

López Obrador's political communication and leadership with his followers through Twitter on COVID-19

*Comunicación y liderazgo político de López Obrador
con sus seguidores a través de Twitter durante el COVID-19*

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Abstract

Leadership and political communication in moments of crisis require an efficient strategy that guides the citizens on how to act correctly. Nowadays, most leaders use digital social networks as political instruments. President López Obrador is one of the politicians with the most followers (almost nine million) on the digital social network Twitter. The sanitary crisis due to COVID-19 keeps having repercussions, reason for which the communication of the Mexican president was studied. The aim of this paper is to analyze the leadership and political communication in the Mexican president's tweets in 2020, in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The communication constructs of communication, populism, charisma, and strategic behavior were used to determine his political communication and leadership style. 631 tweets were analyzed by way of a qualitative methodology and a content analysis out of which 104 were about COVID-19. The results show that president López Obrador mainly uses an informative-communication style about his management with populist features. The paper concluded that the Mexican president did not use Twitter as an informative strategy for the health emergency which is the opposite of effective leadership and political communication during the crisis, either as a correct political instrument. In addition, adapting his style to the circumstances is recommended.

Keywords

Leadership, communication, COVID-19, pandemic, Twitter, president, AMLO, Mexico.

Resumen

El liderazgo y comunicación política en tiempos de crisis requieren de una eficiente estrategia que guíe a los ciudadanos sobre cómo actuar. Actualmente, los líderes utilizan las redes sociales digitales como instrumentos políticos. El presidente López Obrador es uno de los políticos con mayor número de seguidores (casi nueve millones) en Twitter. La crisis sanitaria por COVID-19 sigue generando graves repercusiones por lo que se analizó cómo se comunicó el presidente mexicano durante esta etapa. El objetivo de la investigación fue analizar el liderazgo y comunicación política en sus tuits 2020. Se utilizaron los constructos de comunicación, populismo, carisma y comportamiento estratégico para determinar su estilo. Se analizaron 631 tuits mediante una metodología cualitativa y de análisis de contenido, de los cuales 104 estaban relacionados con el COVID-19. Los resultados muestran que López Obrador tiene principalmente un estilo de comunicación informativo sobre su gestión con características populistas y carismáticas y finalmente poco orientado al comportamiento estratégico. Se concluye que el presidente mexicano no empleó Twitter como estrategia informativa sobre la contingencia sanitaria, lo cual es contrario a un liderazgo y comunicación política eficiente durante una crisis, ni tampoco como instrumento político. Se recomienda adecuar su estilo según las circunstancias.

Palabras clave

Liderazgo, comunicación, COVID-19, pandemia, Twitter, presidente, AMLO, México.

Introduction

In 2020, the world lived one of its greatest challenges, the impact of the crisis was so significant that it caused a change in the European Union poli-

cy, generating a more positive integration and dynamics among its members (Schmidt, 2020). The pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus spread rapidly, generating a very serious health crisis due to the number of cases of COVID-19 disease. Governments were forced to create strategies to manage the disease due to the consequences in the health, economic and social aspects. This research aims to analyze the leadership and communication of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in this situation.

The pandemic required full commitment and leadership to care for public health. From the beginning, experts established that management required the following strategies: containment and testing for SARS-CoV-2 virus on a large scale and improvement of the public health system (Guest *et al.*, 2020).

At the beginning of the health contingency, the Mexican government promoted the Ministry of Health's program "Jornada Nacional de Sana Distancia" from May 23-30, 2020 as part of the strategies to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. This program included the promotion of basic prevention measures, temporary suspension of non-essential activities and rescheduling of mass events, and protection of older adults (Secretaría de Salud, 2022). In this sense, the healthy distance was a flexible and voluntary policy of confinement and short duration (Secretaría de Salud, 2020). According to figures from the World Health Organization, Mexico was in sixteenth place in terms of infections with 5.9 million and fifth place in terms of deaths with 326 000, only behind the United States, India, Brazil and Russia, as of June 30, 2022. Regarding the number of official deaths, the figure seems low, as the government of Mexico published an excess of 667 240 deaths until June 28, 2022 (Government of Mexico, 2022). As a result of these data, Mexico ranked fifth in terms of deaths and twenty-first in terms of infections (World Health Organization, 2022).

In this context, President López Obrador's managed the health contingency, and despite the alarming figures, he dismissed its impact and underestimated its scientific aspects, using political interests in defense of the government's image and legitimization before the priority of preserving the health of citizens (Esteinou Madrid, 2020). Currently, leadership and politics are based on various sources of communication with citizens, digital social networks are one of the strategies most used by leaders (González-List, 2022) and are considered political instruments. Globally, the management of leaders' communications during the pandemic has been studied, and Mexico should not be the exception. In this sense, it is worth noting that

AMLO has a strong profile in digital social networks (Manfredi-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021), opening an important line of research.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate the leadership and communication style of the president of Mexico in the management of the pandemic, responding to the following question: what was the communication and leadership style of the president during the COVID-19 health contingency during the year 2020? The study aimed to analyze the leadership and communication through the discursive components of the president's Twitter account @lopezobrador_ regarding the COVID-19 health contingency during 2020 according to political constructs to determine his style.

Throughout his political career, President López Obrador has exercised his leadership and communication strategy on the social network Twitter, in his account @lopezobrador_ which currently has 8,838,565 followers. He is one of the presidents with the largest number of followers and it is important to determine what effects he generated during his administration before the pandemic. This research identified his behavior, political traits, actions, style and configuration as a political leader and discursive components in this social network before the health crisis in Mexico. For this purpose, the content of President AMLO's tweets during 2020 (a total of 631) was analyzed. In this sense, the idea is to study the political communication of López Obrador; Peytibi (2020) mentioned that politicians must have an efficient communication in times of crisis to contribute to a better management of the situation. In addition, the leader must act to face crises adequately (Hahn Utrero, 2020).

This study was based on the leadership, communication and use of Twitter by President López Obrador based on the variables communication, populism, charisma and strategic behavior. Although it has been said that Twitter does not favor the publication of policy proposals or the inclusion of citizens and that it is a unilateral communication, it is also a political tool so the publications made by leaders should be analyzed (Ortiz and Espejel, 2021).

Theoretical framework

Political leadership

As mentioned in the previous section, digital social networks are used by political leaders as a political tool and to communicate with citizens. In this

sense, it is important to define political leadership: “leading a society along a course, which results in higher levels of well-being, being a positive change, while respecting the framework of democracy” (Méndez, 2013, p. 25). Leading a society implies facing the challenges, as well as knowing the needs of citizens, but also the way they communicate their government policies and strategies. For this reason, political leadership cannot be understood without a communication style. In this sense, the leader depends on his/her personal attributes, language and the impact of his/her communication and the influence of his/her behavior in a political context (Hermann and Milburn, 1977). In other words, the language or the ways a leader uses to communicate can influence his or her performance. This performance of the leader is consolidated as a function of the environment through strategic actions, contributions to the welfare and achievements of the citizenry (Méndez, 2018). For this reason, it is said that the influence and power that a politician can have on another, in this case, the voters are essential to their performance (Meza, 2017, p. 102) and communication can be one of the strategies for that purpose. However, influence can change depending on the context (Rivas Otero, 2018).

Social networks and political leaders

The study of social networks and how politicians use them to communicate and influence their followers and citizens is not new. For example, in the 2017 federal election campaign in Germany, the positive or negative reactions of Facebook users on populist messages used as a communication strategy to increase the interaction and influence of their messages were studied, finding that populism generates negative reactions and vice versa (Jost *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, it is argued that social networks are an instrument and political leaders use them as a means of communication for their messages and to inform about their management; in addition, politicians use hybrid environments to communicate with citizens (Grassetti, 2020). Olmedo Neri (2021) says social networks such as Facebook or Twitter are ideal for the dissemination of information due to their timeless and virtual capacity in times of crisis. Hybrid environments combine different types of communication channels, face-to-face, virtual, combined, or other.

For this reason, world leaders pay increasing attention to their social networks. In relation to this, Twitter has established as the information and communication network and political leaders know about its impact. Table 1

shows the number of followers that the current heads of state of the G7 countries have on their Twitter accounts, as well as President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, who is known by his management of social networks; these heads of state have a lot of followers, as well as President Lopez Obrador. This audience is a fertile and attractive field to be used as political tools by political leaders. It can be seen in Table 1 that President López Obrador has almost nine million more followers than most of the G7 heads of state, except President Joe Biden (just over 23 million). This illustrates the impact and influence that AMLO can have by using Twitter as a political communication strategy.

Table 1

Followers of the G7 Heads of State and Andrés Manuel López Obrador

Name	Account	Number of followers (millions)
Joe Biden	@POTUS	23.4
Andrés Manuel López Obrador	@lopezobrador_	8.9
Emmanuel Macron	@EmmanuelMacron	8.4
Justin Trudeau	@JustinTrudeau	6.1
Boris Johnson	@BorisJohnson	4.5
Nayib Bukele	@nayibbukele	4
Shinzo Abe	@AbeShinzo	2.3
Giuseppe Conte	@GiuseppeConteIT	1.1
Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz	@Bundeskanzler	0.5

Twitter and political leadership

As already mentioned, political activity has moved to social networks, especially Twitter, which is said to have created a “space for constant and always open political discussion that did not exist” (González-List, 2022, p. 47). To this effect, the study of politics on Twitter is quite broad in the literature with diverse perspectives. González-List (2022) provided an extensive classification: public sphere (campaigns, communication, perverse use and citizenship), effects on political participation (analysis, state, women and youth, cultures and others), activism, protests and mobilizations and re-

relationship with journalists and communication (social networks, scanning and contrary content) (González-List, 2022, p. 51). While Jungherr (2016) divided Twitter research on politics into three main aspects: the types of parties and candidates, how the network is used and the measurement of its impact. This study seeks to analyze the effects of political participation, how the president uses the social network and to measure the impact of President López Obrador's communication style on Twitter.

Political leaders build their images on Twitter, mobilize audiences through the digital social network and personalize their political role (Polaino *et al.*, 2020). In fact, digital democracies are a reality, so digital social networks are used as political instruments; hence, the importance of studying the messages that politicians post on them. Through 208 characters on Twitter, videos or images that can be attached, political leaders transmit their speeches to their audience and influence their followers in a digital way that would be difficult to achieve in person. For example, the president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele uses the social network Twitter as a very careful and developed communication strategy to be in touch with his citizens and opponents (Mila-Maldonado *et al.*, 2022). However, this way of interacting with citizens in Mexico has been relatively little studied, and the effects of Twitter communications of Mexican political leaders on the electorate and citizens have not yet been studied.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the interaction of political leaders and digital social networks, and Twitter was not the exception. Although it is a growing field, there are studies on how this social network was used by politicians to communicate the effects and management of the health contingency. For example, Rufai and Bunce (2020) analyzed how the G7 heads of state used Twitter to communicate about the progress of the pandemic, finding that most of the messages were informative with a percentage of links to information pages. Thus, Twitter was a strategy used by these leaders to communicate the management of the contingency to their citizens, except Merkel who did not use it because she does not have a social network, but her spokesman Steffen Seibert does have an active account with one million followers and was the one who informed German citizens (Carbajosa, 2021).

Regarding President AMLO and his communication of the pandemic on Twitter, Manfredi-Sánchez *et al.* (2021) compared the tweets of four presidents, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Pedro Sánchez of Spain, Alberto Fernández of Argentina and López Obrador during the first months of the pandemic. The results showed that the Mexican and Brazilian presidents displayed a

more populist profile. In addition, both paid little attention to public health policy, while the Spanish and Argentinean presidents established a communication strategy for health management through this digital social network. However, their study was limited to a very brief part of the pandemic and did not consider other variables.

Ortiz Espinoza and Espejel Trujillo (2021) analyzed on Twitter the communication strategies of the four presidential candidates in the 2018 campaign, including AMLO, finding that it is a one-sided information channel and that it generates sentimental interaction in followers, data that could be used as political tools. Regarding López Obrador, it was found that he was the only candidate who did not attack his opponents and neither did he use it to inform about his public policy proposals, only about his campaign events, without a clear communication strategy.

Communication

Twitter is a communication strategy and political tool of political leadership, so it is important to mention what the literature has found on this topic. This type of communication has even been classified as “pop politics” which is based on personalization and spectacle, whose purpose is to build a celebrity politician with social networks as a strategy (Manfredi *et al.*, 2021). In this research, communication is understood as: “influence on the opinions or behaviors of the public and powerful tool to communicate with citizens during public health crises” (Rufai and Bunce, 2020, p. 12).

In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the use of social networks such as Twitter by world leaders, and it has been detected that citizens reached out to obtain information about the health crisis (Haman, 2020). For this reason, the rhetoric of leaders, their styles, objectives and types of communication in such social network have already been analyzed. On the contrary, the large amount of information that has been generated during the COVID-19 pandemic, both true and false, has been defined as “infomedia” and it has been stated that it has been difficult for citizens to access valid sources of news and where Twitter is a vital means of communication (Pont-Sorribes, 2020, p. 98).

Hence, the need for an adequate and efficient communication strategy on the part of governments and heads of state. In fact, it has been argued that the political discourse has changed due to the pandemic and generated the need to reduce fake news in social networks (Beller Taboada, 2021). Simi-

larly, Homedes and Plaja (2020) stated that communication during the pandemic should not only be through social networks, but also through direct communication with citizens, requiring rapid and constant learning for efficient management, and should also be adapted according to the constantly changing conditions. In addition, Peytibi (2020) established the ideal strategy that political leaders should have in times of crisis: security, solutions, tranquility, speed, trust, constancy, truthfulness, daily appearance, having a good spokesperson, continuous improvement, generating different types of digital content, creating efficient stories, fostering memorable perceptions, and creating progress.

Regarding Twitter, Rufai and Bunce (2020) analyzed how the G7 heads of state, the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission communicated on this social network during the first part of the pandemic. They used three categories to analyze the communication strategy: informational, moral momentum and political (Rufai and Bunce, 2020). That study concluded that world leaders used their tweets as a form of communication and response to the pandemic. While for Hahn Utrero (2020), communication begins with acceptance, especially in the case of COVID-19, the recognition of the crisis by the leader is essential to take the necessary actions to address it. In addition, the discourse used must have four characteristics to be effective: honesty, coherence, control and emotionality.

Likewise, Montiel *et al.* (2021) studied the styles, rhetoric, leadership, and communication strategies of the heads of state of 26 countries (they did not include Mexico) during the first six months of 2020 on government websites. The study found five constructs in the discourses: global unity, common cooperation, national fervor, systematic intervention, and governmental response. As a conclusion of the study, a predominance of a populist discourse was found over Cosmopolitan. In addition, these authors classified the countries according to rhetoric: populism (United Kingdom, United States and Brazil), responsible democracies (Denmark and Canada), universal collaborators (Taiwan and Norway) and institutional implementers (Russia, Spain, and Italy).

This study includes the dimensions of informative, moral impulse, political, global unity and common cooperation for the analysis of communication. The category of moral impulse is based on the search for promotion, and reactivation of morality, while the informative aspect refers to sharing news or updates on government management, including health contingen-

cy, while the political theme investigates the approach of a governmental or statesmanship debate (Rufai and Bunce, 2020).

As for the general union, it aims to exhort and support group unity, invoking values of peace and honesty. Common cooperation is based on promoting the “general participation of citizens” (Montiel *et al.*, 2021, p. 9).

President Lopez Obrador communicated the health contingency in Mexico in collaboration with the Ministry of Health through the undersecretary Hugo Lopez Gatell, programming two conferences at the beginning, one in the morning during the usual conferences of the president and another in the evening by the undersecretary. Esteinou Madrid (2021) analyzed the coherence of the messages of the authorities and the number of cases of COVID-19 in Mexico, finding great inconsistencies and lack of clarity and orientation. At the beginning, López Gatell even stated that masks were not necessary or optional, although he later changed his position. In addition, the government strategy of the National Healthy Distance Day was extended to digital social networks, including Twitter, and the *hashtag* #SusanaDistancia was written on Twitter. Olmedo Neri (2021) conducted a study of its effects and detected the nodes (12,776) and links (18,679) generated by this hashtag, considering it to be of low intensity. He also identified the main disseminating actors that promoted this campaign: AMLO, López Gatell (highlighting), Beatriz Gutiérrez Müller (wife of the Mexican president), the Ministry of Health, the Mexican Social Security Institute, the governor of Hidalgo Omar Fayad and the media Moreno Hernández and El Chamuco through their accounts in digital social networks.

Populism and charisma

Studying the communication of politicians implies determining what style of communication and leadership they exert on the citizenry. In this regard, there is currently a pattern that is present in different heads of state: populism. Kyle and Meyer (2020) found that there are currently five times more populist leaders than at the end of the Cold War, with different types of populism, and that it is not expected to change soon. For Alsina (2020), President López Obrador, Trump and Bolsonaro are leaders qualified as populist by demonstrating patterns such as the “elite as the enemy”, the people as victims or the leader as a hero or savior (2020, p. 61). Populism is a style that occurs in both left and right politics and presents polarizing characteristics in a divided society (Mila-Mal-

donado *et al.*, 2022, p. 25). It is also based on the sense of us and others, occupying the entire political spectrum (Manfredi-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021, p. 80).

In this research, populism contains the dimensions of polarizing rhetoric, confrontation, social indignation, national fervor and minimization.

Regarding polarizing rhetoric, it is defined as an “agonistic public space fighting for meanings and political identities, immersed in a polarization of political adversaries through identifications of an us/them” (Mila-Maldonado *et al.*, 2022, p. 25) or as the tendency to attack or demonize rivals seeking to create conflict (Manfredi-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021).

In relation to confrontation, it is the “constitution of a we as a popular identity that presents heterogeneous needs, known as equivalences, that will create a they, an adversary” (Manfredi-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021, p. 25).

On the other hand, social indignation is the summation and capitalization of society's anger, the angry, used as political capital (Meza, 2017, p. 116) while national fervor refers to enlivening society through “rhetorical applause for the achievements of national efforts” (Montiel *et al.*, 2021, p. 9). Finally, minimization is when political leaders do not take problems seriously such as the pandemic (Meyer, 2020).

In terms of his leadership style, President López Obrador has already been identified as a socioeconomic populist (Kyle and Meyer, 2020) with charisma and populism (Meza, 2017). In addition, he has been described as having a tendency to distrust others (Rivas-Otero, 2019) and that his leadership is “charismatic integrator-pragmatic with great experience in the electoral” (Navarrete and Salas, 2018).

Charisma is undoubtedly an essential element of populism and it is said that the charismatic leader is based on a “contagious dynamism that offers an irresistible attraction” (Mila-Maldonado *et al.*, 2022, p. 8). In addition, the leader has a “special attraction on the masses that follow him/her” and there is also infatuation through seductive campaign promises for followers (Meza, 2017, p. 105).

In this study, charisma is constructed with the elements of empathy, influence, and power. Regarding empathy, it seeks to “show closeness in relation to the fears and concerns of citizens in times of pandemic” (Mila-Maldonado *et al.*, 2022, p. 35), although it can be applied to other aspects; meanwhile, influence and power are characterized by “having the resources to lead social groups, having the ability to influence, convince and persuade them” (Meza, 2017, p. 105).

Strategic behavior and pandemic

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic contingency requires a strategic behavior of political leaders defined as the conduction of “actions that increase political power, avoid mistakes and are a political leverage” (Méndez, 2013). In other words, failure to act in favor of social welfare put the population at risk.

The following are some examples on the management of the health contingency and the consequences generated by several heads of state. For example, in the case of President Donald Trump, he did not meet expectations and the United States had an undisciplined and disorderly response to COVID-19 (Ladkin, 2020). This situation occurred not only in the U.S. but in many countries that had populist, incompetent, denialist, and autocratic leadership.

It has even been stated that COVID-19 created a leadership crisis and that the populist “denigrates evidence and appeals to fear” and the health contingency required leaders with a sense of vigilance (Tourish, 2020, p. 266). Likewise, management was not oblivious to political currents, partisan influence was detected in Democratic and Republican governors in the United States, finding that party ideology influenced decision making to address the health contingency (Wang *et al.*, 2021). In another gender-related study, a protective feminism of female political leaders was detected while men identified themselves as warriors. Female heads of state such as Merkel, Arden and Tsai Ing-Wen had better contingency management than their male counterparts Trump, Johnson and XI Jing Ping (Johnson and Williams, 2020; Coscieme *et al.*, 2020). In that view, it has been pointed out how President Trump of the United States and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom at the beginning of the contingency minimized the seriousness of the situation, or as happened in India where a very strict confinement was made without considering the economic need of the people, worsening the situation (Grint, 2020).

For this reason, the management of the health contingency required strategic actions on the part of the heads of state, otherwise public health would be at risk with consequences that would worsen the situation and could or did cause thousands of deaths. This required global leaders to take decisive action aimed at achieving the welfare of citizens.

In this sense, strategic behavior has been defined as the performance of actions that “increase political power, avoid mistakes and are political leverage” (Méndez, 2018, p. 4). The following components of strategic behavior

are included in this research: strategic action to achievement, reinforcement of systematic intervention, assurance of government response, and government actions to face COVID-19.

In terms of strategic action to be achieved, it includes the benefits generated in economic growth, the decrease in poverty levels and the safeguarding of democracy (Méndez, 2013). Regarding contingency, the efficient management of the pandemic should not be overlooked.

Regarding reinforcement of systematic interventions, the measurement, expansion, and utilization of government agencies are used from the highest level of power for benefitting citizens (Montiel *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile, ensuring governmental response is the role of the bureaucracy to compensate for the needs of citizens during a crisis (Montiel *et al.*, 2021).

Finally, governmental actions during COVID-19 are the political obligations, management, and attention to citizens to face the pandemic (Mila-Maldonado *et al.*, 2022, p. 31).

As for the analysis of the strategic behavior of President López Obrador, Villanueva Ulfgard and Villanueva (2020) considered that he failed to take advantage of his historical juncture due to his vision based on the past. There are already general evaluations of his years as president, for example, because his campaign promises failed, being a politician more charismatic than efficient (Elizondo, 2020); very focused on his personality, which hinders and polarizes the political system and whose decisions and actions that affect several generations of Mexicans (Curzio, 2020). Likewise, it has been argued how he has involved the Mexican State through centralization, aggressive budgetary austerity, and dependence on the military (Sánchez Talnquer, 2020). Without leaving aside the criticism of his bad energy policy (Hernández Ibarzábal and Bonilla, 2020), or how despite his defense of the people he has excluded Mexico's original groups (Solorio *et al.*, 2021). As for his self-analysis of half a six-year term, AMLO defines it benevolently, but emphasizing the pending reduction of violence, but without presenting something to face it, but with a humble behavior, without pretensions and with the "heart" (López Obrador, 2021).

On the other hand, President López Obrador has been criticized by the way he has managed health contingency due to the minimization of its effects and severity (Meyer, 2020). Not only there is a failed reactive strategy managed by the federal government with a poor identification of the problem, instead of applying an efficient prevention method, which became a

public health problem. Not only is it considered that it was not controlled, but it continued to grow (Mundo, 2021) even up to the closing of this edition. Esteinou Madrid (2020, p. 150) defined it as “when politics displaced science”. In relation to this, it would be important to remember the forecasts made about the number of deaths caused by the pandemic by the Undersecretary of Health; at first it was stated that it would not exceed 6500 deaths, then 8000, 12 000, 25 000, 28 000 and 60 000 (LaPolíticaOnline, 2020), far from the current figure (326 000) and much more than the accumulated figure (667 000 as of June 2022).

The literature review delimited the context and research constructs to analyze the leadership and communication style of President AMLO in the management of the health contingency. This study focuses on communication, populism, charisma and strategic behavior in President López Obrador’s Twitter discourse.

Method

Procedure

The research uses a digital method of social network analysis (Olmedo Neri, 2021) based on the generation of two types of data: attributes and relationships. These studies focus on the study of social relationships and how they affect the behavior of “subjects, groups, institutions, among others” (Brand and Gómez, 2006, p. 6). Likewise, the method is exploratory qualitative documentary of messages and digital data through content analysis.

The method was based on the content analysis technique that examines the characteristics of leadership, LTA (Leader Trait Assessment), evaluation of the leader’s traits that builds his profile, attributes and style through word count (Rivas Otero, 2018) and the following stages were used: selection of material, coding, classification scheme, categorization of messages, coding manual, counting and presentation of results (Rivas Otero, 2018).

Content analysis is based on the study of secondary texts of an individual (Creswell, 2012). In this research, the corpus (tweets) (Mila-Maldonado *et al.*, 2022) was used as the content to be analyzed, in this case the tweets on Twitter of President López Obrador through its discursive components collected from the API (Application Programming Interface).

In this sense, we used the corpus linguistics technique that uses a large collection of unprocessed text data that are organized according to certain dimensions, but with the purpose of “identifying patterns of shared and unique meanings in the text”. This corpus linguistics has been related to the interdisciplinary tradition of content analysis criticism that uses the text (in this case the tweets) to build constructs (Montiel *et al.*, 2021, p. 4).

Regarding the data collection technique, the *Orange Python* software version 3.31.1 was used to obtain all the contents of the tweets, which was used to filter, model and design the database of these tweets and mine the data. In this sense, it was necessary to request a Twitter developer account to obtain this information.

As mentioned above regarding the data and content analysis, this research was based on an adaptation of Rivas Otero's technique (2018). The procedure is described below: first, the selection of the message material (collection and debugging of the tweets); followed by the coding of the messages (identification of the linguistic elements of the tweet); third, classification scheme (definition of the dimensions of the variables communication, populism, charisma and strategic behavior according to the literature); fourth, classification of the tweets (based on the dimensions); fifth, counting of the dimensions and finally elaboration, presentation of results and conclusions.

For this research we analyzed the 631 tweets of President López Obrador during 2020, who, unlike other presidents, tweets very little. Although the idea was to analyze only the tweets referring to COVID-19, they were scarce, about 104, so it was decided to expand the database of all the president's rhetoric during the first year of the pandemic through the corpus of tweets. The data were categorized and analyzed in the program Atlas ti, version 22.0.9.

Results

There are important indicators in the study and analysis of social networks such as the number of followers, tweets published, number of reactions, number of retweets (most shared by followers), nodes and links that indicate the impact that the issuer is having on his followers. For this reason, the tweets published by the president in 2020 through his official Twitter account were collected and classified into their categories and subcategories to have a complete profile of the communication and political leadership of President López Obrador during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this reason, Table 2 presents a summary of the tweets with the highest number of *Likes* of President López Obrador in 2020. This indicator is crucial because it indicates the effect on the social network (Brand and Gómez, 2006). Additionally, the classification of these tweets is presented based on the dimensions proposed by this study. In this sense, it is observed that the tweets with the highest number of *likes* are not related to the management of the pandemic but to AMLO's government actions. The most liked is the one referring to a visit he did to Washington and made an offering at the Lincoln Memorial, which could be classified as communicative, two tweets are populist and two others are charismatic.

Table 2

Tweets with the highest number of Likes

Date	Content	Likes
2020-07-08	Offering at the Abraham Lincoln Memorial, from Washington, USA. USA. https://t.co/ppVVJc5Vvy (Communication)	93 091
2020-06-02	Normally, journalists, artists or writers hide in their supposed objectivity or independence in order not to commit themselves (which we know is a hypocritical way of taking sides). You, on the other hand, Damián, without ceasing to be free, define yourself in favor of transformation. Thank you https://t.co/p4cLFiGqfu (Populism)	45 814
2020-12-06	Congratulations to Checo Perez for taking first place in Formula 1 Sakhir Grand Prix. Whenever a Mexican wins in a competition, it exalts our country. https://t.co/CTOQZaGF7s (Charisma)	41 908
2020-06-21	Congratulations to all the dads in Mexico, living, dead and always remembered with love. https://t.co/T4X1eQBdEk (Carisma)	36 958
2020-01-01	They even wanted to take away hope and they could not. Now, dreams of justice and freedom are beginning to become a reality. Let's move forward! Happy New Year! https://t.co/A6A6qLqrYx (Populism)	36 743

Table 3 presents the most shared tweets (retweets) and it can be observed that none refers to the pandemic, appearing again the tweet referring to Abraham Lincoln's offering of President AMLO's visit to Washington, which was also found as the one with the highest number of *likes*. In the case of Twitter, it has been observed that retweets are important to measure the acceptance degree of the message (Ortiz and Espejel, 2021). The tweet with the most retweets is communicative as already mentioned; in addition,

there is a tweet of strategic behavior, another of communication and one of a populist nature.

Table 3

Most shared tweets

Date	Content	Retweets
2020-07-08	Offering at the Abraham Lincoln Memorial, from Washington, USA. USA. https://t.co/ppVVJc5Vvy (Communication)	19 045
2020-06-02	Normally, journalists, artists or writers hide in their supposed objectivity or independence in order not to commit themselves (which we know is a hypocritical way of taking sides). You, on the other hand, Damián, without ceasing to be free, define yourself in favor of transformation. Thank you https://t.co/p4cLFiGqfu (Populism)	14 069
2020-07-08	We as government will do our part, we will continue to set a good example. Morning conference. https://t.co/eDPWKMzplM (Strategic Behavior)	10 734
2020-08-24	We begin the year recalling Mexico's cultural greatness. https://t.co/9c5t1CSX9R (Communication)	10 692
2020-01-01	In this first tour of the year in indigenous villages I am very happy, I feel grateful. It is an honor to serve everyone, but it is a blessing to work for the neediest and receive in return a word, a look or a sincere smile. https://t.co/8gRsTDDH1n https://t.co/OG06G4LU1C (Populism)	10 520

Data analysis

Communication

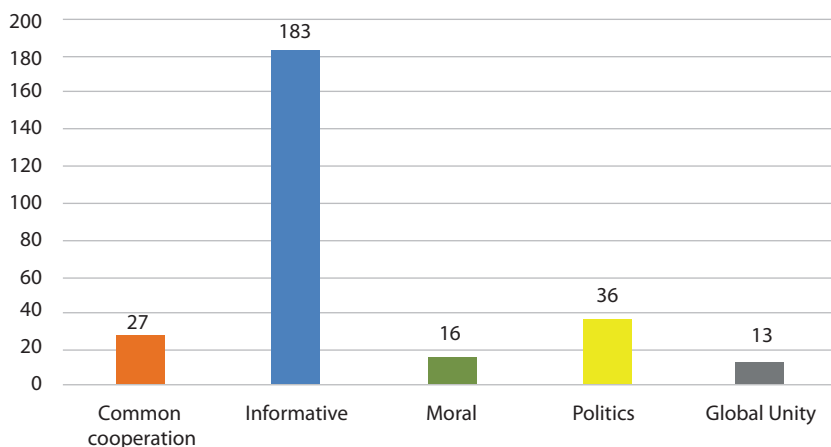
“Report on #COVID19 from National Palace.” <https://t.co/IqS34cF9RR> <https://t.co/M3Z3S8iZov> (López Obrador, 2020d).

In relation to the communication variable, the data show that approximately one third, 275 tweets, were classified as communicative as shown in Graph 1. The president did seek to influence the behavior of citizens and followers.

Of these publications, 183 (66.5 %) were informative and refer to the notification and update of the general situation that was happening in the country. Although almost half of them were of this type, they had a very diverse content, since President López Obrador tended to inform from the economic and health situation of the country to only publish links directed towards his morning conferences.

Graph 1

Number of tweets by communication dimensions



It shows that President López Obrador disseminated information about his administration and topics related to the country. However, it is shown that in the first year of the pandemic, the number of informative tweets dedicated to the topic was minimal, as will be seen below.

Additionally, the data show that 36 of the tweets were political, equivalent to 13.1 % (graph 1), which are the messages that sought to generate a debate on the part of the president. Likewise, 27 tweets (9.8 %) were dedicated to common cooperation aimed at promoting citizen participation. Followed by 16 publications (5.8 %) categorized in the moral dimension dedicated to encourage and strengthen the mood of the nation. Finally, 13 tweets (4.7 %) were from the global unity category based on the promotion of global values of unity and peace.

Populism

“If there is collective will to enforce rights, conservatives will not be able to roll them back. Morning conference.” <https://t.co/hi2WUTOqe4> (López Obrador, 2020a).

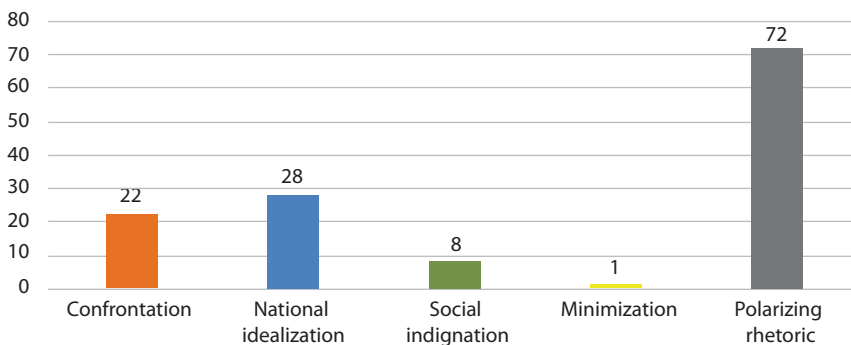
Regarding the populism variable, 131 tweets were classified as populist (Graph 2), i.e., AMLO employed a communication that fostered polarization and gaps, emphasizing an “us” with respect to “them” through his rhetoric.

Out of the 131 tweets categorized as populist, 72 (54.9 %) possess polarizing rhetoric that seeks to attack rivals. Followed by the national fervor dimension with 28 (21.4 %) of the publications are based on national achievements. Next, the confrontation category with 22 tweets (16.8 %) that identify adversaries and the promotion of a national identity. Meanwhile, the social outrage dimension had eight (6.1 %) of the publications that refer to the outraged using them as political capital. Finally, only one tweet (0.7 %) was classified as minimization based on downplaying the importance of the problems (see Graph 2).

As shown, more than half of President López Obrador’s publications were polarizing with a focus on fighting against those he considers his detractors, identified as those who have different political ideas from him. It is worth mentioning that, like the other variables, he only dedicated some of his publications to the COVID-19 issue.

Graphic 2

Number of tweets by populism dimensions



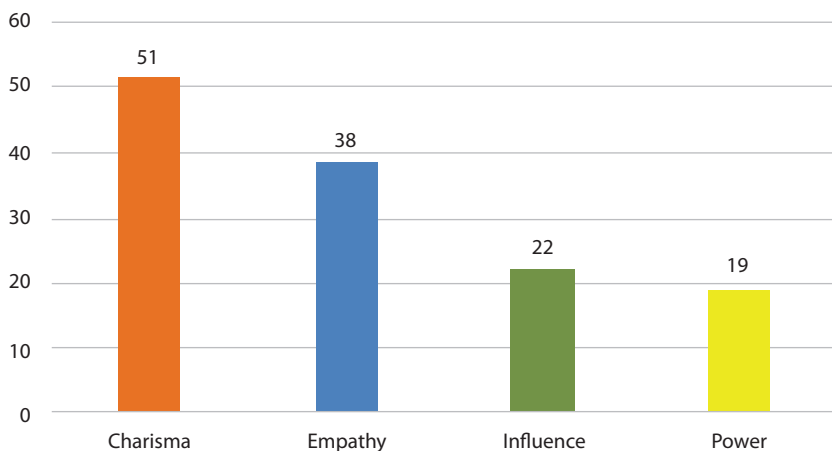
Charisma

“I wanted to kiss her, but I can’t because of the healthy distance. She’s a sweetheart.” <https://t.co/rmlfj9XA1e> (López Obrador, 2020b).

Regarding the variable of charisma, the results show that 130 (20.6 %) of the tweets were classified as such (Figure 3). These results reflect AMLO’s charismatic characteristics that include communicating a dynamism and attraction for his followers, avoiding as much as possible to talk about difficult issues such as the health crisis by COVID-19 and boosting his personality to the nation.

Graphic 3

Number of tweets by charisma dimensions



Regarding charisma, 51 tweets (39.2 %) are considered charismatic. This discourse seeks to attract his followers with the purpose of reflecting a more fraternal connection between AMLO and his followers. In addition, there are 38 tweets (29.2 %) that seek to enhance that connection of a benevolent leader. His speech shows the influence and power he wields over the masses, but does so to a lesser extent, being 22 (16.9 %) and 19 (14.6 %) tweets respectively (see Graph 3).

President López Obrador shows a high priority in strengthening a bond with followers, seeking in a charismatic and empathetic way to create a fraternal image of himself, leaving aside the use of messages oriented to influence and power.

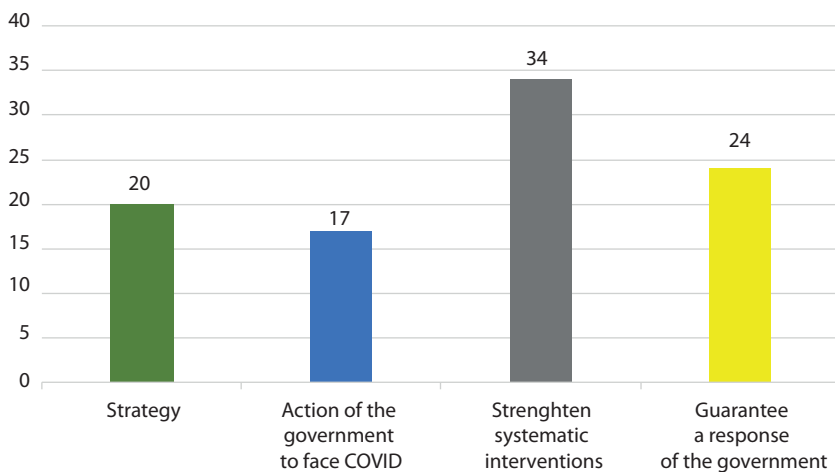
Strategic behavior

“DN-III-E plan is underway to strengthen the health sector to face #coronavirus.” <https://t.co/7rjbF7Uzcv> (López Obrador, 2020c).

In relation to the strategic behavior variable, 95 tweets were observed (15.06 %) (see Graph 4). This way of acting of President López Obrador is based on leveraging his political power through his actions and strategies for both the management of the health contingency and the development of the country, avoiding mistakes.

Graphic 4

Number of tweets by dimensions of strategic behavior



Regarding the strategic behavior of President López Obrador, Figure 4 shows that although there are some differences in the categories, they are not very significant. As can be observed, there is greater emphasis on the rein-

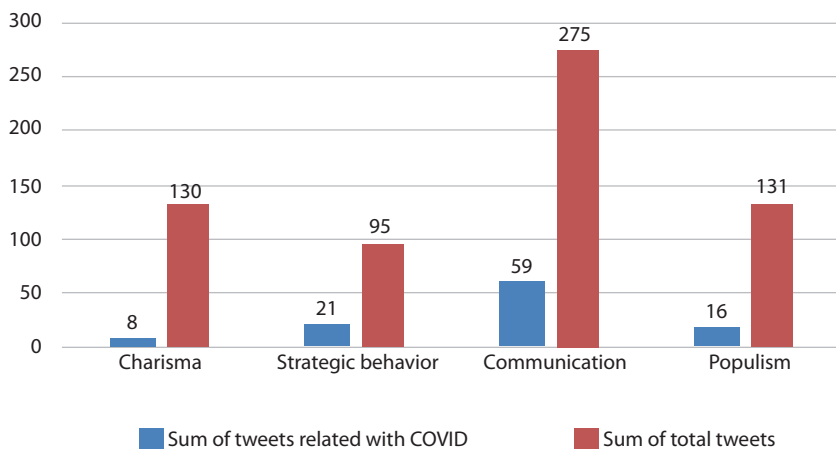
forcement of systematic interventions with 34 tweets (35.7 %). This aspect is based on the regulation, mobilization or modification of government institutions for the benefit of citizens, followed by the messages to ensure a governmental response with 24 tweets (25.26 %) which are the concrete responses of the government to moments of crisis or needs of the Mexican people. Regarding strategic actions, 20 publications (21.05 %) focused on communicating about activities oriented to the achievement in aspects of economic growth, poverty reduction and strengthening of democracy. Finally, only 17 (17.89 %) of the tweets were about government actions related to the management of governmental and political actions to face the health crisis.

Tweets dedicated to COVID-19 per variable

Figure 5 presents the ratio of tweets by general and specific variable of COVID-19. Almost half were informative, followed by populist, charismatic and strategic behavior. Only 104 tweets (16 %) of the total were dedicated to the topic of the health contingency and there was no moral support in the first year of the pandemic.

Graph 5

Total number of tweets and total number of tweets dedicated to Lopez Obrador's COVID



When comparing tweets dedicated to COVID-19, it stands out that there were very few tweets from President López Obrador focused on this issue during the first year of the health crisis. However, it should be clarified that the crisis began in March 2020, so it is reasonable that at first glance it seems that few tweets were dedicated to the issue in that year. Regarding the communication variable, the one with the most publications (59) highlights that AMLO's discourse on the health crisis was mostly informative. The second place is occupied by strategic behavior with 21 tweets, followed by populist-type publications (16) and finally within the charismatic style tweets, eight are focused on the issue of the COVID-19 sanitary contingency. Finally, charisma, which was the variable that was least used to communicate the topic of the health crisis, maybe because the president used a charismatic strategy that avoids referring to difficult topics in this case, the pandemic.

Conclusions

This research aimed to determine the leadership and political communication style of President López Obrador on Twitter during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This social network can be a political tool and be used as an efficient communication strategy for heads of state and have positive consequences in favor of their leadership or the management of a public health crisis.

The results of the study allowed to verify that AMLO used Twitter to inform about his government management without delving into the health contingency. He had an informative style of communication and exhibited a populist, polarizing, charismatic rhetoric and to a lesser extent oriented to strategic behavior.

Regarding communication, it is a fundamental tool to be in contact with citizens, especially during a health contingency. The analysis of the data shows that the president, although he tweets very little in the first year of the pandemic, dedicated almost half of his tweets to inform about his administration. In this sense, he contrasts what other heads of state did during the crisis, reporting on the pandemic through Twitter (Rufai and Bunce, 2020). On the other hand, AMLO also did not take advantage of his tweets to boost citizen morale as other leaders did in the face of the pressing contingency. For the Mexican president, the health crisis was not crucial, rather he rele-

gated it, he did not promote the rhetoric of the common good. In fact, it is the topic that was least communicated on Twitter during that year. Worldwide citizens used the social network to be informed, but in the Mexican case, the president did not inform or guide his followers and citizens with data or news about the management of the pandemic and its risks. It cannot be argued that this error in the communication and information of the contingency generated the catastrophic results of deaths and contagions in Mexico, but it is one of the factors that could have an effect, among many others.

In terms of populism, the results demonstrate a broadly populist rhetoric in the same sense as Manfredi *et al.* (2021). AMLO shared many tweets with highly polarizing content to divide society, i.e., “those who are against me”. Populism is the second most used variable in his tweets. This research contributes to the literature on López Obrador’s populist profile and his confrontational discourse with a patriotic sense. The health crisis required a political communication and leadership oriented towards unity and social responsibility of the population, but there was not even effort in that, neither in the pandemic nor in his general management, rather he shared a discourse to polarize and confront. He does not minimize so much in his speech neither the pandemic nor his adversaries, but the indifference is also ambiguous and does not contribute to positive messages or strategic action.

In relation to the charismatic leader who shows a contagious dynamism and offers an irresistible attraction to his followers, a style that seeks to attract is verified in his speech and this research contributes to evidence it. Although the level found for this variable is very close to the populist, it should be remembered that the charismatic style seeks to attract the followers through the speech. On the other hand, empathy, which is to get close to citizens, is used less frequent in his tweets. The influential and power style are also observed, although to a lesser extent. In the end, the charismatic leader seeks to be protective and his discourse shows it by contributing to López Obrador’s charisma, which has always helped his political career.

Finally, regarding the discourse on strategic behavior that refers to actions that increase political power, avoid mistakes and have achievements, the results show that he dedicated little rhetoric to the subject, both in general terms of his governmental management and in the management of the pandemic. It was observed that he dedicated few words to the reinforcement of systematic interventions and the mobilization of his government’s institutions. As for ensuring the government’s response to meet the needs of

citizens, there was no predominant discourse either. Finally, there was no emphasis on government actions in the tweets. The strategic behavior of leaders occurs when there are achievements and mistakes are avoided. In one of the most dramatic years for Mexicans, the president did not concentrate efforts at least in his Twitter speech to face this situation. President AMLO was neither good nor bad in his speech for the health contingency, simply indifferent and at the end of the day, a barrier to face a crisis as serious as the coronavirus. Other presidents such as Trump and Johnson minimized the pandemic with disastrous results of their administrations, at least López Obrador did not contribute so much in that sense with his Twitter rhetoric.

The results of the study allow to conclude that the discursive rhetoric of the Mexican president on his Twitter account with almost nine million followers missed the opportunity to use Twitter as a political tool to communicate and influence the behavior of citizens during the worst health crisis in favor of a better management of the pandemic, unlike what other heads of state did on the same social network.

This research is innovative since it analyzes his general rhetoric on Twitter, a crucial topic in the current context. We found evidence of an informative communication strategy of his administration, perhaps in an empirical way but that contributes to his political and communication capital to strengthen his leadership. As it is known, President López Obrador's communication strategy is managed through his morning conferences, which do not have the same reach as Twitter, where he could maximize his communication and leadership as other politicians do. For example, Macron, as a result of his management of Twitter during the pandemic, doubled his number of followers on this social network.

To conclude, there is no evidence that President López Obrador's communication and leadership style during the first year of the pandemic contributed to inform, moralize, promote global unity and strategic behaviors for the management of COVID-19 but rather was used to inform his management in general, rather with a populist and charismatic rhetoric. It could be argued that the reason was because AMLO delegated that function to Undersecretary López Gatell who was his spokesperson during the health contingency, but regarding efficient communication and political leadership, citizens require the guidance and influence of heads of state in a direct way, but it did not happen in Mexico.

Part of an efficient political communication in times of crisis requires a direct strategy with citizens, offering solutions, security, tranquility, trust, truthfulness, continuous improvement, digital content, good stories, memorable perception, moving forward and a good spokesperson (Homedes and Plaja, 2020; Peytibi, 2020). In our research, the results are conclusive, there was no such approach by President López Obrador's communications on Twitter.

On the other hand, the Mexican president could improve his communication strategy and leadership on Twitter towards the last part of his government to maintain an efficient, modern and expanding contact with his millions of followers to enhance his political capital, but does not maximize as a political instrument or contribute to the welfare of citizens.

One of the limitations of the study is that it does not analyze the content of the links presented in the tweets, and it only shows a part of the leadership and communication exercised, which are much more complex. As future lines of research, the communication and leadership styles in other social networks of the president and other leaders of Mexican politics during the pandemic should be analyzed. Thus, the analysis of the rhetoric of his spokesperson for the health contingency, Undersecretary López Gatell, the content of President López Obrador's morning conferences and, of course, the impact of his management on the public health crisis remain pending.

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