and can have an impact on the decision-making process. This study addresses this third category, which has been less explored from an academic perspective.

Digital games are increasingly an attractive space to push political propaganda. On the one hand, digital games can be used to articulate imaginaries and readings of contemporary political systems (Gómez-García

et al., 2022). Bossetta (2019) claims that, as rhetorical devices, *political campaigning games* "reify the enduring effectiveness of media framing" and "exemplify changing dynamics in the digital campaigning space" (Bossetta, 2019, p. 3,424). On the other hand, researchers have identified an emerging playful notion of civic protest (Stokes & Williams, 2018). In this respect, Huang and Liu (2022) stated that gamification has been used to organize and stimulate pro-democratic movements through three forms of resistance: (a) games as direct action tactics for advocacy; (b) games as a mechanism for movement pedagogy; and (c) games as a tool for civic education (p. 41).

Baltezarević et al. (2019) argue that it is only a matter of time before digital games are recognized as key media for political communication, capable of generating new voters. This is mainly because they can be used to "create highly compressed versions of the embodied experiences both of other citizens and of policymakers" (Bogost, 2006, para. 45). An example of the potential digital entertainment games as platforms for political marketing is the successful application of this marketing strategy in the Obama campaign during the 2008 US presidential election. This campaign deployed advertisements within entertainment games targeting eligible voters in key states (Baltezarević et al., 2019; Leng et al., 2010; Miller, 2013). However, other approaches have not been as effective. In the 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton's quip "Pokémon Go to the Polls!," referring to the popular video game, resulted in "ironic media gaffes and memes" (Tran et al., 2021).

We are now in a new phase of the use of digital games for political marketing. Examples are the initiatives of politicians such as Joe Biden and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, who chose games such as Animal Crossing: New Horizons and Fortnite as new media vehicles to deliver their political messaging (Tran et al., 2021). Akbar and Kusumasari (2021) claim that players in Biden's campaign embedded in Animal Crossing were "involved, informed, and strongly advocated on critical issues in the election" (p. 657). The success of these political actions was mainly due to the fact that politicians interacted with gaming cultures on the terms of their users and communities (Tran et al., 2021). With this study, we would like to provide more insights into the way political messages are articulated in this new type of political marketing.

### 2.2. Persuasive Communication Through Digital Games

The study of persuasive communication through digital games became particularly relevant in academia with the publication of the book *Persuasive Games*, by the game scholar Ian Bogost in 2007. Since then, numerous researchers (e.g., De la Hera, 2019; De la Hera et al., 2021; Ferrara, 2013; Ferrari, 2010; Heide & Nørholm, 2009; Seiffert & Nothhaft, 2015) have investigated the persuasive potential of digital games, providing more detail on what types of persuasive goals can be achieved and how digital games can be used for

these purposes. Complementary studies have also further explored aspects such as the effects of persuasive games (Jacobs, 2017; Jacobs & Jansz, 2021; Jacobs et al., 2017, 2019), the design principles of persuasive games (Grace, 2021; Kors et al., 2021; Siriaraya et al., 2018), and concrete applications and persuasive roles (De la Hera, 2017, 2018; Lee et al., 2021; Løvlie, 2008; Orji et al., 2013; Ruggiero, 2013).

From a political perspective, researchers have explored how persuasive games could be used for political propaganda in the form of *propagames*. Nieborg (2004), for example, has analyzed how the game America's Army has not only been used as a recruiting tool, an educational game, and a test bed tool for the US Army, but also as a propagame to convey political messages. In this vein, recent studies have investigated how propagames are used to convey persuasive messages. Chew and Wang (2021) established that propagames "operate as a part of digital authoritarianism, together with other forms of new soft propaganda, to legitimate populist authoritarian states around the world" (p. 1,431).

According to De la Hera (2017), three types of persuasion approaches can be found in digital games: exocentric persuasion, exercised with the intention of influencing the player's attitude beyond the game; endocentric persuasion, to keep the player interested in the game; and game-mediated persuasion, where an entertainment game becomes a persuasive element when used in a given context for a specific purpose. Within academic research on persuasive communication through digital games, the third category has been the least studied so far. In this article, we focus on this third category—game-mediated persuasion—through a case study on the use of Fortnite in the Biden–Harris campaign for political persuasion in the specific context of the 2020 US presidential election.

De la Hera (2019) has developed a theoretical model that aims to highlight how persuasion can be structured within digital games and be useful to identify specific aspects of persuasion through games. The author states that digital games can persuade players on three different levels and that it is possible to find different persuasive dimensions in each of the three persuasive levels. The first persuasive level refers to signs (De Saussure, 2017) embedded within the game; the second refers to the system (Frasca, 2007) that allows players to interact with the game's signs; and the third is the context (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) in which the games are played. To date, this model has only been used to analyze persuasive strategies in persuasive games (i.e., games designed with the very purpose of changing players' attitudes beyond the game). In this study, we apply this model to analyze the use of an entertainment game to convey a political message—that is, game-mediated persuasion. The aim is to validate the usefulness of this model for the analysis of game-mediated persuasive strategies.

## 3. Methodology

This research work consists of a case study of the Biden–Harris campaign in Fortnite for the 2020 US presidential election. In this case, to guide the analysis we used De la Hera's (2019) model for analyzing persuasive communication in digital games (see Figure 1). We used an embedded design (Yin, 1989) to analyze the case (i.e., we gave attention to subunits and subprocesses). We critically analyzed the persuasive strategies used in the game in relation to the persuasive levels and persuasive dimensions described by De la Hera (2019). Within this study, we analyze the political message as understood by Lempert and Silverstein (2012): That is, we look beyond its literal meaning, also trying to reflect on its figurative meaning. We look into what the campaign seems to convey about the personality and personal values of the candidates by analyzing which issues have been focused on and which have been ignored (Lempert & Silverstein, 2012, p. 2).

For the analysis of the persuasive strategies used in the case study, we used a combination of qualitative methods. First, analytical play (Mäyrä, 2008) was used as the research method to collect relevant data from the case study. The researchers played through the island's challenges, critically examining their game experiences. This process included utilitarian play, which implies relating the game to "wider contexts of a historical, conceptual and social range of thought that constitutes game studies and game culture in their reflexive form" (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 165). Analytical play included total completion (Aarseth et al., 2003) of the island's challenges: That is, repeated play with the purpose of achieving total completion of the game including the exploration of multiple paths within the game. Screenshots and notes of relevant moments were taken for the data analysis phase.

Second, for triangulation purposes, we conducted a textual analysis (Brennen, 2017) of 19 articles published by US digital media that discussed the campaign. These articles were selected from an advanced Google search. The search results were filtered by date from October 30, 2020 (date on which the island went live) to November 3, 2020 (election day). We used the following search terms: intitle:"biden" and Fortnite; Biden Island and "Fortnite"; intitle: "biden" and "fortnite"; and "Biden Island" and "Fortnite." This resulted in 41 articles in different languages, from which we selected 19 that met the study criteria: English language, US digital media, and primary source or citing the official source (see Supplementary File for a complete list of articles analyzed). As sensitizing concepts for the textual analysis, we used the persuasive dimensions proposed by De la Hera (2019). Specifically, the analysis focused on the discussion of aspects related to the persuasive dimensions identified during the analysis of the game, with the aim of identifying how the press interprets the use of the different persuasive dimensions present in the campaign.
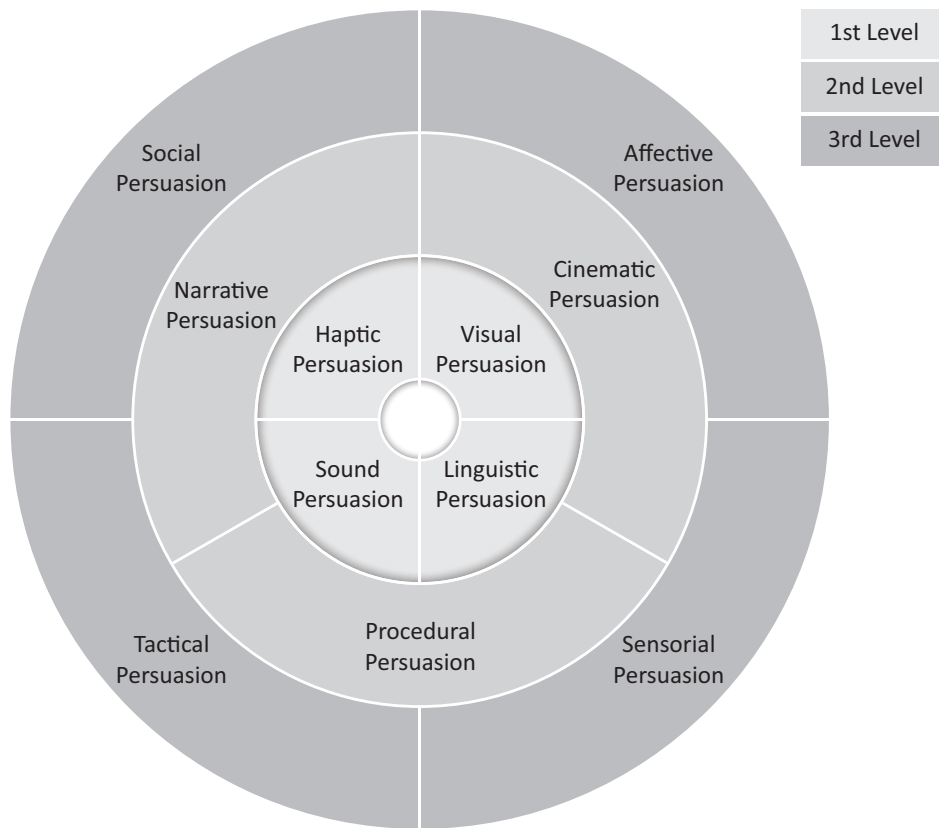
**Figure 1.** Model on persuasive communication in digital games. Source: De la Hera (2019, p. 104).

### 3.1. Case Study

The Biden–Harris campaign featured a custom map in Fortnite's creative mode. The Build Back Better With Biden island created by Alliance Studio was launched on October 30, 2020, just days before the US presidential election. Biden–Harris's director of digital partnerships reported that the purpose of using digital games was "to meet people everywhere they are online and offline with innovative and thoughtful activations," with the advertising objective being "engaging players in a substantive, approachable, and fun way to reach and mobilize voters" (Foreman, 2020). The in-game objective was to complete six challenges related to the Biden–Harris political agenda. The player must activate Fortnite's creative mode and go through a magic portal or insert the map code 0215–4511-1823 to access it. The defined target group was young people, especially men, between 18 and 35 years of age.

### 4. Results

The results of our case study show how the Biden–Harris persuasive strategy was embedded in the Fortnite island at the three persuasive levels described by De la Hera (2019; see Figure 1): signs, system, and context. Below we discuss in detail how the campaign's persuasive strategies were embedded in each of the three levels.

### 4.1. Level 1: Signs

At the first level of persuasion, signs are understood "as the whole that results from the association of the signifier, i.e., the form the sign takes, with the signified, i.e., the concept it represents" (De la Hera, 2019, p. 102). We have found that the campaign makes use of two of the four persuasive dimensions described by De la Hera (2019) at the first level of persuasion: linguistic persuasion and visual persuasion. Furthermore, some of the signs identified in the game are multimodal signs: signs rendered in more than one mode at the same time. The use of each of these dimensions is discussed below.

#### 4.1.1. Linguistic Persuasion

Linguistic persuasion refers to how linguistic communication is used in the game to persuade the player (De la Hera, 2019). The linguistic signs that can be found on the island are: title of the island, instructional texts, names of spatial locations, and dialogues.

When the players reach the island, they appear on a stage in the town hall where the name of the island can be read in the background: Build Back Better With Biden (see Figure 2), which is the Biden–Harris campaign slogan. Build Back Better is a promise of hope and a better future for Americans. This phrase comes from the United Nations (2015) improvement plan for disaster risk reduction in areas such as physical infrastructure,

social systems, economies, and the environment. Using this intertextual reference, both the campaign and the game could be alluding to a possible disaster brought about by the administration headed by Donald Trump. The player's goal on the island is connected to its title, which is also captured in the campaign slogan: to rebuild what has been destroyed by Trump's administration. Medhurst and Desousa (1981) explain how, in political communication, metaphors are used to "frame the election as a battle, a race, or a circus" (as cited in Bossetta, 2019, p. 3,428). It could be argued that in this case, the purpose is to frame the election as a race, in which the player is responsible for taking care of this reconstruction under time pressure.



**Figure 2.** Title of the game.

An example of a linguistic sign in the form of an instructional text can be seen in Figure 3. This text encourages players to text a number to retrieve information on how to vote. This strategy is linked to the fact that the campaign is trying to reach young voters, some of them voting for the first time. Seven of the articles analyzed discuss this strategy. Matt Baume, from *The Stranger* (11-03-2020), claims that one of the purposes of this is to collect players' phone numbers and emails to add them to the official campaign mailing list. This allows the creation of a database with possible voters, in order to personalize the political content sent and monitor their behavior.



**Figure 3.** Instructional text.

Names of spatial locations on the island are also used to convey a political communication goal. An example of this is the station named No Malarkey, an intertex-

tual reference to one of the campaign's slogans and to one of the most popular phrases of the presidential candidate, Joe Biden (see Figure 4). This slogan was a source of ridicule among some citizens, as it was considered a difficult term to understand, especially among the younger generations (Korecki, 2019). The fact of using it in this case is compared by Steve Watts, from GameSpot (11-02-2020), to a meme. Baume, from *The Stranger*, criticizes this strategy, claiming that specific locations in the game are only created for political communication purposes and are not engaging for the player, as they do not have a specific purpose within the game:

> Players who load up the custom map (the code is 0215–4511-1823) will find themselves wandering a windswept small-town setting that inexplicably has a subway station, devoid of all human activity as though you are the sole sinful survivor of the rapture. (*The Stranger*, 11-03-2020)
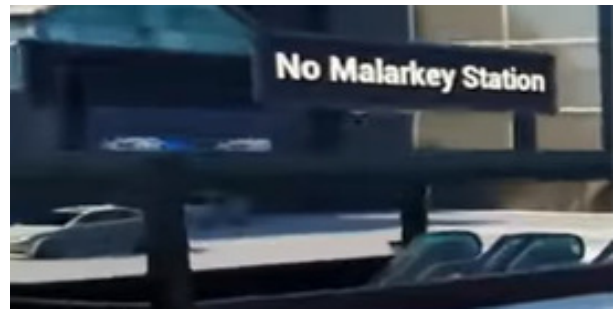


**Figure 4.** No Malarkey station.

Dialogues with non-player characters are also used in the game to convey the political agenda, explaining why players are expected to do certain things in the game and how these are connected to the candidates' plans for the country (see Figure 5). For example, the character in the information counter states: "Joe Biden has a jobs and economic recovery plan for working families. We need your help to Build Back Better." This sentence, which is encouraging players to help rebuild the country, is linked to the candidates' recovery plan, suggesting that the country is in crisis due to Trump's management of the Covid pandemic. The Fortnite campaign tries to illustrate how these campaign goals would translate into reality. Another example is a dialogue in the ice cream store, in which the player can read: "Celebrate a better tomorrow by ordering some ice cream." This phrase promising a better tomorrow is key because it conveys a message of hope in the face of uncertainty and political mismanagement (economic, health, social, etc.). Rilley MacLeod, from Kotaku, reflects on the fact that, although these texts are clearly linked to Biden's political agenda, there is a lack of depth in the information provided in this form:

> Text printed on a speech bubble can't get at the nuances of Biden and Harris' positions, but, as a whole, the island paints the ticket as good for the

economy, the environment, and people who aren't white or straight. (Kotaku, 10-31-2021)
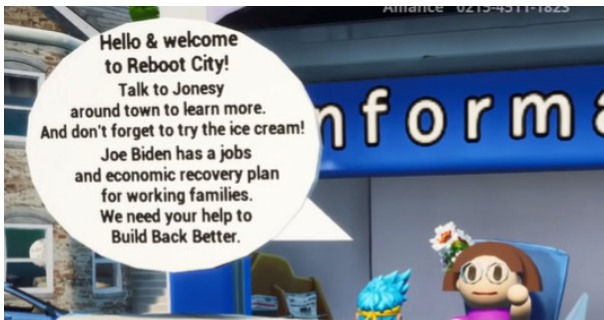

**Figure 5.** Dialogue.

Linguistic persuasion is the most common persuasive dimension to convey a political message and also one of the two strategies most often discussed in the online articles analyzed for this article. The 19 articles analyzed discuss the political content of the textual references on the island in different ways, the campaign title being the most widely cited in these texts. The use of linguistic signs in the Biden–Harris campaign is significant from the perspective of political communication because it seeks to attract players with a political project that offers arguments on relevant issues, such as an economic recovery plan, well-paying jobs, promoting home-grown industries throughout America, and investing in science, technology, education, and energy efficiency. Through linguistic persuasion, the messages in the Fortnite campaign appeal to emotions and point to the candidates' credibility. By focusing on these specific points of their political agenda, the Biden–Harris campaign team is trying to create an image of the candidates' values without explicitly referring to the candidates themselves. This is in line with the strategies described by Lempert and Silverstein (2012) to build a politician's persona through political communication.

Using linguistic persuasion to persuade players in a game is, however, not considered the best persuasive strategy, as players tend to skip text or do not read it in detail unless doing so is required to progress in the game (De la Hera, 2019). Game designers try to overcome this challenge by using two strategies. The first one is repe-

tition. The slogans, for example, are all over the island, so the player encounters them repeatedly. The second strategy is conveying the message in the form of instructional texts embedded in dialogues, which players are expected to read to understand the challenges that need to be completed.

### 4.1.2. Visual Persuasion

By visual persuasion we mean how the visual elements of the game are used to persuade the player (De la Hera, 2019). On the Biden–Harris island, we found two types of visual persuasive signs: interface design and spatial design. An example of this is the use of the three colors of the American flag in the spatial design of the island, such as the blue, white, and red flowers that are shown in Figure 6. Furthermore, some elements of the interface design also use the three colors and the stars of the American flag. An example of this is the leaderboard design (see Figure 7). These are used on the island as signs of patriotism, identification with the country, or the essence of the American dream: Values that the candidates want to convey through their campaign. According to Silverstein (2003), this strategy is commonly used to "create cross-cutting senses of groupness" (p. 536). The author claims that in a dialectic of social distinction, identity indicators regularly replay one another, thereby conveying several possible messages of profundity or at least importance.

### 4.1.3. Multimodal Signs

Some of the signs identified on the island are multimodal signs: That is, signs rendered in more than one mode at the same time (De la Hera, 2019). Billboards alluding to social movements can be found throughout the island. In this way, linguistic and visual signs merge and are used not only to convey information through their denotative meaning, but also through their cultural connotations. The phrases "love is love" and "Black lives matter" (see Figure 8) are currently linked to social movements— the former to the LGBT community and the latter to racial activism. Billboards in Spanish ("voy a votar") can also be found, appealing to the Hispanic community in


**Figure 6.** Flowers: Example of spatial design.


**Figure 7.** Leaderboard: Example of interface design.

**Figure 8.** Billboards.

the US. According to Silverstein (2003), this could be considered an "instrument of mobilizing sentiment" (p. 533). These signs try to convey the inclusive values of the candidates, which aspire to govern for all citizens without discrimination. Furthermore, billboards are elements that we often encounter in a city, so this form of persuasive communication in games is considered useful to create realistic gameplay and has been proven not to be considered intrusive for the player, which helps to reduce players' resistance to persuasive communication (De la Hera, 2019).

### 4.2. Level 2: System

At the second level of persuasion—the system—relationships are established between signs to create meaning. This is achieved with the rules that guide the player through the game (De la Hera, 2019, p. 101). We have found that the campaign makes use of one of the three persuasive dimensions described by De la Hera (2019) at the second level of persuasion: procedural persuasion.

#### 4.2.1. Procedural Persuasion

By procedural persuasion, we mean how the rules of the game are used to persuade the player (Bogost, 2007). Procedural persuasive strategies can be designed using four different types of rules: model rules, grade rules, goal rules, and meta-rules (Frasca, 2007). In this case, only goal rules are used to persuade the players on the island.

Goal rules determine when a player wins or loses in the game (Frasca, 2007). An example of their use for political communication in this game is the fact that, to feature on the winner's board that appears at the end of the game, the player must complete a total of six challenges. There are two persuasive goals linked to these challenges: (a) create awareness about the political agenda, and (b) create emotional empathy with the candidates.

The first persuasive goal—create awareness about the Biden–Harris political agenda—is conveyed through

four challenges presented to the player: help build a new research facility at the local Historically Black College; install three Scranton towers; restore The Aviator river; and help make Major's auto factory run clean. These challenges require tasks such as installing energy-efficient AC units and solar panels, removing industrial waste from a river, and investing in science and education. Using textual and visual persuasion, the designers explain the relevance of these challenges and how they are connected to the candidates' political agenda. The persuasive message conveyed by the Biden–Harris campaign with these challenges emphasizes the candidates' commitment to African American education (challenge 1); technology and innovation (challenges 2 and 3) and the environment (challenge 4). Furthermore, the third challenge includes an intertextual reference to Joe Biden's Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses.

The second persuasive goal—foster emotional empathy with the candidates—is conveyed through two challenges presented to the player: visit Joe's famous ice cream shop, and complete Kamala's sneaker run collecting sneakers around the island. Both challenges allude to two of the candidates' personal tastes: Joe Biden's fondness for ice cream and Harris' obsession with Converse sneakers. From a political communication perspective, this strategy is used to create a youthful public image of the candidates. These human characteristics are attributed to them with the intention of demystifying the political figure.

The ice cream challenge is discussed in 9 of the 19 articles analyzed for this study, while the sneakers challenge is mentioned in six of them. MacLeod, from Kotaku, labels these as "easter eggs," meaning that these are surprising elements hidden in the game. Some authors, however, are skeptical about the value of these challenges from a gameplay perspective. Baume, from *The Stranger*, calls into question Harris' "exaggerated" number of missing sneakers and Biden's "love" of ice cream:

Cardboard cutouts will appear now and then to implore you to find Kamala Harris' ten missing

sneakers (is she a centipede???), or to visit an ice cream shop because "Joe Biden loves ice cream." (*The Stranger*, 11-03-2020)

MacLeod also wonders about the value of these challenges from a political communication perspective and criticizes the use of humor as a resource to get closer to voters, based on the argument that electing a political representative is a serious matter:

> The island tries to give Biden personality, with mentions of his favorite ice cream flavor and his dogs, but to me it reads like a desperate, hollow attempt to get me to like a man I mostly scream at through my computer as he distances himself from the Green New Deal and professes a misguided allegiance to fracking. Hunting through a virtual town for Kamala Harris' sneakers taught me that Harris likes sneakers I guess, but I don't care about her footwear—I care far more about her stance on prisons and policing. (Kotaku, 10-31-2020)

From a persuasive communication perspective, the fact that the goals of the game are linked to the goals of the political campaign is a good strategy, as the player needs to go through the six challenges to finish the game. The fact, however, that the player needs to read all the written instructions in the game in detail to understand the political meaning of these challenges shows that the designers do not have an accurate understanding of the persuasive potential of digital games. Basing the most important part of the political message on textual persuasion is always risky because players might skip the text and still complete the challenges (De la Hera, 2019). The strength of procedural persuasion in games relies on the fact that players can experience the consequences of their actions in the game. This could be better done in this case by combining persuasive goal rules with persuasive grade rules. Grade rules give players the opportunity to understand the consequences of their performance (Frasca, 2007). Using grade rules to show players the relevance of electric cars or efficient AC units by letting them experience the positive and negative consequences of their use or the lack thereof, for example, would have been a better way to use the persuasive potential of the game in this case.

### 4.3. Level 3: Context

At the third level of persuasion—the context—the objective is to foster feelings and emotions in the player that favor the interpretation of the persuasive message embedded in the other two persuasive levels of the game (De la Hera, 2019). Here we have found that the campaign makes use of three of the four persuasive dimensions described by De la Hera (2019): tactical persuasion, affective persuasion, and social persuasion. The use of each of these dimensions is described below.

#### 4.3.1. Tactical Persuasion

Tactical persuasion consists of designing pleasurable gaming experiences that engage the player through challenges (De la Hera, 2019). The fact that this campaign chooses Fortnite as the space for conveying a political communication campaign is a tactical persuasive strategy. First of all, Fortnite is a very successful game among the target group of this campaign action, which created anticipation around the Biden–Harris island. Furthermore, the very fact that the campaign made use of an existing entertainment game, instead of creating a new game from scratch, makes it easier for the player to have prior experience with how the game world works and the skills it requires. This allows the player to focus their attention on the message being conveyed and not have to put effort into learning how to play the game. The advantage of Fortnite players already having the skills to play the game is also highlighted in Kotaku: "It's certainly approachable if you're a Fortnite player, in that you understand how to click prompts, drive vehicles, and build" (Kotaku, 10-31-2020).

This, however, becomes a double-edged sword for the Biden–Harris island, as players are familiar with the game and might have high expectations about the content that they are going to encounter on the island. Consequently, although some label the island as "really impressive" (GameRant, 10-31-2020) others describe its challenges as "basic and clumsy" (Kotaku, 10-31-2020). This is in line with the results of previous studies, which have found that games specifically designed to convey a persuasive message offer more advantages and flexibility to convey the political message (Bossetta, 2019).

#### 4.3.2. Affective Persuasion

Affective persuasion arouses the player's deepest feelings and emotions with the aim of triggering affective experiences ranging from mildly positive feelings to strong emotions. This type of persuasion is used with the aim of generating a state of mind in the player that helps the message to be conveyed (De la Hera, 2019). Through a persuasive communication strategy, the team behind the design of the island claims that the objective of the island is to create a "fun" experience as a way to engage young players:

> Christian Tom, director of digital partnerships for the Biden–Harris campaign, told Mashable that…they "designed the custom 'Build Back Better with Biden' Fortnite map to do just that—engaging players in a substantive, approachable, and fun way to reach and mobilize voters." (MIC, 11-02-2020)

From the analysis of the strategies implemented on the island, it is also possible to conclude that there are other strategic motivations, such as creating a database of potential voters and benefiting from the fact that games

are an excellent medium to collect data from players that can be used to create profiles and better cater to their expectations.

Furthermore, the analysis of the articles shows that the campaign also aroused negative emotions. This is illustrated through statements that claim that the island "is more depressing than inspiring" (Kotaku, 10-31-2020) or label the gameplay as "janky" (MIC, 11-02-2020).

In addition, the analysis also shows that the island is able to foster complex emotions in those players who feel identified with the campaign's political message:

> It gave me an hour of something to do on another Saturday spent inside so as to do my part in combating the pandemic the US' current government has given up on fighting. It reminded me of some of the positions I agree with Biden on, which was heartening. It encouraged me to think about politics while playing a video game, which felt good at a time when I'm sick of escapism (Kotaku, 10-31-2020).

### 4.3.3. Social Persuasion

Social persuasion aims to influence players' attitudes by providing them with experiences that focus on encouraging them to interact with others (De la Hera, 2019). In our study, we have been able to identify two different strategies used on the island in the form of social persuasion: information sharing and relationship building.

In terms of information sharing, a persuasive message at the end of the game encourages players to share a photo of their time spent on the island on Twitter, using the hashtag #SquadUpandVote. Furthermore, the island includes a leaderboard that encourages competition among players. Players are also instructed to share their results on social media. This persuasive strategy seeks to get players to let others know about their achievements (De la Hera, 2019), which translates into greater visibility and status for the Biden–Harris political campaign, promoting viral marketing.

In terms of relationship building, the island includes several matchmaking points. Fortnite's matchmaking points are designed to pair players with complementary skills so they can collaborate to complete challenges together. One of the island's most notable flaws is that these matchmaking points do not work, so it is impossible for players to pair up, making the map experience a solitary one. Collaborative play is commonplace in Fortnite and is one of its more relevant and attractive features for players (Carter et al., 2020), so the fact that this option is not available is disappointing to some. This is discussed by Tebany Yune, from MIC: "Reviewers have noted that matchmaking didn't seem to work from the map, leaving players alone to explore the island for about a solid hour" (MIC, 11-02-2020).

Ultimately, social persuasion benefits both the players in terms of relationship building and social recognition, as well as the persuasive goal of the campaign, which is to attract as many voters as possible in an entertaining environment. However, the analysis shows that social persuasion has not been properly implemented on the island, creating disappointment among some players.

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore how digital entertainment games are used as spaces for political persuasion. We have done so by studying Joe Biden's use of Fortnite during the campaign for the 2020 US presidential election using analytical play and textual analysis as research methods. The results of the analysis show that procedural persuasion and textual persuasion were the most prominent strategies used to convey the campaign's political agenda, with the support of other persuasive dimensions such as visual, affective, tactical, and social persuasion. The results of the textual analysis show that, although there is an appreciation of how the campaign links political persuasive goals with the challenges presented to the player, the gaming experience in some cases does not meet the expectations of Fortnite's experienced and demanding players.

This study demonstrates that the theoretical model for persuasive communication in digital games (De la Hera, 2019) is useful for analyzing persuasive strategies mediated by digital entertainment games. So far, this model had only been used to analyze persuasive games. For this reason, the study provides new insights into academic research on political communication in digital games.

This is an exploratory study focusing on a case study. To gain a better understanding of the use of digital entertainment games for political communication, further studies exploring and comparing more cases would be necessary. Further research should also explore voters' perceptions of this political communication strategy, as well as the effectiveness of this type of campaign through quantitative research.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

# Games as Political Actors in Digital Journalism

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**Abstract**
The goal of this study is to explore the role of digital games as political actors in digital journalism. The development of digital games designed to frame journalistic messages led to the emergence of newsgames. This trend impacts online mass media outlets' performance as political actors in democratic polities. In this article, we explore the current relationship between political communication and newsgames by answering the following research question: How do online mass media outlets use newsgames to report, interpret, and critically analyze democratic polities? In this study, an inductive grounded theory approach was used to analyze 29 political newsgames published in 25 mass-media digital outlets across 11 different countries. The findings reveal that mass media outlets employ political newsgames to perform four distinct functions when covering political events: analytical reportage, commentary, critical scrutiny, and representation.

## 1. Introduction

The political culture of Western countries is facing two major challenges: threats to their welfare state and the proper functioning of their democratic systems. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have warned of these dangers, claiming that the internal corrosion is caused, among other things, by populism, which triggers the distrust and alienation of citizens towards the political system and its institutions. The proliferation of soft news has fostered this distrust. This journalistic style combines information and entertainment, favored by the public's increasing disinterest in the so-called *hard news* (Postman, 2005).

Scholars suggest that new media are widely acknowledged as a significant tool for increasing the public's political information and participation in the democratic processes (e.g., Hadma & Anggoro, 2022; Kahne et al., 2009; Lee, 2019). The consolidation of the use of digital games in the media ecosystem, therefore,

allows us to question their contribution to contemporary political culture (de la Hera, 2019; Glas et al., 2019; Moreno Azqueta, 2022; Torres-Toukoumidis et al., 2023). Although connections between digital games and political information in the media have existed since their inception, the genre has evolved considerably (Meier, 2018). Previous research on political newsgames has been mainly focused on studying the link between digital games and political participation (Dalisay et al., 2015, 2021; Stokes & Williams, 2018). In this article, we approach the study of political newsgames from a new perspective by exploring how political newsgames are used by online mass media outlets in their role as political actors. We do so by answering the following research question: How do online mass media outlets use newsgames to report, interpret, and critically analyze democratic polities?

Following Dahl's (1989) discussion about "democratic polities," this study focuses on the analysis of political

newsgames that depict traits of the democratic systems, the key players involved, and their modus operandi. Therefore, this research does not analyze other digital games with clear inferences about fair or unfair state policies, such as in the case of asylum seekers or refugee crisis issues, a popular topic in newsgames (e.g., Plewe & Fürsich, 2017). We acknowledge the multifaceted nature of the term "political" and the fact that our understanding of the concept of political newsgames does not include the multifaceted nature of the concept. This is, however, a conscious decision that allows a clearer focus on the research question and a more in-depth analysis of the discourse within this specific type of game.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Political Games

It is possible to identify precedents of games about political issues since the inception of digital games. One of them is Dennis Through the Drinking Glass (1985), a commercial digital game with a political agenda in which the player takes the role of Margaret Thatcher's husband, who wants to go to the Gravedigger's Arms pub. Another relevant example is Spitting Image (1988), a fighting game featuring the characters of a famous British satirical television puppet show. A more ambitious geopolitical interpretation can be found in Balance of Power (Crawford, 1985), in which the player (in the role of the president of the US or the general secretary of the Soviet Union) tries to avoid a nuclear war and "take on a social challenge through gameplay proper" (Bogost, 2007, p. 126).

Since then, more games have addressed political issues, but Bogost (2006) contends that a significant break of games into the world of politics, advocacy, and activism occurred in 2004. That year, digital games were used for the first time to support several political campaigns (US presidential elections, US state legislative elections, and presidential elections in Uruguay). Bogost (2006) claims that this break led to games being more closely integrated into political discourse strategies and becoming a part of endorsed political speech. This "significative break," in Bogost's terms, intensified since the 2015 US presidential election when a wide range of newsgames appeared on mobile devices, "becoming an integral part of political discourse strategies" where "the boundaries between satire, humor, and primitive insult are blurred" (Meier, 2018, p. 431). This build-up of the political sphere in the mobile ecosystem has been developed in recent research about politicians (Quevedo-Redondo et al., 2021) and political processes (Gil-Torres et al., 2022).

Nowadays, the academic study of digital games that address political issues is approached from several angles. One perspective focuses on analyzing entertainment digital commercial games that address topics linked with contemporary politics. The dominant approach in this group of studies explores the permeability between the discourse of digital games and the political context (e.g., Planells de la Maza, 2020). Previous research has analyzed abstract and broad processes of political systems, such as pressure groups, public opinion, or the threat of populism (Gómez-García et al., 2022; Planells de la Maza, 2015). Furthermore, there are readings of specific events, such as the impact of the Great Economic Recession of 2008 on the representations offered by commercial video games (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2019) or the use of games as tools of techno-nationalism (Moreno Cantano, 2022).

Another perspective is focused on analyzing serious political games, digital games that address a current political issue designed "to promote a more just, solidary and/or tolerant society" (Games for Change, 2022). Several studies have explored games designed with a persuasive, activist, or awareness-raising purpose around different political realities (Glas et al., 2019). Researchers have also explored the ability of serious political games to promote political awareness or engagement (Neys & Jansz, 2010), advocacy journalism (Dowling, 2021), or citizen empowerment (Banz, 2019; Lerner, 2014). The present study is framed in this group of studies insofar as it studies political newsgames: the use of serious political games in digital journalism.

### 2.2. Political Games in Digital Journalism

Newsgames is a label describing a game used for journalistic purposes (Bogost et al., 2010). The rise of newsgames started with the origins of digital journalism in the forms of interactive entertainment (e.g., Fojba, 2000) and multimedia infographics (e.g., Can You Spot the Threats, 2001). Their popularity arrived with their implementation in the digital edition of *The New York Times* in 2007. The success of some newsgames developed by established media outlets at that time, such as Cutthroat Capitalism (2009) or Gauging Your Distraction (2009), drew the attention of game researchers, who started exploring this phenomenon from an academic perspective (e.g., Bogost et al., 2010; Ferrer-Conill et al., 2020; Grace, 2020; Lin & Wu, 2020; Lopezosa et al., 2021).

Newsgames have been linked to political communication since their inception. Gonzalo Frasca coined the term when he released the well-known game *September 12th*, claiming "simulation meets political cartoons" (Treanor & Mateas, 2009). In other words, Frasca implies that newsgames are "the video game equivalent to political cartoons" (Treanor & Mateas, 2009, p. 1). Following Frasca's argumentation about how digital games become playable political cartoons, Treanor and Mateas (2009) explain that they usually use a specific political news event to make a statement about a bigger issue. The authors claim that the primary function of political newsgames is to convey the author's biased, editorial opinion and that they are hardly used to report information or the events of a real story.

The field of political newsgames has experienced significant advancement in recent years, with the ability to

convey increasingly complex and comprehensive political messages. This feature has been highlighted by Sou (2018) and her research on refugee games. The two key traits proposed by Sou can also be applied to other types of political games. Firstly, the technological form of video games enables the representation of sophisticated messages about political, social, economic, and historical factors. Secondly, video games possess a distinctive rhetorical power, as they can effectively communicate complex narratives while remaining accessible and understandable for those without prior knowledge of political issues. These traits demonstrate the growing significance of political newsgames in shaping public understanding of political issues and can be applied to a wider range of political games beyond just those focused on refugees.

Additionally, a recent study by Gómez-García and de la Hera (2022) analyzed 75 newsgames and identified not only opinion-based political newsgames but also informative and interpretative political newsgames, frequently reporting on real political events. Furthermore, previous academic studies that include political newsgames in their samples provide results reporting on newsgames in general instead of insights related to their political content (e.g., García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2020; Wan & Shao, 2019). There is, therefore, room for further interpretative analysis, guided by political communication research, regarding the functions of newsgames as political actors (McNair, 2014). The academic study of political newsgames becomes particularly relevant, especially considering that most newsgames produced by mass media outlets are related to political news topics (Wan & Shao, 2019). In this study, we provide insights into the democratic role of political newsgames published by online mass media outlets in democratic societies.

## 3. Methodology and Sampling

In order to study the role of digital games as political actors in online journalism, this study adopts a qualitative methodology. Since our goal was to explore the emerging data, we have selected constructive grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as the data analysis method. This decision was taken because existing theoretical positions on political newsgames come from studies that approached the analysis of these games from a deductive perspective, in which existing theories from the field of game studies and other fields, such as journalism, were used to analyze political newsgames. In this study, we decided to start from an inductive approach to later move on to an abductive one, allowing us to explore the phenomenon of political newsgames from a ground-up perspective.

### 3.1. Sampling

A total of 29 political newsgames comprise the sample for this study (see the Supplementary Material). The political games that constitute the sample were published on online mass media outlets between 2008 and 2019. The games were published in 25 different media outlets and 11 countries. The selection criteria were as follows: (a) digital games published on mass media outlets' websites; (b) not including advertising messages; (c) published in English, Spanish, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or using no written or oral language (taking into consideration the language proficiency of the researchers); and (d) addressing topics related to democratic polities. The Supplementary Material includes a list of analyzed games, along with their associated metadata, such as the year of publication, the publisher, the game genre, and the topic.

The sampling strategy employed for this study was *comprehensive sampling* (Gray, 2004), meaning that we analyzed every case we could find that met the sampling criteria. The units of analysis were retrieved from the three most complete databases of newsgames available to date: a database of 160 newsgames produced between 2000 and 2018, published by García-Ortega and García-Avilés (2020); the Journalism Games project (https://www.journalismgames.org), developed by Lindsay Grace and Katy Huang; and a database composed of 75 newsgames produced by media outlets between 2000 and 2019, published by Gómez-García and de la Hera (2022). These were complemented with a systematic online Google search. The following keywords and combinations were used: "political newsgame," "political game journalism," "political interactive," "political video game," and "political game," which were combined with boolean operators in the native language of each media outlet.

All games that met the sampling criteria became part of the preliminary sample of this study. This preliminary sample consisted of 93 newsgames from 48 media outlets from 17 countries published between January 2000 and June 2022. The final sample was refined following our decision to only focus on games involving democratic polities (including politics, policies, and politicians). This yielded a final sample of 29 newsgames developed by 25 media outlets from 11 countries.

We acknowledge that the sample of this study is not an exhaustive list of political newsgames developed by mass media outlets. In addition, the list of games examined is constrained by the researchers' language skills. We recognize that this limitation implies that this study only offers a western interpretation of this phenomenon. However, we tried to balance these limitations by broadening the search strategy. Considering that the use of newsgames in political journalism is a sporadic practice, the commitment to include all games that meet the sampling criteria, 29 games in total, supports the *validity* of this study (Silverman, 2011, pp. 219–314).

### 3.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The 29 games of the sample were analyzed between August and November 2022. All were played several

times by the researchers, exploring multiple options (paths) in the game. The gameplay was recorded and screenshots of relevant moments were taken. All recordings and screenshots were stored and analyzed using Atlas.ti, following the grounded theory analytical method, explained in detail below.

We used a constructivist grounded theory approach proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Following this approach, grounded theory focuses on building useful analytical categories from the analysis of data. This means that categories must not be forced on the data; instead, they should emerge from the ongoing data analysis process. This process is divided into three coding stages: open, axial, and selective coding. Any development of categories during the selective coding stage, however, requires the researcher to employ theoretical sensitivity, meaning that the researcher must be open to seeing and reflecting upon empirical data material with the help of theoretical terms. We, therefore, started our analysis without using any theoretical framework for the open and axial coding phases, and we employed *theoretical sensitivity* during the selective sampling stage (utilizing McNair, 2014).

The use of grounded theory began with an initial exploratory phase; the two researchers analyzed the games independently in three stages (open, axial, and selective coding). In the first stage, all types of open codes were used to analyze the sample so as not to limit the analytical approach. When coding, the researchers paid attention to any aspects of the game that were relevant to the research question, including the game genre, the political topic discussed, and the persuasive and communicative strategies used to address the political topic. It was not until the selective coding phase that we attempted to establish connections to the existing literature by employing *theoretical sensitivity*, as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). During this phase, the two researchers, together, analyzed the results of the exploratory phase and compared their views. Considering the inductive nature of the process, the researchers did not expect to find identical codes but either complementary and consistent codes able to enrich the discussion and conclusions of this study and ensure *reliability* (Silverman, 2011). When deciding on the best approach for proposing selective codes, it was concluded that using the analytical lens of political media roles was useful for discussing and interpreting the analysis results. McNair (2014) summarizes the roles of the political media in four statements: *informing* citizens with objectivity and authority (in the form of reportage or analysis); *educating* citizens with commentaries about the meaning of the facts (and developing a subjective point of view about politics); giving *publicity and critical scrutiny* to governmental and political institutions; and, finally, serving democracy as a conduit for the presentation of different political viewpoints and *advocacy*. Once the researchers had a clear idea of how to proceed with the analysis, the sample was analyzed again in an iter-

ative manner; namely, open, axial, and selective codes assigned to the games were revised several times until theoretical saturation was reached.

## 4. Results

The analysis resulted in 13 open codes, five axial codes, and four selective codes (see Tables 1–4). The political issues these games cover and the game genres used are all reflected in the open codes. Five axial codes relating to the five main political themes covered in the games were chosen from these open codes. The four primary selective codes linked to the four political media roles (McNair, 2014) were finally Analytical Reportage, Political Commentary, Critical Scrutiny, and Representation. The axial codes for these four selective codes and pertinent examples from the sample are discussed below.

### 4.1. Analytical Reportage

Political newsgames fulfilling the role of Analytical Reportage not only report on political events but also analyze and interpret them. Through ludic content, these newsgames strive to help citizens understand the intricacies of the political landscape. In democratic societies, the media's role in providing citizens with comprehensive information about the various interpretations and meanings associated with political events is considered crucial for democracy to be meaningful (McNair, 2014).

Eight of the 29 political newsgames analyzed in this study play the role of reporting on events from an analytical perspective. In this case, the games take the form of political *newsgames as interpretative reportage*, a genre "commonly used to cover sensitive or complex topics" (Gómez-García & de la Hera, 2022, p. 9). These games typically employ a linear structure and simple rules to focus on a singular issue in a short period of time. The political newsgames from the sample that fulfill this function cover four different types of political issues: policies on economic affairs (four), policies on data privacy (one), the role of the parliamentary system on democracy (one), and campaigning in political elections (two; see Table 1).

Political newsgames fulfilling the role of Analytical Reportage emphasize fostering players' reflection rather than focusing on strict objectivity. We identified two different approaches when using games to fulfill this role. The choice of game genre plays a crucial role in applying the intended perspective to be fulfilled by the game. In the first approach, political newsgames foster reflection by letting players become aware of their own knowledge on specific political topics. An example of this is the game Could You Be a Speaker? (2019) in which players assess their knowledge of the functioning of the parliamentary system. Game genres that require prior knowledge for optimal performance, such as trivia, are used in this approach.

**Table 1.** Analytical reportage.

| Political topic | | Games | Game genre |
|---|---|---|---|
| Policies | Economic affairs | Objectif Budget (2017) | Role playing, text-based |
| | | ¿Cómo Cambió el Rumbo…? (2017) | Trivia |
| | | You Draw It (2017) | |
| | | The Federator (2013) | Real-time strategy game |
| | Data privacy | Der Metadaensauger (2015) | Action game |
| Democracy | Parliamentary system | Could You Be a Speaker? (2019) | Trivia |
| Elections | Campaigning | The Waffler (2014) | Real-time strategy game |
| | | Campaign Rush (2008) | Real-time strategy game |

The second approach identified within this category is the use of political newsgames to foster reflection through experiencing the consequences of real-time decisions. The games in this group confront the player with a game experience that presents a specific standpoint, including obvious bias. This approach involves real-time strategy games in which players take the role of a politician and need to make decisions in real-time to see the consequences of these decisions later. A notable example of the application of this strategy is The Waffler (2014). In this game, players assume the role of a politician replying to questions about controversial issues. The popularity meter, shown in Figure 1a, changes depending on the public's reaction to the player's answers. Players may also face similar questions while trying to pander to public opinion, and consistency is key to avoid being labeled as a "waffler." At the end of the game (Figure 1b), players can compare their answers to those of the 2014 Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidates and see how they changed their viewpoints to gain support. This approach usually invites players to reflect on the moral and ethical dilemmas that politicians face and the complexity of the decision-making process.

## 4.2. Political Commentary

In this role, political newsgames fulfill the subjective function of providing commentary on key political events, processes, and topics. This role is relevant insofar as performing democracy must be founded on the informed discussions of those participating (McNair, 2014). Political newsgames that fulfill this function are both editorial and educational. In this sense, these games contribute to informed political discussions by presenting facts and data in a way that is accessible to the general public through a cartoonish style, caricatures, and satire similar to traditional political cartoons.

Six of the 29 political newsgames analyzed in this study were identified as Political Commentary. The political newsgames from the sample that fulfill this function cover three different types of political topics: government policies on foreign affairs (one), political public relations (three), and campaigning during political elections (two; see Table 2).

The most prominent feature of games in this category is that they perform Political Commentary from a cynical perspective through visual and written rhetoric in combination with simple game mechanics. The six games
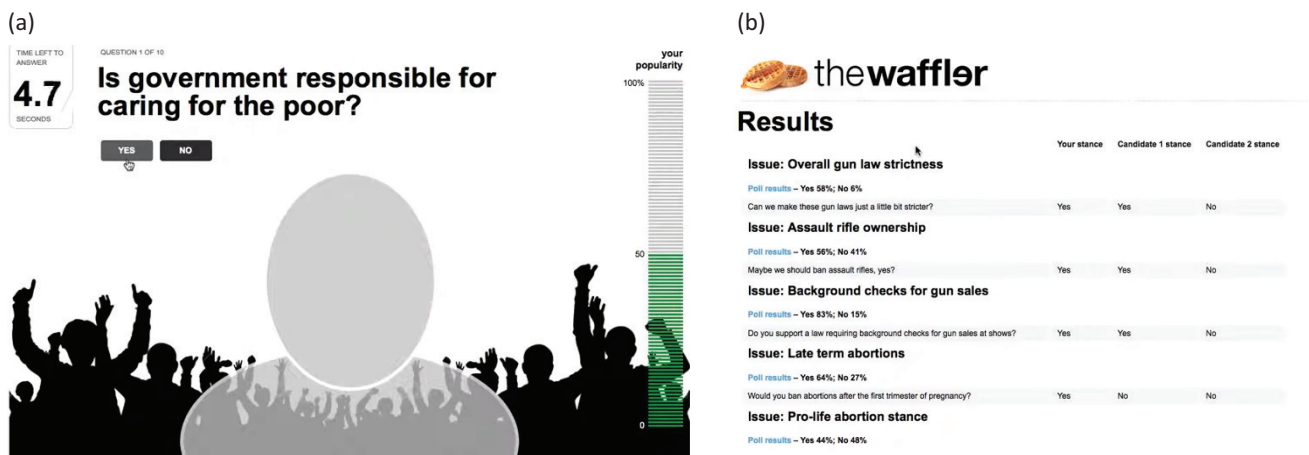


**Figure 1.** Screenshots from The Waffler. Source: The Waffler (2014).

**Table 2.** Commentary.

| Political topic | Games | Game genre |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Policies: Foreign affairs | Brexit Bus (2017) | Real-time strategy game |
| | Retoricum (2016) | Trivia |
| Politicians: Public relations | President Evil (2017) | Real-time strategy game |
| | The Betsy DeVos Board Game (2018) | Board game |
| Elections: Campaigning | Presidential Pong (2008) | Real-time strategy game |
| | Tortura Electoral (2008) | Trivia |

labeled as Political Commentary borrow game mechanics from well-known games such as Pong (1972), framing a political message using visual and written rhetoric, as discussed in the examples below.

Five of the six games in this category contain recognizable portrayals of current politicians. They portray politicians as unreliable, troublesome, incompetent, or pragmatic individuals who adjust to shifting circumstances. This is the case with The Betsy DeVos Board Game (2018), in which the player navigates through a 24-square board game in the style of the classic goose board game. This simple and well-known game mechanic combines written and visual rhetoric to convey a critical editorial viewpoint on Betsy DeVos. On the one hand, the simple game mechanic in which the player is allowed to endlessly roll the dice until reaching the final square emphasizes that a successful political career depends more on perseverance than aptitude. On the other hand, in each square of

the game, written rhetoric is used in instructions given to players to convey a critical editorial viewpoint on DeVos. Each square represents a key issue faced by DeVos during her tenure as US Secretary of Education under President Donald Trump. For example, one of the instructions says: "You call historically black colleges and universities *pioneers* of *school choice*. Public outcry ensues. Move back two spaces" (see Figure 2). Furthermore, drawings of DeVos and the use of the red and blue colors are used to frame and reinforce the political message.

Of note, Brexit Bus differs from the rest of the games in this category as it does not directly depict a politician. Instead, it challenges the player to drive the iconic Brexit Bus along a road represented as a timeline from May 2016 to September 2017. Inspired by the game mechanics of Hill Climb Racing (2012), the goal is to keep the bus running without crashing, symbolizing the challenge and pressure of navigating a complex and unpredictable
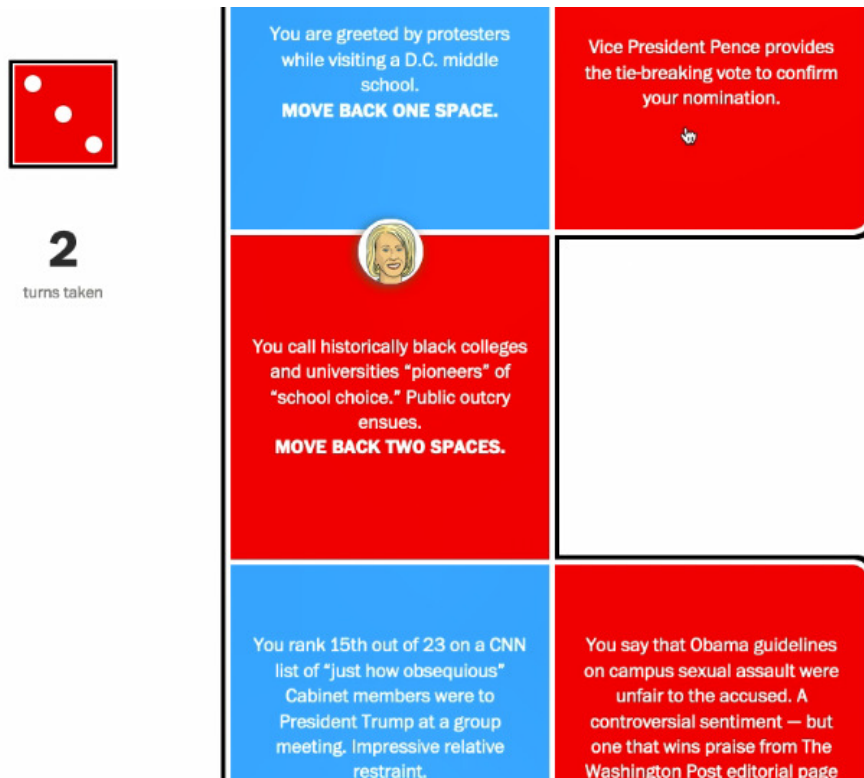


**Figure 2.** Screenshots ftom The Betsy DeVos Board Game. Source: The Betsy DeVos Board Game (2018).

political situation during the Brexit campaign. These game mechanics become particularly meaningful in combination with visual rhetoric. In the game, an analogy is established between the changes in the level of the ground and the changes in the pound–euro exchange rate from May 2016 to September 2017. This is achieved by incorporating a coordinate axis into the visual design that connects the exchange rate with the months of the year (see Figure 3). In this way, the game integrates information into the gameplay and makes it relatable for the player, allowing the kind of thought-provoking experience that Political Commentary games seek.

### 4.3. Critical Scrutiny

In the role of Critical Scrutiny, political newsgames subject political and governmental actions to rigorous examination. Critical Scrutiny of political actions is considered a key role of the media in democratic societies (McNair, 2014). In the games fulfilling this role, the jour-

nalistic point of view is built upon different sources with background information that allow one to present antecedents and reflect on the consequences of the topic addressed for the democratic system. The games usually adopt a political point of view to explain choices the political class make in a pragmatic way to ensure their election. In these games, politicians are portrayed as strategic players who try to maximize their chances in an electoral process.

Seven of the 29 games analyzed were designed for Critical Scrutiny; all use the text-based role-playing genre, employing a narrative approach to emphasize the motives and significance of an issue covered in the game. The political newsgames from the sample that fulfill this function cover six different types of political topics: policies on foreign affairs (one), local policies (one), policies on economic affairs (one), tax evasion (one), influence peddling (two), and the functioning of the electoral system (two; see Table 3). All these games cover political topics that create concern and controversy in
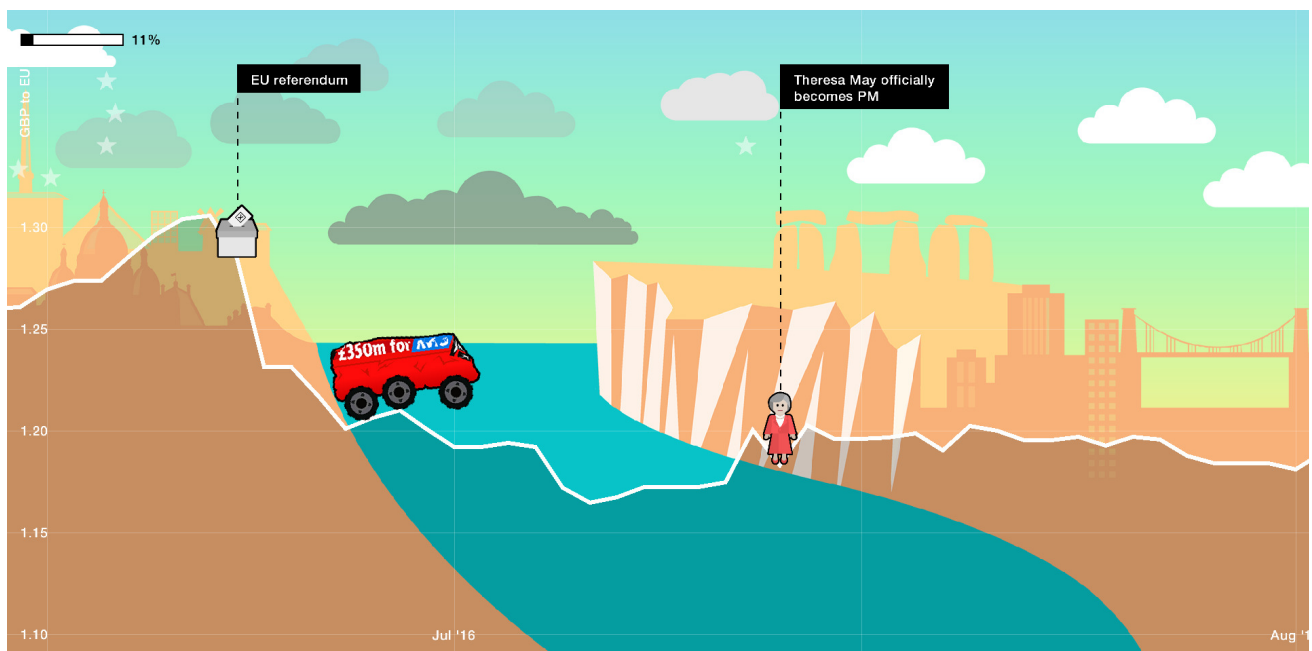


**Figure 3.** Screenshots from Brexit Bus. Source: Brexit Bus (2017).

**Table 3.** Critical scrutiny.

| Political topic | | Games | Game genre |
|---|---|---|---|
| Policies | Local policies | Dans la Peau d'un Bourgmestre (2018) | |
| | Economic affairs | Dodging Trump's Tariffs (2018) | |
| | Foreign affairs | Pick Your Own Brexit (2018) | |
| Political corruption | Tax evasion | Stairway to Tax Heaven (2017) | Role playing—Text-based |
| | Influence peddling | El Bueno, el Malo y el Tesorero (2017) | |
| | | Tallanasty (2013) | |
| Elections: Electoral System | | The Voter Suppression Trail (2016) | |

society. The Critical Scrutiny approach is useful to critically compare different viewpoints related to the topics they cover.

An insightful example of a political newsgame that serves the purpose of Critical Scrutiny is The Voter Suppression Trail (2016), a sharp analysis of the experience of voting from different points of view. In the game, the player can choose between three profiles: a white programmer from California, a Latina nurse from Texas, or a black salesman from Wisconsin, and users experience the different challenges they face while voting. The white programmer votes in less than a minute (Figures 4a and 4c), while the other two profiles face long queues, inclement weather, work and family pressures to leave the queue, malfunctioning machines, and attempts at intimidation by "election observers." In these cases, the character will usually not be able to vote (Figures 4b and 4d), or if the player manages to do so, it will be after several hours and with great frustration (which works as a life meter). The cunning use of different experiences reflects inequalities in the exercise of the democratic right to vote by US citizens. The game's point of view is supported by a proposal to help the user find the best place to vote in the elections at the end of the game.

The game genre selected for the seven political newsgames serving the purpose of Critical Scrutiny is text-based role-playing. This genre allows the design of unique gaming experiences strongly supported by a game narrative used to convey complex messages through the combination of multiple persuasive dimensions, including visual, textual, and procedural persuasion. In this category of political games, players have more agency, being able to explore different gaming paths and experience the consequences of their own decisions.

## 4.4. Representation

Finally, among the 29 analyzed games, eight serve the purpose of Political Representation (McNair, 2014) by showcasing various political perspectives and viewpoints. These games are developed by the media as a means of presenting the different policies of political parties and politicians, sometimes to highlight the differences between them. The eight political newsgames labeled under this category cover the topic of campaigning during elections (see Table 4).

Political newsgames playing a Representation role on the topic of election campaigns distinguish two types of coverage. The first group employs humor and irony to highlight an expressive feature of the election campaign. This group uses the genre of sports games to address the competitive and confrontational nature of election campaigning. This is done by using visual and textual persuasion to frame the political message resulting in a game that equates election campaigning to sporting competitions such as athletics or table tennis. They play a Representation role as usually candidates of different political parties, and some basic information about
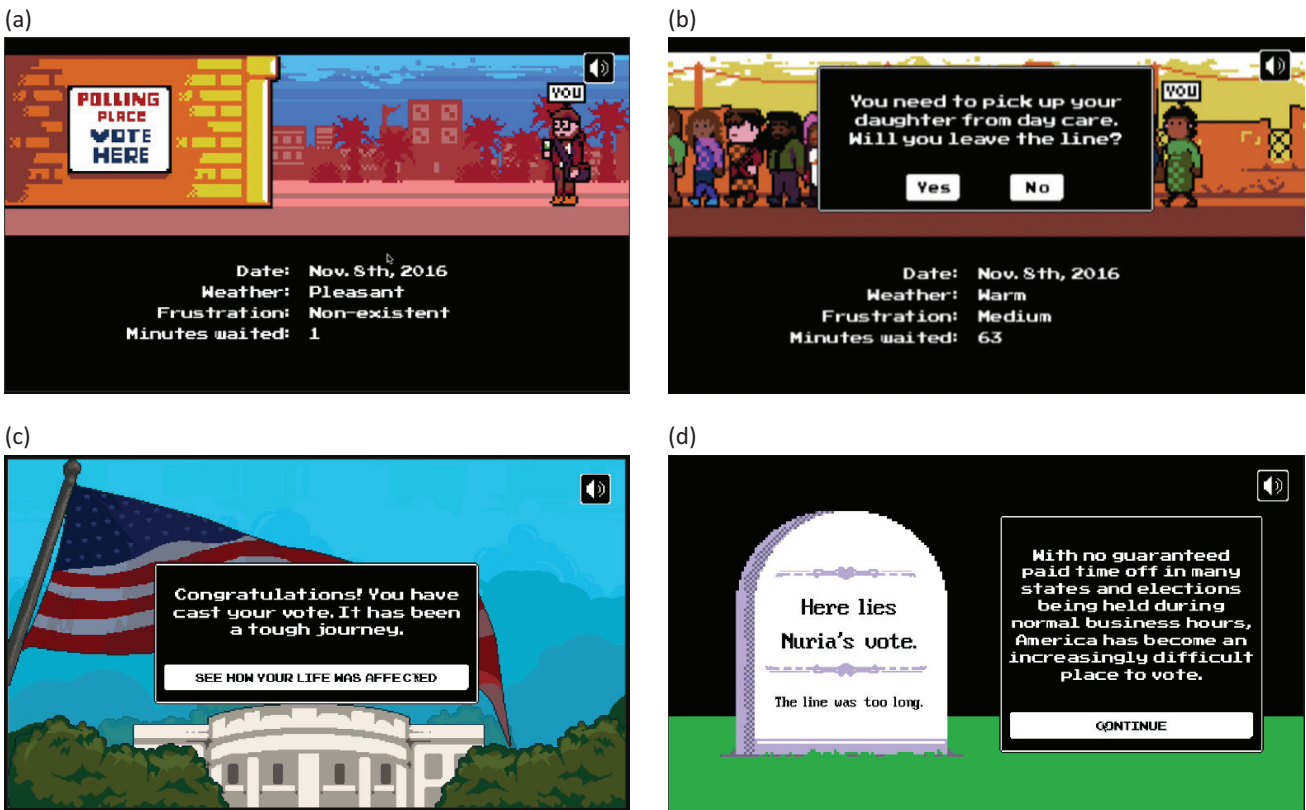
(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

**Figure 4.** Screenshots from The Voter Suppression Trail. Source: The Voter Suppression Trail (2016).

**Table 4.** Representation.

| Political topic | Games | Game genre |
|---|---|---|
| | Predict the President (2016) | |
| | Predict the President 2020 (2020) | |
| | Votematch (2015) | Trivia |
| Elections: Campaigning | Moral Kombat (2012) | |
| | Candidate Match Game II (2012) | |
| | Reto Carondelet (2017) | |
| | Jogo Eleitoral (2018) | Sport games |
| | Corrida Eleitoral (2010) | |

their campaign programs are presented. However, they only present shallow information through cartoon-style images of the politicians and their scramble for votes. In this sense, these games do not attempt to explain complicated political events. Instead, they try to "buy a cheap smile from its player" (Treanor & Mateas, 2009). Nonetheless, from a media perspective, they serve as attention-engagement tools for media, as they provide popular content that increases the time spent on the media site and enhances its content popularity.

An example of this first group of games is Corrida Eleitoral (2010), a game inspired by the popular Nintendo franchise Mario Kart and featuring the nine presidential candidates in the 2010 Brazilian elections (Figure 5). When players choose the candidate they will play with in the game, they receive basic information about the politician (party, wealth, campaign spending, profession, and a brief biography), which can be expanded through links to the media site. According to the game, this is "a crazy race with the presidential candidates of the 2010 elections. The speed of the cars is proportional to the politicians' position in the electoral polls and the campaign money is used to boost their candidate." The game mechanics make it very difficult to win for players unless they choose one of the two main candidates of the elections (Dilma Roussef and José Serra), those with the greatest popular support.

The second group of games under this category involves simulating or predicting upcoming election results, often in the form of trivia or quizzes. The informative dimension of these games covers several topics, from political personalization to mathematical simulations of different election results. Some of these games use basic mechanics to help the reader identify the political party more suitable for them by comparing their personal preferences to the political agendas of different parties (e.g., Reto Carondelet, 2019). In these cases, there is a higher level of interactivity which allows the exploration of different outcomes in the forthcoming electoral process.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the different roles digital games can perform as political actors in digital journalism, guided by the research question "how do online mass media outlets use newsgames to report, interpret, and critically analyze democratic polities?" A constructive grounded theory method has been used to approach the analysis of 29 political newsgames published in 25 different media outlets and a total of 11 countries. This analysis was carried out from a ground-up perspective moving from an inductive to an abductive approach in which the categories emerge from the ongoing data analysis process.

While earlier studies on political newsgames emphasized their editorial role, recent research has broadened the scope of examination to uncover a wider range of



**Figure 5.** Screenshots from Corrida Eleitoral. Source: Corrida Eleitoral (2010).

functions and potentials that political newsgames can fulfill (e.g., García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2020). Despite this growth in understanding, the study of the role of digital games as political actors remained underrepresented. This study contributes to the study of this phenomenon by illustrating how online media outlets use political games to portray the four roles of the media as political actors (as discussed by McNair, 2014). According to our research, mass media outlets use games to fulfill four functions when addressing political topics: Analytical Reportage, Political Commentary, Critical Scrutiny, and Representation. These findings offer a more extensive and ambitious understanding of the role of newsgames as political actors in digital journalism, allowing for systematic identification and categorization of these games. A description and key elements of each category are discussed below (Table 5).

The analysis of the 29 games that constitute the sample for this study did not reveal a dominant category, and the distribution is well balanced, indicating that political newsgames serve different roles of political actors similarly to other media. First, in their role for Analytical Reportage, political newsgames are used not only to report on political events but also to interpret and analyze their complexity to inform and educate players on current political issues. Thus, it is not surprising that these games usually deal with economic or electoral topics that are sometimes difficult to understand for citizens. Numerous studies point to the importance of an informed citizenry in the face of the risks of populism (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). These games seek to convey an explicit message using a narrative supplemented by background and contextual information. This type of political newsgame does not require a complex, lengthy,

**Table 5.** Roles of newsgames as political actors.

| Category | Description | Significative political traits | Significative game traits |
|---|---|---|---|
| Analytical reportage | Newsgames that provide in-depth analysis of political events and issues, aiming to inform and educate players on current political situations. | 1. Claims of objectivity or neutrality (moderate bias); 2. Presentation of facts and data; 3. Complex topic conveyed in a simplified form. | 1. Game genres that require prior knowledge, such as trivia, are used to raise players' awareness about their knowledge of political topics; 2. Real-time strategy games to let players experience the consequences of politician's decisions. |
| Political commentary | Newsgames designed to express opinions and thoughts on current political events and issues, often from an editorial perspective. | 1. Personal and subjective interpretation; 2. Clear bias towards a particular point of view or perspective; 3. Usually satirical or cynical in nature. | 1. Simple and well-known game mechanics combined with written and visual rhetoric to frame the political message. |
| Critical scrutiny | Newsgames that examine the workings of political systems, institutions, and individuals, often with the purpose of exposing corruption, abuse of power, or flaws in the political process. | 1. Investigative journalism approach; 2. Clear tendency to expose shortcomings; 3. Focus on systematic issues and problems. | 1. Text-based role-playing games; 2. Unique gaming experiences strongly supported by a game narrative used to convey complex messages; 3. Combination of multiple persuasive dimensions, including visual, textual, and procedural persuasion. |
| Representation | Newsgames that serve the purpose of political representation by showcasing various political perspectives and viewpoints. They aim to present different political parties and/or politicians, and sometimes highlight the differences between them. | 1. Reflects the heterogeneity of political forces in election campaigns; 2. Goes beyond mere politician promotion to show how systems work; 3. Highlights commonalities and differences among political forces. | 1. Sports games to address the competitive and confrontational nature of election campaigning; 2. Trivia or quizzes to simulate or predict upcoming election results. |

or costly game design, and they are closer to the type of content with which users of these media are familiar. Among the games analyzed fulfilling this role, we found that (a) the use of game genres that require prior knowledge, such as trivia, are used to raise players' awareness about their knowledge of political topics, and (b) the use of real-time strategy games lets players experience the consequences of politician's decisions.

Second, political newsgames are used for Political Commentary when they emphasize the editorial line of the media outlet in which they are embedded. This subjective function appears, in traditional media, in the form of columns, editorials, opinion pieces, or cartoons. In political newsgames, this type of game tries to convey a subjective point of view with casual and basic game mechanics that do not require too much time to master, allowing the player to focus on the political message framed with the use of visual and textual rhetoric. These games include clear bias towards a particular point of view or perspective and are usually satirical or cynical in nature. These games inherit the narrative legacy of early political agenda games such as Dennis Through the Drinking Glass (1985) or Spitting Image (1988).

Third, a relevant part of the results of this study has been the identification of games that question the inconsistencies of the political system or warn of its shortcomings, fulfilling the role of Critical Scrutiny. These games frequently address issues that usually generate "news fatigue," trying to promote interest and engagement among digital media audiences. These games denounce unlawful political activities or social inequalities by critically scrutinizing complex and controversial political topics. The use of the first-person point of view in these games aims to immerse and engage the player in controversial issues such as the Brexit referendum, political corruption, or social inequalities linked to economic or foreign policy. Unique gaming experiences strongly supported by a game narrative in combination with multiple persuasive dimensions (including visual, textual, and procedural persuasion) are used to convey complex messages.

Fourth, the participation of digital games in the media's contribution to the advocacy, representation, and visibility of political plurality in Western democracies is the final role played by games in the sample. All the games in this category reflect the heterogeneity of the political forces in the election campaigns. Some of them go beyond the mere promotion of these candidates or political forces and reflect the functioning of the electoral system and the possibilities of the different candidates winning.

Among these four identified roles, two significant elements are common to all political newsgames of the sample. First is the prevalent use of a pixeled or cartoonish aesthetic with a parodic or humoristic purpose. Other serious games with political overtones, such as migrant games, avoid this aesthetic when the subject matter is deemed too sensitive. So, this choice in the political

newsgames of the sample suggests that this distinctive aesthetic approach of political games is partly due to the fact that the influence of political cartoons is still predominant in this format and, furthermore, the perception that this specific content corresponds to the logic of soft news.

A second aspect, in line with previous findings of García-Ortega and García-Avilés (2020), is that almost all the games in the sample present a viewpoint with different levels of editorial intensity, as in The Voter Suppression Trail, which clearly conveys a grievance regarding the US electoral system. Still, others—which might be perceived as more objective—also contain infotainment features, such as Could You be a Speaker? In this game, humor and cartoon animation suggest a lighthearted approach, often a hallmark of satire. The focus on some eccentric rules and regulations of the British House of Commons also suggests criticism or mockery of the formalities of parliamentary procedure.

This research offers a broader and more ambitious reading of the use of digital games published by media when addressing political issues. The analytical approach proposed in this article encompasses a comprehensive and systematic way of identifying and classifying the roles of digital games as political actors in digital journalism. It is important to note that the identified roles are not mutually exclusive, and games may sometimes fulfill several roles. How these roles are combined in political newsgames could be explored in future research. The results could be further extended with additional games developed by institutions, political parties, collectives, or individuals. Further research should also assess players' perceptions and the effectiveness of political newsgames in fulfilling the functions identified in this article.

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**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

**Supplementary Material**

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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