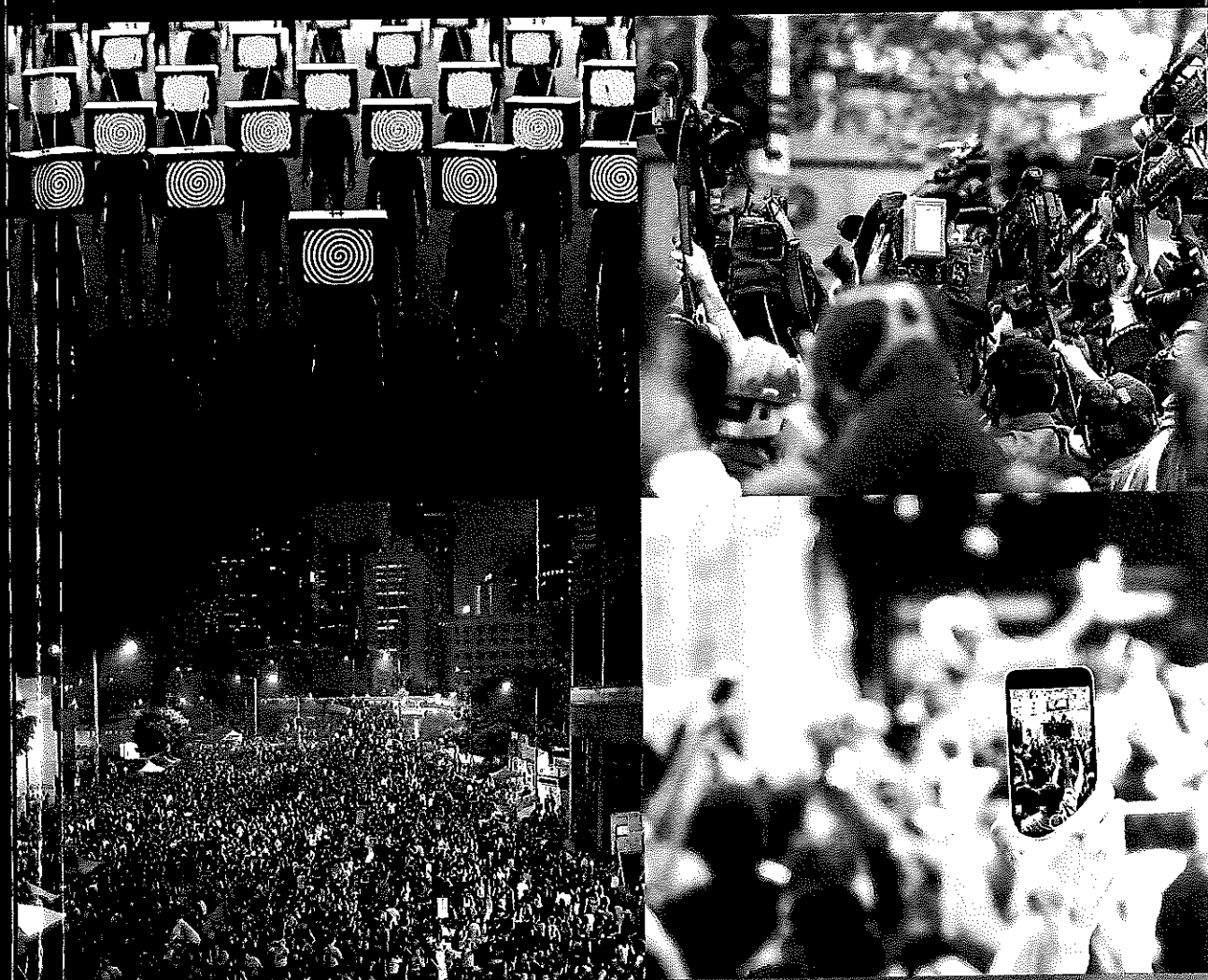


RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON **Visual Politics**

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17. Politainment as dance: visual storytelling on TikTok among Spanish political parties

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, younger internet users have heavily adopted visually based social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat and, most recently, TikTok. Launched in 2016 by ByteDance, this short-video platform is now the fastest-growing application among young users and generation Z, attracting a huge audience of 1.5 billion active users, 41% of whom are between 16 and 24 years of age (Zeng et al., 2021). The irruption of short-video platforms like TikTok has recently drawn a great deal of academic attention (Abidin, 2021; Abidin & Zeng, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020) as they represent a new challenge for political strategists (Zeng et al., 2021; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). Because of the increasing importance of visual images in politics (Venet et al., 2019), politicians are currently turning their attention to TikTok for communicating with young voters. This effort represents a hyper-postmodern aesthetic, based on visual components oriented toward virality, entertainment, humor, simplification and performance art in order to communicate complex political issues in simple formats through the use of visual storytelling.

This chapter provides an opportunity to reflect on new challenges short-video formats pose as a developing form of political communication. It examines the ways political actors use this specific platform to connect with young voters from the understanding that politics may be "depicted" through visual media as entertainment. Previous studies have already shown the commitment of political parties to approaching younger audiences by using Instagram (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019), YouTube (Berrocal et al., 2017), Snapchat (Gutiérrez-Rubi & Peyrubi, 2016) and WhatsApp (Zamora & Losada, 2021). However, there is still a lack of research by media scholars into the political use of TikTok. This chapter provides an opportunity to consider the new challenges posed by the use of short-video platforms for political purposes.

Given that this is quite a new phenomenon linked to the idea of visual media as entertainment and playful technologies (Vijay & Gekker, 2021), the theoretical support of this chapter is first based on the spectacularization of politics and its consequences for political communication. We contextualize the use of TikTok as part of "pop politics" (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019) and the use of "politainment" on social media (Berrocal-González et al., 2021).

Based on the digital architectures of social media framework (Bossatta, 2018), the chapter provides a summary of TikTok's main affordances that could prove useful in political contexts. In the second part we explore how political parties use TikTok's main affordances to communicate with young voters as part of a creative, simplified and entertainment-based communication strategy. The research includes a quantitative analysis of the official TikTok accounts of the main Spanish political parties in order to measure to what extent they are employing politainment resources and formats in their videos and the impact that these enter-

tainment visual narratives have on levels of engagement. Differences between traditional and new political parties in Spain regarding the use of the platform's main affordances will also be considered.

VISUAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SPECTACULARIZATION OF POLITICS

The irruption of social networks in the political arena has changed the way that political communication takes place (Jilleker et al., 2015). The dissolution of the dividing line between public and private spheres has led to the spectacularization of politics, a phenomenon that has been linked to the fusion of information and entertainment, also known as infotainment (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2011; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2014). Visual elements have been crucial in infotainment strategies, given their significant ability to arouse and stimulate emotional reactions based on visual impact. They are part of the spectacular discursive structures based on what some scholars have called the categorization of infotainment narrative strategies (Berrocal et al., 2014).

As indicators of spectacularization, researchers have mentioned the protagonism of emotions (Ulrich & Gunter, 2007), as well as the revealing of information related to the private lives of political actors (Jebri et al., 2013). Other scholars have also pointed out the prominence of light-hearted content; the intense personalization and humanization of the leader; the tendency toward emotionality and the human approach in the treatment of politics, including the use of humor, criticism, and personal relationships; the prominence of individual action over the explanation of ideas; and the use of spectacular images with differing types of plane, scale, perspective, location, scenery, effects, etc. (Pellisser-Rossell & Pineda, 2014).

Spectacularization characterizes contemporary political communication as a performance (Salmon, 2013), a dramatic construction of reality (Berrocal et al., 2014). Consequently, politicians are now considered to be products of the media subculture and have become mere actors and performers, similar to pop idols. Scholars have suggested different terms for referring to this phenomenon. The first, *pop politics*, defines a global trend within visual political communication that consists of dealing with information, events, physical appearance and everything that ultimately involves politics in a spectacularized way, in order to construct the celebrity politician (Mazzoleni & Stardini, 2009). Pop politics has increased its resonance within the political "memefication" of the online ecosystem (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019).

A second term, *politainment*, describes the spectacularization of politics based on the two media-related functions of information: politics and entertainment (Nielsen, 2008; Sayre & King, 2010). Considered as a softening of political communication (Otto et al., 2016), the term refers to the inclusion of political actors, topics and processes within the culture of entertainment (Nielsen, 2008), and is understood to include the styles, narratives and scenery of the world of show business and entertainment, characterized by high levels of emotion in communicative repertoires (Berrocal et al., 2017; Berrocal-González et al., 2021).

Political spectacularization in the context of politainment has led to alternative ways of political participation for hard-to-reach audiences (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). When political information is offered in the form of spectacularized politics, popular culture on social media can also prompt youth participation in collective political expression (Lliverat &

Kliether-Vilenchik, 2021) with notable effects on political engagement (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2021; Neys & Jansz, 2010).

Although most studies on politainment have been TV-based, the growing use of social networks has seen a number of important studies being conducted into the use of politainment on Twitter (Zamora-Medina & Rebollo, 2021), Facebook (Durán-Sztole & Martínez-Sanz, 2019), Instagram (García-Beaudoux & Slinovich, 2021) and YouTube (Berrocal et al., 2012). However, there still exists a lack of studies into how political leaders and parties are using politainment on short-video platforms such as TikTok (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Cervi et al., 2021).

TIKTOK'S AFFORDANCES AS A VISUAL PLATFORM FOR CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND INTERACTIVITY

In a world filled with visual information (Fahmy et al., 2014), communication scholars have highlighted the increasing importance of visual content in political contexts (Veneti et al., 2019; Lilleker, 2019). The strategic use of pictures and videos is likely to help a political party to build and maintain trust and reputation (Russmann et al., 2019). The number of studies on the strategic use of visual-centric social media platforms has increased recently, with Instagram being the most studied platform for the distribution of "polished" visual content (Bossetta, 2018). It offers the chance to show the more personal and human face of political actors, along with the celebrity culture of popular artists and idols (Skogethø & Larsson, 2021). However, several studies suggest that Instagram's main affordances for connecting with pop culture remain unexploited, since political actors tend to project a conventional and highly political image of their activities, and rarely include private or personal aspects (Marcos-García & Alonso-Muñoz, 2017). In fact, political parties use Instagram mostly as a channel to broadcast information, and as a tool for image management and self-promotion (Russmann et al., 2019; Filimov et al., 2016), although differences in how new and traditional political parties make use of this platform have also been identified (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

The irruption of TikTok as a new social network based on similar visual components and creativity options, similar to Instagram but more oriented toward entertainment, humor, simplification, performance and especially virality options, represents a new challenge for political strategies. We propose to consider TikTok's main affordances under the framework for understanding the social media digital architecture of other platforms that Bossetta (2018) suggested. From the platform's structural perspective, TikTok represents hyper-postmodern aesthetics based on a "memetic text" (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) that invites imitation and remix on a platform level with a particular focus on the influencer culture. Users show their ability to dance convincingly through "silly dances", share short videos of crazy stunts and perform funny snippets from popular culture, mainly in the form of lip-syncing and acting out or dancing to dialogs and songs (Vijay & Gekker, 2021).

In terms of functionality, TikTok is a place for *creative expression and playful sociality* (Abidin, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020), since users have a range of editing options, filters and effects, as with other popular visual platforms. The main feature that differentiates this visual social platform from the others is that its users can select from a wide variety of music genres, sound clips and voice messages to include in their videos. This may then form part of a dance routine, a lip-sync battle, or as the backdrop for a comedy skit, and often plays a key role in the

storytelling (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). Another feature that makes the platform distinct in terms of its functionality is the possibility of replication and virality (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). TikTok videos allow the creation of other videos, a phenomenon known as "*spreadability*" (Jenkins et al., 2013). Users can click on the soundtrack used by a video to reveal other videos that use the same track and then create their own version. Hence, TikTok storytelling is based on individuals becoming vehicles for personal narratives, which are then connected through features such as hashtags and viral sounds.

However, the main functional affordance is possibly the type of *interactivity*: this social platform offers through two main genres: "Challenges" and "Duets". Challenges consist of community-created hashtags (often sponsored) in which TikTok users are invited to create videos showing themselves attempting to do a certain action, dance, or stunt proposed by others. Duets are videos by users who have taken another person's video (original) and added themselves performing the same action, scene or choreography.

Through the use of artificial intelligence, TikTok has an *algorithmic recommendation system* that makes users follow an algorithmically generated feed of videos through the "For You" page. This personalized content feed has become an addictive scrolling experience (Zeng et al., 2021), since users spend most of the time "flopping" through hundreds of videos (Andi, 2021). It is not based on connections but on a user's experience, thereby giving the platform more control over the user (Vijay & Gekker, 2021; Guinaudeau et al., 2020). An important issue is data privacy, however. This short-video platform is a rich information source that can reveal personal user details, such as appearance, personality, traits and vocal attributes. In fact, TikTok has recently been accused of excessive data harvesting (Gray, 2021), since its data is easily accessed for data mining processes as well as political online campaigning and electoral databases (Wolf et al., 2017).

THE USE OF TIKTOK IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Recent studies have argued that young people are not as apathetic or disengaged as is commonly believed (Kitanova, 2020), but have instead turned to alternative forms of political engagement (Pruitt, 2017). Consequently, political organizations and especially young politicians have started to recognize the importance of participating on youth-oriented platforms (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018).

After Instagram and Snapchat, short-video platforms like TikTok are now an emerging field for political actors. This social network includes new interactive ways of reconnecting with young voters by using a co-created space for visual storytelling, where visibility and attention work according to their own rules (Abidin, 2021). Hence, political organizations need to adapt existing content using new formats in which mimesis, creativity, emotionality and soft content – issues related to human dramas, unusual events, trivialities or daily life – play an important role. But, the amateurish creation, co-creation and remixing cultivated on TikTok does not fit with traditional message control practices.

Despite TikTok having banned the placement of political advertisements (Chandlee, 2019), researchers have found that this platform can play an important role in political contexts (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). It can be regarded as a grassroots social media platform for mobilizing followers and that enables youth collective political expression (Mirchandani, 2020). It also plays a role in political self-expression through the sharing of opinions on con-

troversial political topics (Vijay & Gekker, 2021), and is even used for image management to create a closer and more humanized political image of populist leaders (Bianchi, 2020; Sánchez-Castillo, 2020).

From the affordance-based perspective, scholars have shown how political communication on TikTok is user driven and much more interactive than on other social media platforms (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). Users do not just circulate content and comment on it, "they become the content" (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020) when they personally respond to existing content with another video. The platform's design and its playful architecture shape political discourse and participatory expressions for online campaigning (Vijay & Gekker, 2021; Mithchandani, 2020), especially youth political expression and collective action (Hautea et al., 2021).

Previous studies conducted in Spain into the use of TikTok among political parties (Cervi & Martín-Lladó, 2021; Cervi et al., 2021) showed that they mainly used this platform as a unilateral broadcasting tool for self-promotion, without fully exploiting the platform's affordances. Only newer political parties seem to have perfectly understood the platform both in terms of technical affordances and specific language, but have not yet taken full advantage of TikTok's opportunities for interaction (Cervi et al., 2021).

In order to understand the impact of politainment on TikTok, we should consider not only formal aspects, such as the potential use of language and the use of technical affordances for its entertainment mission, but also content-related aspects (Cervi et al., 2021). Our study shows to what extent Spanish political parties are using TikTok's main affordances for visual storytelling based on a new way of interactivity that can reduce the complexity of political messages. Research on the political use of social media has shown parties and politicians generally tend to adapt social platform affordances to the norms of political communication and not vice versa (Jilleker & Jackson, 2011). Regarding the playful architecture of the platform (Vijay & Gekker, 2021), we can study how the entertainment logic and political spectacularization affect how political parties communicate on this platform.

RQ1. To what extent do Spanish political parties use TikTok's affordances to communicate with young voters through a creative, simplified and entertainment-based communication strategy?

Following previous findings on other visual-centric social networks, such as Instagram (Russmann et al., 2019), we can expect political parties to use TikTok as a channel for broadcasting information and as a tool for image management and self-promotion, in line with the personalization trend in political communication.

H1. Most political parties are not exploiting TikTok's affordances and continue to broadcast their messages using traditional storytelling techniques.

Our second research question is based on the use of politainment resources on TikTok from a visual political communication perspective. We also measure the effect on levels of engagement of using politainment resources in terms of creativity, emotionality and soft content narratives.

RQ2. To what extent were politainment resources used on TikTok and how did these visual narratives affect levels of engagement?

The literature suggests the specific affordances originally developed for peer-to-peer entertainment encourage political organizations to communicate "hard" topics more amusingly and to "soften" them through the use of a more playful communicative style (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). This is often believed to be the only way political organizations can make stories more digestible for generation Z audiences (Andi, 2021).

Because of the ease with which simple and playful formats are consumed, content on TikTok has shown a considerable level of engagement among young users (Ballesteros-Herencia, 2020). Consequently, we would expect TikTok videos to be more successful in terms of engagement when political parties incorporate styles, narratives and scenery from the world of show business and entertainment into their communicative repertoire. Although this goal can be a challenge for traditional political leaderships, it could be more feasible for newer parties.

H2. Including entertainment-based narratives on TikTok videos leads to higher levels of engagement compared to traditional narratives

METHOD

Sample

We conducted a systematic analysis of videos posted by the main Spanish political parties on their official TikTok profiles over a period of twelve months, from 30 April 2020 to 30 April 2021, during which time TikTok became the most downloaded application on Google Play and Apple's App Store, with 8.4 million downloads (Mena-Roa, 2020).

The Partido Popular was the first Spanish political party to join TikTok, in March 2019, followed by Podemos in January 2020, Vox in February 2020, and Ciudadanos in March 2020. The left-wing PSOE was excluded from our analysis since it only opened its official account in June 2020. One important caveat is that all these accounts were recognized as being official, but none included the verified badge, which shows that TikTok has confirmed the identity of who the account belongs to.

Our sample included 282 units composed of videos and their captions or textual descriptions. The distribution of units across political parties showed @ahorapodemos as having the highest activity on TikTok, with N=162 units and 205,600 followers; followed by @ciudadanos, with N=83 units and 1,797 followers; @partidopopular.es with N=27 units and 7,018 followers; and finally @vox_espana, with N=10 units and 44,500 followers.

Analysis

Following previous literature on the use of TikTok in political contexts (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020; Cervi & Martín-Lladó, 2021), we focused on three types of variables: format-related, content-related and engagement variables.

As Table 17.1 shows, among the format variables we included different dummy variables to measure the use of the main TikTok affordances. One of these is the use of music in the video,

Table 17.1 *Coding variables*

Variable	Values
<i>Engagement variables</i>	
Number of views	
Number of likes	
Number of comments	
Number of shares	
<i>Formal variables</i>	
Music	0: without music 1: with music
Text in image	0: without text 1: with text
Text caption	0: without text caption 1: with text caption
Sticker	0: without sticker 1: with sticker
Special effects	0: without special effects 1: with special effects
Hashtag	0: without hashtags 1: with hashtags
Type of post	0: normal video 1: challenge 2: duet
<i>Content variables</i>	
Type of content	0: non-political 1: political
Main issue	1: gender 2: health/COVID 3: education 4: economy 5: independence/territorial policy 6: environment policy 7: political agreements 8: political corruption 9: racism 10: others 11: campaigning 12: ideological issues 13: monarchy
Who is mentioned?	1: the same political party 2: the party leader 3: another political party 4: another political party leader 5: other

Variable	Values
Main actor in visual content	1: citizens 2: politicians from own party 3: politicians from other parties 4: others
Intention	1: information and promotion 2: to criticize other parties 3: mobilization

which can function as a story builder to deliver a specific message or serve as part of a dance routine, a lip-sync battle or as the backdrop for a comedy skit (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020).

We also recorded the use of special effects for customizing and adding details to TikTok videos. The most popular are visual effects added during post-editing to change the look and feel of the video, from adding stars, rain or bubbles to the use of a time warp scan effect to distort any image on the screen. Another affordance that we recorded was the use of the sticker pinning effect, which allows users to pin stickers and emojis on objects in their videos and track them as they move around a scene, thereby making the content more creative and fun.

The option of including text in the videos was recorded in two different ways: text in captions, as in other social networks, and text inserted into the video images. We also recorded the use of hashtags in the text to help users share and find content and join conversations about topics of interest.

Videos were classified as (1) normal videos; (2) challenge videos, in which TikTokers encourage one another to create videos showing themselves attempting to do a certain action, dance or stunt proposed by others; and (3) duets, in which users take another person's video (the original) and add themselves performing the same action, scene or choreography.

The second part of the encoding included categorical variables related to the video content. We measured the type of content – political or non-political (i.e., providing personal images in non-political contexts) – and the main subject of the video, such as gender, health/COVID, the economy, education, territorial policies, environmental policies, political agreements, political corruption, racism/immigration policies, etc. The main actor in the visual content was recorded in order to distinguish between the party, the party leader, another party, or another party leader. To identify the storytelling strategies, we also recorded who or what the main content of the video referred to using the same group of options. Finally, we recorded the main aim of the video: information and promotion (i.e., showing political speeches in Parliament about a new political decision), negative campaigning (i.e., when the party clearly makes a negative judgement of political adversaries) and mobilization (i.e., launching a new challenge or recruiting new party members).

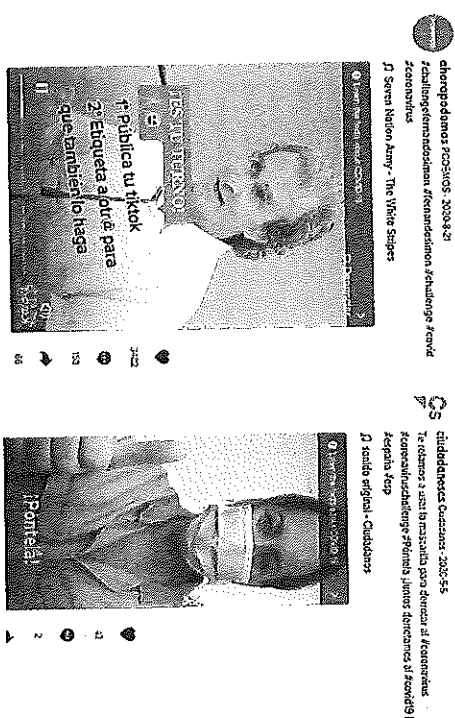
Finally, in order to measure engagement variables, we quantitatively recorded the number of views, likes, comments and shares of each video. To construct an engagement index based on these parameters, and following previous literature (Ballesteros-Herencia, 2019) already applied in TikTok studies, we employed the following formula:

$$\text{Engagement level} = \frac{(n^{\circ} \text{ likes} + n^{\circ} \text{ comments} + n^{\circ} \text{ shares})}{n^{\circ} \text{ views}} * 100$$

Two researchers analyzed a total of 282 videos from Spain. To check reliability, a sample of 10% of the videos (28) were used for a pretest. For all variables, the rate of agreement was 90.1%, based on Holsti's formula.²

FINDINGS

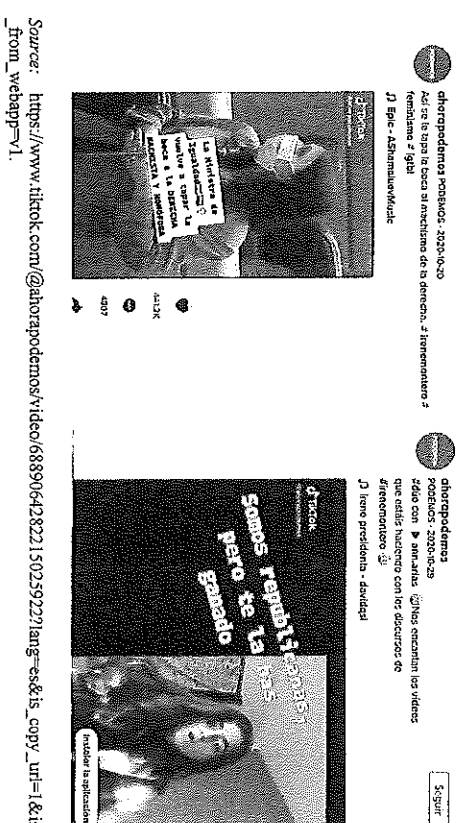
RQ1 explored to what extent Spanish political parties use TikTok's affordances through entertainment-based communication strategies. Of the 282 units analyzed, 98.2% were considered to be normal videos, while the use of TikTok's specific genres (challenges and duets) was negligible: only three challenges (1.1%) – two from @ciudadanos and one from @ahorapodemos – and two duets (0.7%), both by @ahorapodemos, were identified. Most of the challenges referred to COVID-19 issues, with politicians encouraging young people to wear a face mask or calling for social media influencers to help spread information about preventing COVID-19 (see Figure 17.1). In the third case, the challenge consisted of responding to a short personal questionnaire in which party members could introduce themselves.



Source: https://www.tiktok.com/@ahorapodemos/video/6863492079753054342?lang=es&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1 and https://www.tiktok.com/@ciudadanos/video/6823337985249955078?lang=es&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

Figure 17.1 *Podemos call for influencers to spread COVID message; Ciudadanos call for the use of face masks*

In terms of duets, in one @ahorapodemos showed a teenager mimicking a political speech on gender issues by one of the party leaders, Irene Montero. The screen was split in half, with a still image of Montero giving the speech in her own voice while, on the right side of the screen, a teenager performs a dance (see Figure 17.2).



Source: https://www.tiktok.com/@ahorapodemos/video/6889064282215025922?lang=es&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

Figure 17.2 *Duet linked to Irene Montero's gender speech message from Podemos*

Among all the TikTok affordances, video background music, a key element of popular culture, has become an important feature that differentiates this visual-centric platform from other social networks. In our study 63.1% of the videos contained music, which is a relatively low figure given its importance on TikTok. Some differences were found among the political parties: most videos by @ciudadanos contained music (88%), compared to @vox_espana (60%), @ahorapodemos (56.8%) and @partidopopulares (25%). Following previous literature on this topic (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020), our findings showed that the role of music mostly formed part of the story builder for framing specific messages, while only a few videos included it as part of a dance routine (12%).

Another important feature of TikTok that is crucial for creative expression is the use of special visual effects and stickers to create attractive videos. Although these are important affordances on short-video platforms, the results showed that only 3.5% of the videos included visual effects and just 3.4% included stickers. Some parties, like @ahorapodemos, used editing options and special visual effects more often than the rest, including anime filters, the double screen effect, the bling bling effect, and the time warp scan. Most of these resources were not only used to ridicule political adversaries but also to enhance the image of the party candidate. Figure 17.3 shows how @ahorapodemos used the anime filter to include a cartoon face on the party leader, Pablo Iglesias.

The use of hashtags is another important TikTok affordance for labeling content and for connecting with similar content. Although this is not specific to TikTok, it has greatly helped to build the community. In our study, 88.3% of videos contained one or more hashtags. They mostly mentioned the name of the political party (i.e., #Podemos appeared in 80 videos) or the party leader's name (i.e., #PabloIglesias appeared in 65 videos) but there were also more thematic hashtags like #Madrid (53 publications) – since regional elections were taking place in Madrid at the time – or #España (in 66 videos). Most of these hashtags were included as part

were consistent with those of previous studies (Cervi & Martín-Lladó, 2021; Cervi et al., 2021) that point out how political parties do not seem to be taking full advantage of the opportunities that TikTok offers for interacting with young users, and that they are rather attempting to use TikTok as a new visual communication tool while employing old communication patterns. H1 was supported since most political parties have used TikTok to broadcast their messages, employing traditional storytelling methods, as unidirectional channels of promotion. However, some differences between traditional and newer political parties were detected, especially in the case of @ahorapodemos, a party that was the first to introduce technical affordances and use platform specific language (Cervi et al., 2021).

Our study shows that, although political spectacularization based on politainment resources is clearly linked to visual platforms, its presence in the political parties' strategies on TikTok, both in terms of entertainment-based formats and content, is still scarce. However, when political parties incorporated creative styles and narratives, emotionality and soft content narratives into their communicative repertoire, their videos scored higher levels of engagement. H2 was therefore also supported, since TikTok videos including entertainment-based narratives lead to higher levels of engagement. Also, the use of traditional political storytelling based on attacking political opponents and the "softening" of political communication content (Otto et al., 2016) can also work on TikTok to make a higher impact.

This exploratory study contributes toward the growing understanding of the role of short-video platforms in political contexts from a visual communication perspective. Political consultants may use these contributions to formulate concrete proposals concerning the design of their communication strategies. Further comparative studies on the use of TikTok in other countries would help to increase our understanding of the potential of this social platform, not only for political organizations but also for image management strategies among political leaders.

NOTES

1. The Partido Popular has recently changed its official TikTok account from @partidopopular.es to @partidopopular.
2. For all categorical formats, variable agreements were 100%. For categorical content variables, reliability estimates for each category were calculated using Scott's Pi (see Scott, 1955). Specifically, the reliability rate for type of content was .91; for main issue .92; for main actor .96; for actor mentioned .94; and for video iteration .90.

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