

New media in political campaign. The case of Madrid regional elections in 2021 on TikTok

Nuevos medios en campaña. El caso de las elecciones autonómicas de Madrid 2021 en TikTok

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Abstract

Due to the television revolution and the arrival of social networks, political communication has undergone a great transformation, both in Spain and in the rest of the world. The use that parties make of their corporative profiles on social networks is increasingly tending towards spectacularization and trivialization of content. TikTok has been the latest platform to burst on the political, media and electoral chessboard. This research explores the role that this social network plays in current political communication, as well as the possibilities it offers for so-called spectacularization and the degree of professionalization with which the different formations work. The publications made by the candidate parties during the campaign and pre-campaign periods of the Madrid 2021 regional elections were taken as sample. This election was the first in which TikTok becomes part of the communication strategies. The content analysis is combined through triangulation with in-depth interviews with the different political groups. The results show an experimental use of TikTok as an electoral tool, a strong commitment to confrontation and trivialization of messages and a better audience response to tendentious and spectacular elements. However, the use of this app remains still unprofessionalized and is not really decisive: what happens on TikTok stays on TikTok.

Keywords

Political communication, TikTok, spectacularization, election campaigns, political parties, social networks, trivialization.

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Resumen

Con la revolución televisiva y la llegada de las redes sociales, la comunicación política ha experimentado una gran transformación, tanto en España como en el resto del mundo. El uso que los partidos hacen de sus perfiles corporativos en redes cada vez tiende más a la espectacularización y a la trivialización de los contenidos. TikTok ha sido la última plataforma en irrumpir en el tablero político, mediático y electoral. Este trabajo explora el papel que TikTok juega en la comunicación política actual, así como las posibilidades que brinda a la llamada espectacularización y el grado de profesionalización con el que trabajan las distintas formaciones. Se toman como muestra las publicaciones realizadas por los partidos candidatos durante los períodos de campaña y precampaña de las elecciones autonómicas de Madrid 2021, que son las primeras en las que TikTok pasa a formar parte de las estrategias comunicativas. El análisis de contenido se combina por medio de la triangulación con entrevistas en profundidad a los distintos grupos políticos. Los resultados evidencian un uso experimental de TikTok como herramienta electoral, una fuerte apuesta por la confrontación y la trivialización de los mensajes y una mejor respuesta del público ante lo tendencioso y espectacular. Sin embargo, su uso sigue siendo poco profesional y tampoco es determinante, es decir, lo que ocurre en TikTok se queda, al menos de momento, en TikTok.

Palabras clave

Comunicación política, TikTok, espectacularización, campaña electoral, partidos políticos, redes sociales, trivialización

Introduction

The research focuses on the campaign analysis of the regional elections of Madrid 2021 in TikTok and is presented as an exploratory approach that seeks to provide the first findings regarding the use of social network by political parties during elections. The work occurs in the era of digital communication in a scenario of hybrid actors and liquid procedures (García-Orosa, 2021). The results of this paper seek to provide information on the changing and complex scenario and sometimes it offers differentiated interpretations of similar phenomena. In the dichotomous perspective of recent decades related to the advantages or risks of technology for democracy, concern for manipulation or liberation of citizenship is now being placed. Concern about the use of technology through the creation of artificial public opinion

is increasing, especially in election campaigns (Frost, 2020) but, at the same time, there is growing doubt about the relevance of phenomena such as digital misinformation (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021).

Technological determinism has marked the evolution of technological innovations in the different actors who promoted their use by the attraction of technology rather than by a rigorous evaluation of its effectiveness (Cheeseman *et al.*, 2018). This research focuses in this context, which seeks to analyze the entry of new technology into election campaigns: TikTok. This is a first approach to a phenomenon that has recently been studied in the field of journalism and communication.

The increased use of TikTok caused changes to the digital communication ecosystem. With a young audience usually under 25 years old (Digital Trends, 2020; Parra, 2020; Beer, 2019; Makarov, 2019), the social network is known not only as a place of entertainment videos but also as an interesting place for organizational communication and influence on the public from different social actors (Zhang, 2020). Institutions, political parties (Medina-Serrano *et al.*, 2020) and companies (Torres-Martín & Villena-Alarcón, 2020) have already taken their first steps.

The dissemination of the spectacular

The consolidation of the Internet as the main gateway to political content has led to a slight evolution in the communicative approaches of parties and leaders. With television, infotainment, first in the United States and then in European (Brants, 1998) and South American countries, has gradually invaded political storylines and speeches. This fusion of genres that Thussu (2007) called politainment aims to trap and sensitize viewers (Carrillo, 2013) and its consequences involve frivolization and superficial treatment of politics (Valdez-López *et al.*, 2020; Berrocal *et al.*, 2012a). The broad response of the public and the immediate dissemination capacity thanks to the social networks (López-Rabadán *et al.*, 2016) have favored their proliferation and roots.

This trend toward spectacularization, personalization and trivialization of political affairs are now on top. The performance, technical and formal features of Twitter (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011), Instagram (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; López-García, 2017) or the newly released TikTok (Medina-Serrano *et al.*, 2020) promote their use. Parties are attacking from their offi-

cial accounts (Lee & Xu, 2018) humor (Berrocal *et al.*, 2012b) simplicity or the presentation of certain aspects of the private life of candidates (Redondo *et al.*, 2020; Berrocal *et al.*, 2015) to try to obtain more visibility in the digital world and, consequently, in the media agenda of traditional media. In addition, more and more voters from their personal accounts nurture, share, and participate in this coverage.

The origins of the spectacularization of political communication go back to the American audiovisual, where it was experimented with the coverage of electoral campaigns, facing candidates in new formats and versions (Miguel-Sáez *et al.*, 2017). Television presented parties and audiences new humorous, debate or entertainment genres that showed a great welcome to show politics in a more trivial and close way. Years later, the Spanish media import the patterns of American political communication (Paniagua, 2004).

There is a growing interest in political communication in digital environments with the advent of the Internet and from 2000 (Filimonov *et al.*, 2016) and its influence is considerable, especially in election campaigns (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013). The phenomenon begins again in the United States, where public party events are broadcast (Paniagua, 2004). Before and after is marked by the 2008 White House presidential election (López-Meri *et al.*, 2017), in which Democratic candidate Barack Obama used social media to successfully mobilize younger voters (Lee & Xu, 2018). Since then, networks have consolidated as strong platforms for the viral distribution of political images and messages (López-Rabadán *et al.*, 2016) and their arrival has provided a springboard for an even more pronounced spectacularization policy event (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2018).

Methodology

In this context, the campaign of the regional elections in Madrid held on May 4, 2021 was analyzed, in which the main political parties used TikTok as part of their communication strategies. The main objective was to know the use of this social network and, above all, to observe trends in the changes that it could cause in political communication in the campaign.

Literature review, content analysis and in-depth interviews with campaign managers were used. The study is carried out by selecting a sample composed of the official TikTok profiles of the five political parties repre-

sented at the Madrid Assembly prior to the last electoral call and the content published by them during the time frame established, which corresponds to the campaign and pre-campaign periods of the regional elections and represents a total of 198 videos analyzed manually and with the involvement of a single researcher.

In particular, TikTok's profiles of: Partido Popular de la Comunidad de Madrid, Más Madrid, Vox España (national account of the party), Unidas Podemos (national account of the party) and Ciudadanos (national account of the party) are analyzed.

As for the time zone, it is important to clarify that, although the last date of the videos to analyze is common to all users and is May 2nd 2021, the last official day of the campaign, the starting point is somewhat volatile between the profiles, since the first publication of each account related to the elections of May 4 has been selected as the initial object. Thus, the initial date ranges between March 14 and 22 in all cases except Vox, whose first video about it is April 13.

This tab includes the main variables used in content analysis:

Identification of the publication	<i>Link</i>	
	<i>Date of publication</i>	
	<i>Pre-campaign/campaign</i>	
	Duration:	
	Text:	
Mentions	Mentions	
Engagement	Coments:	
	Likes:	
	Views:	
	Shares:	
	Engagement achieved (no views):	
Hashtags	<i>Hashtags used</i>	
	Identification of the tag with the highest engagement	<i>Hashtag with the highest engagement</i>
		Number of views:

Formal aspects	Elements used	Stickers/ GIF : <i>Yes/No</i>	
		Emojis: <i>Yes/No</i>	
		Text : <i>Yes/No</i>	
		Survey : <i>Yes/No</i>	
		Transition : <i>Yes/No</i>	
	External editing : <i>Yes/No</i>		
Content adjusted to TikTok format (correct display) : <i>Yes/No</i>			
Audio	Rating : <i>Location/Music/Environment/...</i>		
	Original or reused : <i>Original/reused</i>		
	Videos with the same audio :		
	Videos with the same audio :		
Theme	General theme :		
	Content framed in the 4M campaign: <i>Yes/no</i>		
	Issue frame: Electoral program and purely political issues	<i>Program presentation and general proposals</i>	
		<i>Social policy: equality, housing, immigration...</i>	
		<i>Economy: taxation, public spending, employment...</i>	
		Education	
		Health	
		Democratic regeneration	
		Culture and sport	
		Other campaign issues	
	<i>Game frame: show</i>	Attacks and confrontation	
		Humor	
		Personalization of the candidate	
		Other: challenges, <i>backstage</i> politics, etc.	
Observations:			

The following variables were worked on in-depth interviews: TikTok's practice in the electoral campaign; motivations and objectives of its use; advantages and disadvantages for the production and circulation of political messages; characteristics of the content, narrative and language of the network; user profile; keys to success of messages; impact of their employment on political communication and democracy; role of audiences; role of supporters and affiliates; role of bots.

Results

The results obtained confirm widespread use of TikTok, although with languages, narratives and strategies similar to the previous ones, and therefore without significant changes in communication, as it follows the guidelines in force on other digital platforms. It highlights a predominance of the spectacularization of political content over the exposure of electoral programs. This trend, original from American screens, penetrated other societies in the world, including the Spanish one. TikTok, for its codes, as well as for the youth of its audience, opened a new window to the spectacular themes and treatments of politics.







The arrival of the parties on TikTok

The campaign of the regional elections in Madrid, which took place on May 4, 2021, was the first in which TikTok became part of the communication strategies of the Spanish political parties. Prior to the call for the elections, the training courses in the application was rather low and the electoral background was null and void.

No Spanish political party was registered on TikTok before 2020 (Table 1), when the social network experienced strong growth following the confinement decreed by the authorities to cope with the expansion of the coronavirus. The first group to join was Unidas Podemos, in January 2020. Vox joined in February of that same year and Ciudadanos a month later. In all three cases, these are corporate profiles for their use nationally, but once Madrid elections are called, they address part of their content into that campaign.

Table 1

Dates of registration on TikTok of the political parties under analysis

					
18-3-20	28-10-20	11-12-20	28-1-20	13-2-30	-

Something different happens with Más Madrid and Partido Popular de la Comunidad de Madrid, which joined TikTok in October and December 2020 respectively, but with specific accounts with content similar to the one at the borders of the region. In fact, Más Madrid does not show a dynamic activity in the implementation until the beginning of the electoral pre-campaign. For its part, PSOE still does not use its profile, explained in the interview with the limitations that it would imply to be a government party — national.

In most of the cases analyzed, little professionalization of TikTok's accounts is detected. This is seen in the use of recycled content from other platforms instead of specific pieces of the application, in the codes, times and languages used, or in the little adaptation of the videos to TikTok's visual logic. However, Vox and Más Madrid have best managed to adapt and work their messages, with 100% and 90% of their content adjusted to the display format and the requirements of TikTok respectively. Partido Popular de la Comunidad de Madrid stands at 10.8 %, presenting the vast majority of its publications horizontally and with a smaller edition, internal or external, than its opponents.

Planning for the 4M campaign

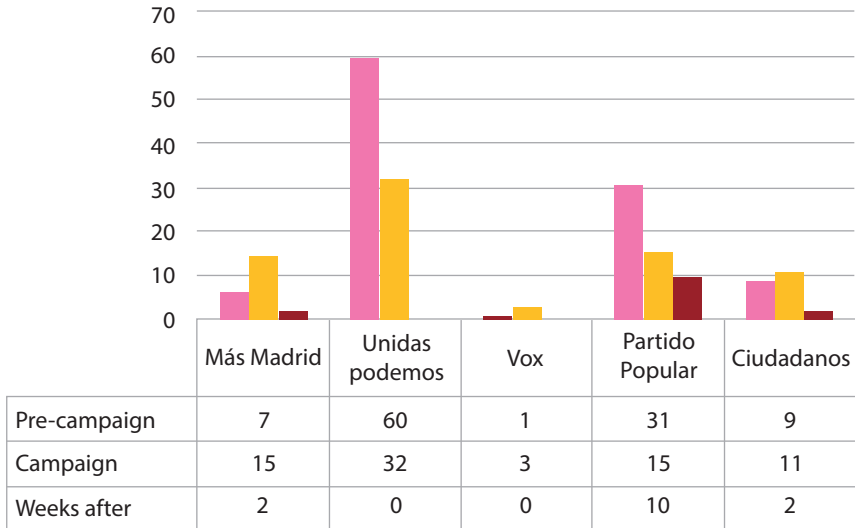
Despite TikTok's recent addition to political and electoral communication strategies, parties agree that it is a tool that has come to stay. However, teams have worked practically from zero on this platform in this research, both in the planning and design of the messages.

All the political parties included in the sample mentioned in the interviews that had planned this campaign on TikTok on an experimental basis and without considering the decisive or conclusive application for the results of elections.

The audience they intend to reach, in the words of their networking and communication teams, is young—over 18. The idea of Más Madrid, for example, was to connect with new audiences who are not present on other networks and create a space that would not have the bubble effect like Twitter or Instagram, where only the users who follow others can be reached. The same is true with Partido Popular, whose aim is to reach young people from 18 to 23 who do not use media or other social networks.

Figure 1

Representation of the evolution of videos published by each of the parties during the two periods analyzed, including the week after elections



During the campaign and pre-campaign periods, the publication rhythms that the parties maintain are very diverse (Figure 1). Más Madrid was more constant during the two weeks before the elections, uploading new content almost daily, but without saturating the viewers. It can be observed an excess of publications, accumulating up to four or five videos per day. The other side of the coin is Vox, which only published four pieces during the

two times analyzed. Partido Popular, which won, is the one that publishes the most videos once the elections are over.

Do parties interact with TikTok users?

The degree of interaction between political parties and their followers and other TikTok users is virtually null compared to that seen on other social networks such as Twitter or Instagram.

Unidas Podemos shows a survey in one of its 92 posts and three responses to user feedback in three other videos. The remaining profiles do not identify any movement in these terms. Other interactions are limited to some mention of other users — usually party members or Ciudadanos show no interactions in the two periods analyzed.

Using hashtags and stickers in campaign

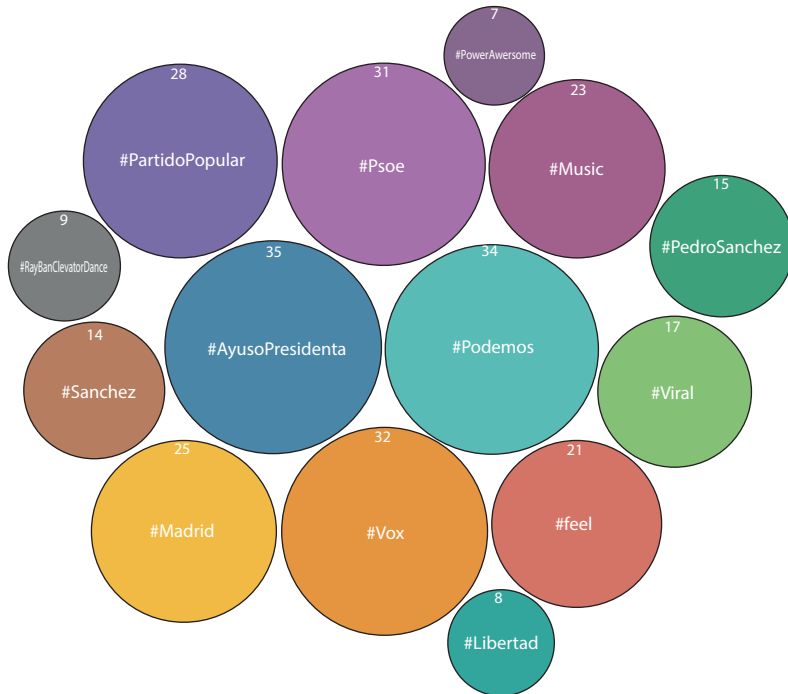
In terms of the inclusion of hashtags and tags in the publications observed, the strong commitment of all parties to their use must be emphasized. However, the way these tools are used differs from one political party to another.

Vox is party that best positions its own hashtags, i.e., those referring to its candidates, members or campaign slogans, integrating at least one of them in each of its four publications. The most widely used is #vox, which accumulated over 534 million views on TikTok during the campaign. In addition, its campaign slogan #ProtegeMadrid is featured in two of the four pieces released by the official account of the green formation, being the second label most used. The only one of their hashtags that refers to another candidate, issue or political party is #

Unidas Podemos and the Partido Popular of the Community of Madrid are the accounts that use the most labels in the descriptions of their videos. In fact, all content published by PP has several hashtags and ten of them do not even use text, i.e., limit their description to tags. However, the strategy adopted by each of these two parties is quite different. Unidas Podemos focuses its references on its own slogans and political leaders, as well as on the Madrid region or on the political adversary Vox.

Figure 2

Most used hashtags by the Partido Popular de Madrid during the campaign and pre-campaign periods studied



For its part, Partido Popular very often uses hashtags completely out of the electoral date and the political world itself, as we often encounter labels with commercial challenges, trends or viral terms, such as #RayBanElevatorDance, #music or #PowerAwesome, in order to gain views (Figure 2). Reference to #podemos, #vox or the President of the Government, Pedro Sánchez, are also common, appearing even without having any link with the pods.

Ciudadanos is the political group that used the least labels during the election campaign and Más Madrid the one that best combines the use of hashtags and text in the descriptions of their videos, since it always uses both tools and does so without abusing of them, as if occurs in any of the above cases.

As for the stickers, this is a phenomenon for which only Partido Popular is giving its whole, since Unidas Podemos and Ciudadanos hardly employ them and neither Vox nor Más Madrid use any element in all its publications relating to the campaign. As they are corporate accounts, it is believed that the image to be transmitted, closer to a serious and institutional profile, would try to avoid the use of these fun and entertaining elements. Conservative parties use lots of stickers in its profile, present in 82.6% of the videos included in this call for elections.

The militants, creators of content for parties?

The analysis shows that political parties and their communication and networking teams are mostly the main creators of their own content for TikTok. The teams work with their own content, whether developed exclusively for this platform or directly dumped from other networks.

It should be noted that all parties, except Vox, often use their candidates or public representatives in the content creation process. Thus, it is normal to see in the account of Partido Popular pieces starring its leader Isabel Díaz Ayuso, or videos in the profile of Más Madrid focused on the figure of her candidate Mónica García. However, Unidos Podemos is the only team that has several videos produced, directly or indirectly, by militants or other users. Out of the 92 publications of the party during the pre-campaign and campaign weeks, 17 have been created explicitly and exclusively for TikTok by the user and militant @carlagaleote, representing 18.47%. The content is uploaded directly from Unidas Podemos account, a task that was not only carried out during Madrid elections, but was already part of the communication strategy.

The dominance of the spectacular

Both parties and users use TikTok to content that tends to spectacularization or trivialization of today's topics, over those that are purely political or based on elections. In fact, it is striking that Partido Popular only refers to proposals from its electoral program in one of its 45 publications, even though all of them are broadcast in the middle of the campaign.






All parties from the sample bet on more than 50% of trivial, simplistic or spectacular content (Table 2). The most publications in this subdivision

are Vox, since spectacularization covers 100% of its contents. 90% of the videos uploaded by Ciudadanos are also considered trivial, a place completed by Partido Popular with 84.4%. The left-wing parties are the ones which use spectacularization less daring, but they also define more than half of the campaign content in both cases.

Regarding spectacularization, what seems to interest the parties is confrontation with political opponents, accounting for most of the videos in four of the five cases. Partido Popular resorts to attacks in 76.3% of its publications with spectacular content and almost always directs them to the left party, especially the central government (PSOE) and the candidate of Unidas Podemos, Pablo Iglesias. The second position is occupied by Vox (75 %), which also seeks to clash with the purple party. It is precisely Unidas Podemos which completes this ranking with 64% of its trivial pieces framed in this subdivision. In the latter case, the disputes are directed mainly toward the popular leader, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, and to the political group Vox and its representatives.

Table 2

Videos with a tendency to spectacularization published by the parties on TikTok during the campaign and pre-campaign periods of Madrid elections

Thematic \ Parties					
Attacks and Confrontation	8	6	29	32	3
Candidate Personalization	4	8	6	12	1
Humor	2	0	1	1	0
<i>Backstage</i> Policy	2	1	2	0	0
Retos y <i>challenges</i>	2	0	0	1	0
Challenges	0	1	0	4	0
Celebrity Appearance	18	16	38	50	4
Total videos published	20	22	45	92	4
Percentage of spectacularization	90%	72,7%	84,4%	54,3%	100%

For its part, Más Madrid is once again the exception and focuses its trivial contents on the personalization (50%) of its candidate Mónica García, and her role as health professional during the hardest months of the pandemic. However, confrontation and differences (37.5%) also have a gap on their TikTok profile, being the second category with the largest number of publications.

Also, what the public seems to like most is confrontation, either in *zasca* format—cut or sharp response—or humorous, because it is placed as the category with the best percentages of performance in the five cases analyzed. The most visited videos and with more engagement¹ achieved by Vox, Partido Popular, Ciudadanos, Más Madrid and Unidad Podemos are included in the category of “Attacks and Confrontation”.

Más Madrid, which was the group with the greatest growth of followers during the campaign, is also the party with the best results in the impact achieved, presenting a percentage of 349.1% in its publication with the greatest reach. It has three other publications with values higher than 200%, all under the matching and personalization aspects.

Challenges raised by the different parties are also remarkable. Thus, challenges reported by Ciudadanos not only fail to be replicated, but do not exceed 2.5% and 1.6% of engagement respectively. The same is true of the backstage policy — teaching the part of the policy that is not often seen — which, despite being a promising aspect and perfectly suited to TikTok codes, as the people responsible for networks and communication of the teams mentioned, it has not just taken off any of the three assumptions that resort to it — Partido Popular, Ciudadanos and Más Madrid. Nor do the videos created and generated exclusively for TikTok by Carla Galeote, a militant of Unidas Podemos, yielded good results: of the 17 pieces, only two exceeded 1% of engagement achieved. This could be due to the oversaturation of publications or to their extended duration—in no case they are less than 50 seconds, when the maximum allowed by the platform at that time was 59 seconds by content.

When they do not go the trivial trend, parties also have different attitudes: Unidas Podemos and Partido Popular are more inclined toward social policy issues, hovering around 40% in both cases of the total of videos

1 Engagement is calculated based on *likes*, comments and shares of each videos, divided in the number of followers of the account and multiplied by 100.

lacking any spectacular content. While Más Madrid is mainly decanted by the presentation of its program and its government proposals, they make up 50% of these cases.

What happens in TikTok, stays on TikTok

This research dismantles the idea that political parties can use TikTok as a key to media agendas, at least for now, as happens to other social networks like Twitter or Instagram. The recent incorporation of this application into election campaigns, as well as the transience of its contents and the lack of relevant issues, make it difficult to introduce it directly into the media and news, at least without any other external impetus, as viral as it may be. This creates a public sphere distanced from the media system, something that the teams could take advantage of in the future to launch more direct and spectacular messages.

Discussion and conclusions

The results show an experimental and not too innovative use of TikTok in the political aspect, as well as a clear predominance of the spectacularization in the content presented by parties in their official profiles in the middle of the electoral campaign. Thus, personalization of candidates, humor, challenges or presentation of political aspects never presented before fit the rhythm and characteristic of the network, where confrontation and attacks between one and the other ideological forces fit perfectly, as showed in this study. TikTok is presented as a new digital alternative to show spectacular political content and speeches, also at the time of elections, a practice that has already being developed in other media lately.

The first of the conclusions calls for a fairly widespread use of TikTok by the political parties in the campaign for regional elections of Madrid 2021, the first in which the platform is part of the communicative plans of parties. Of the six candidate groups, only the PSOE has left TikTok on the sidelines of its electoral strategy, claiming the limitation of being a government party to delay its use on this social network as much as possible. This is due to a matter of image, since the party considers that it is a network that could take away seriousness and formality from its proposal.

It also certifies the low degree of professionalization that exists in most of the TikTok accounts included in this sample. The arrival of the parties into the application has been very recent, none of them registered before 2020. All the groups surveyed acknowledged having proposed the campaign of the Madrid elections in an experimental way and without putting any expectations on it as regards the decision to vote. The definition of its target audience is also unanimous: young people and people of voting age. However, the professionalization level of the profiles of Vox and Más Madrid, which are the parties experiencing the greatest growth of followers during the official campaign period, are above that of their opponents. Both have most of their content adapted to the display format and the requirements of TikTok. Moreover, regarding Más Madrid, the publication rates during the weeks before the elections are very constant and do not imply oversaturation.

The second conclusion, related to the previous ones, shows that the interaction degree of political parties with their followers is practically non-existent, even during the electoral period, especially when compared to other social networks such as Twitter or Instagram. Only Unidas Podemos present some interaction in some of its publications, but also non-significant.

The third conclusion reveals the strong commitment of Partido Popular de Madrid to the use of stickers — in 82.6 % of its videos — and hashtags, with the aim of obtaining a greater scope and number of visits in the application. Conservative party often uses viral challenge tags or commercial campaigns, totally align the campaign itself and the political reality, to gain visits and impact. Abusive use of hashtags is also common in Unidas Podemos, but in this case they are not used in a decontextualized way. The parties that used the hashtags the best are Vox and Más Madrid, since they prioritized those terms that refer to their own candidates, parties or campaign slogans.

The fourth and final conclusions show that both TikTok's parties and consumers prefer content with spectacular and trivial ideas, far exceeding the data obtained for all the electoral programs or the political reality. Spectacularization predominates in the communication of the five political parties sampled. All of them bet, with more than 50%, on videos and messages with a simplistic, theatrical or spectacular character. However, right parties prefer this type of format, since they account for 100% of the total publications in the case of Vox. 90 % for Ciudadanos and 84.4 % for Partido Popular de Madrid. In a lesser extent, left parties also prefer this type of format.

Confrontation with political opponents is what citizens like most, and it is what best works for the accounts of the five parties analyzed. Attacks and clashes predominate in the profiles of Partido Popular (76.3%), Vox (75%), Unidos Podemos (64%) and Ciudadanos (44.44%), in the total of their publications classified as spectacular. While left-wing groups focus their disputes on Isabel Díaz Ayuso, candidate of Partido Popular, or Vox, right-wing forces focus primarily on the image of Pablo Iglesias, a candidate of Unidas Podemos. The response of TikTok users is also unanimous, as confrontation is the most important impact in the five cases studied. Even Más Madrid, whose strategy is based on the personalization of its leader, Mónica García, presents a better performance in those videos that contain cuts, polemics or ideological contentions.

Nevertheless, the video sample available in some of the cases has been quite small—specifically Vox, Más Madrid and Ciudadanos and previous research was almost non-existent, hence it is advisable to be cautious with the percentages obtained on spectacularization and not to generalize the results. The most representative results were achieved by Unidas Podemos and Partido Popular, whose samples are considerably higher. It would be interesting to continue working along these lines, to confirm with future research the trivial trends that political communication can adopt on TikTok, as well as the real influence that this social network can have on citizens and their votes in future electoral processes.

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