Methodology and Characterisation of Hate Crypto-Discourse Between Political Parties
TikTok in Election Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the possible hate speech used by political parties (PSOE, PP, Vox, Unidas Podemos, and Ciudadanos) on TikTok during the campaign for the May 28, 2023 elections, and to define common characteristics by delving into the term "cryptic hate speech." The methodology includes content and discourse analysis of all videos that the parties posted during this period (N=160). The results indicate different behaviors between the opposition and the government, with nationalism as the preferred theme and Vox as the party that most used cryptic hate speech.

1. Introduction

Social networks have become an integral component of public discourse, facilitating interaction between political actors and their constituents (Beriain Bañares et al., 2022). In contrast to the vertical and unidirectional structure of communication in traditional media, the hyper-personalisation options and dynamic elements have made these platforms highly attractive tools for the dissemination of information and propaganda, particularly during electoral campaigns (Chaves-Montero et al., 2017). Nevertheless, as a consequence of the new digital relations between political and civil society, polarising dynamics are proliferating, with the tone of discourse exceeding that which should be expected in a democratic system.

In the context of what has been termed 'cyberpolitics' (Cotarelo, 2013), the usefulness demonstrated by these platforms contrasts with their capacity to induce user segregation. If the deliberative ideal of democracy demands environments that favour debate and the exchange of ideas, in many of these spaces the opposite is true (Ortega et al., 2022). The structure and patterns of use of social networks make it easier to display and confront discourses, which in turn fuels the ideological confrontation that leads to antagonism and polarisation (Cinelli et al., 2021). Consequently, the period of democratic erosion that is currently unfolding has been further exacerbated by the increasingly prominent role played by networks such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, which are instrumental in shaping political preferences and attitudes.

In particular, the ascendance of TikTok in recent years represents one of the most intriguing phenomena in the domain of digital communication. The application has experienced a gradual increase in popularity since 2020, partly due to the impact of the global pandemic (Vintimilla-León and Torres-Toukoumidis, 2021). In Spain, the network for video editing and distribution has reached 14 million downloads, with Spanish users spending an average of 43 minutes a day and connecting around seven times a day (Argintzona, 2020). TikTok is a social media platform that has gained significant popularity in recent times. It is characterised by its simplicity and intuitiveness, coupled with a vibrant and attractive visual aesthetic. The platform has emerged as a popular choice for both individuals and brands seeking to engage with their audiences. It has also emerged as a key tool for political forces seeking to attract votes and disseminate their arguments (Ballesteros Herencia, 2020).

As with other social media platforms, the potential significance of TikTok for the major political actors has not been overlooked. Despite its relatively brief history and its recent incorporation into political and electoral communication strategies, the attention that TikTok is attracting seems to be enduring and is likely to become an important asset for parties seeking to build their supporters' loyalty. As a network where simplicity and the simplification of discourse are its defining characteristics, the distinctive style of this platform could also be a significant factor in the dissemination of polarised messages. It is important to note that this type of network communication is associated with a greater tendency towards hostility in the way of communicating (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

The expansion of social networks has led to the creation of new spaces for confrontation, which have in turn encouraged the use of mockery, humiliation and discrimination (Cuevas-Calderón et al., 2022). In response, social media platforms have employed their own algorithms to identify and remove content deemed to be problematic or disruptive. Similarly, the problem of disinformation has been addressed by incorporating mechanisms such as fact-checkers, which are verification tools that can help limit the free circulation of false content on these social media (Calvo et al., 2023). Nevertheless, despite the implementation of control systems, no solutions have yet been identified to address the multitude of belligerent messages and expressions of hatred that continue to circulate online, which foster exclusion and promote a type of discourse that shares the characteristics of hate.

In a similar vein, Wheatstone and O'Connor (2020) have identified the "lax" security of TikTok as a significant vulnerability, which has facilitated the promotion of sensitive content on this platform. Hate speech on this platform is manifested in a 'covert' manner, taking advantage of security flaws and the speed of propagation of rhetoric that has already been categorised (Logrieco et al., 2021). Moreover, the categorisation of hate speech in networks is challenging due to its subjective nature and the influence of context, country, and individual factors (Salminen et al., 2018). In addition, hate speech is not a homogenous phenomenon. It can manifest in different forms and with varying objectives. It can serve to stigmatise, create discrimination and produce harm, or simply engage users in debate (March and Marrington, 2019).

Furthermore, the term "hate" presents a terminological problem within the academic community. The term "hate speech" is collectively accepted when the subject attacks a socially vulnerable group (Gómez García et al., 2021). However, there is still no universally accepted definition of hate within political content on networks (Cáceres-Zapatero et al., 2023), the subject of this study. However, recent research has proposed a term that aims to define this phenomenon: hate crypto-discourse (Berdón-Prieto et al., 2023; Herrero-Izquierdo et al., 2022; Reguero-Sanz et al., 2023). This presents an alternative interpretation to the traditional rhetoric of hate derived from the paradigm shift in the world of politics, where ideological confrontation and confrontation are taking centre stage. The objective of this novel concept is to encompass all messages that are not automatically identified as hate speech by the Academy or the platforms themselves, despite their potential to incite conflict, as they are based on the same foundation: discriminatory language directed at a person or group on the basis of their identity.

The convergence of political confrontation and polarisation makes it imperative to examine the "hidden side" of the platform (Weimann and Masri, 2020). Given its considerable popularity, it is important to consider the potential consequences of the politicisation of TikTok, which has become a popular platform for entertainment and promotion (Cerví et al., 2023),. It is therefore essential to examine the possible excesses and threats that this may pose.

In this political-media environment in which social networks are preferentially positioned, the main objective of this research is to analyse the messages published on TikTok by the parties with parliamentary representation throughout the national territory during the electoral campaign for the 2023 municipal elections. This analysis will identify and examine the specific posts that encourage polarisation between parties and have an impact on the quality of public debate and the integrity of democracies. In addition, the study aims to identify a set of common characteristics shared by this type of political content, which will contribute to the development of a theoretical framework on this subject.

The overarching hypothesis of this study is that, when political parties reference other political forces in TikTok, the primary objective of the message is direct confrontation, disqualifying the opponent for belonging to a different group and constructing a rhetoric similar to hate speech, but with other recipients. On this basis, the study puts forward two specific hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1 (HE1): Political parties situated at the extremes of the parliamentary spectrum, such as Unidos Podemos and Vox, tend to present more polarised messages directed towards their opponents. This concept has been corroborated in the context of Twitter in the study conducted by Herrero-Izquierdo et al. (2022). Consequently, it will be possible to ascertain whether this assertion can be extrapolated to TikTok by testing the veracity of the aforementioned hypothesis.
- HE2: Despite its reputation as an entertainment platform, analysis of political communication on TikTok reveals a prevalence of crypto-hate speech. Posts on this platform not only seek to differentiate themselves from other parties but also resort to the disqualification of political forces and their representatives.

2. Material and Methods

The general sample (GM) selected for this research comprises all the videos published on the TikTok platform by the five political parties that participated in the elections in all the autonomous communities in which voting took place (PSOE, PP, Vox, Unidas Podemos and Ciudadanos) during the electoral campaign for the municipal elections of 28 May 2023, which took place between the 12th and 26th of the same month. The total number of individuals in this GM is 160, distributed as follows: The distribution of votes in the General Election is as follows: PSOE (17.50 %), Partido Popular (14.37 %), Vox (34.37 %), Unidas Podemos (33.13 %) and Ciudadanos (0.63 %). Once the GM had been compiled, an initial discourse analysis was conducted to construct a specific sample (ME1) comprising publications in which the message directly alluded to a political party or representative of a political party other than that of the issuer. The initial sample (ME1) comprises 84 TikTok videos, with the distribution as follows: The distribution of political parties in the sample is as follows: PSOE (9.52%), Partido Popular (22.62%), Vox (33.33%), Podemos (33.33%) and Ciudadanos (1.19%).

In order to analyse in detail the publications that pose a greater dialectical confrontation between political parties and representatives, a new analysis was carried out in which the videos were classified

according to their degree of hate, taking as a reference the typology proposed by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration in its study entitled: "Protocol and systems of indicators for the detection of hate speech on social networks" (Table 1). The coding was conducted by three researchers independently, and a reliability process was performed by calculating Krippendorff's alpha with the ReCal tool. The results of the test demonstrate satisfactory reliability, with a value of 0.81 in the initial test and 0.86 in the subsequent test.

Table 1. Hate intensity scale

Extreme hatred	Speech inciting violence
Hate-offense	Speech that represents personal or collective offences, incites discrimination, reproduces clichés and falsehoods.
Neutral discourse	Descriptive discourse, in which hatred does not appear.
Upstander	Alternative discourse that contributes to a counter-narrative, breaking clichés or taking a stand in defence of groups that are the target of hatred.

Source: Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration based on Watanabe et al., 2018; Gitari et al, 2015.

This new analysis has enabled the differentiation of posts classified as "neutral discourse" or "upstander", resulting in the formation of a novel specific sample (ME2), which is distributed as follows: The distribution of the posts is as follows: PP (22.22%), Vox (55.56%), Podemos (19.44%), and Ciudadanos (2.78%). In order to meet the research objectives, an analysis of the discourse of this ME2 was carried out using a range of variables in order to define the characteristics of this type of discourse. Firstly, the messages were categorised according to the topic they addressed using the catalogue of 18 issues proposed by Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo (2022). Secondly, the discursive focus of the messages was determined using the distribution proposed by Mazzoleni (2010). The two indices provide a contextualisation of the issues that generate the most polarisation.

Having considered the characteristics of hate speech from a communicative standpoint, it is now necessary to examine the linguistic features employed and their intended effects. In order to analyse this, previous studies have been employed, including that of Noriega and Iribarren (2012), which was based on Van Dijk's previous work (2002), and that of Miró Llinares (2016).

3. Results

In the context of the electoral campaign for the municipal elections scheduled to take place in May 2023, a significant proportion of the strategies employed by the political parties in question were based on the use of the social media platform TikTok. In fact, 52.5% (N=84) of the total number of posts published by the parties in question were related to the mention of other political parties, with the explicit intention of differentiating themselves from these other parties and creating a polarising climate. As illustrated in Table 2, each party has established a series of confrontational relationships through these mentions, which have, on occasion, resulted in the dissemination of information that is not particularly constructive for the electorate. The PSOE was the sole party that, despite referencing other parties in its videos, refrained from employing hateful rhetoric. In contrast, United Podemos concentrated its aggressive messages on the Partido Popular, particularly targeting the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso. In the case of Cs, which only published one video on this platform during the campaign, it dedicated itself to discrediting the vice-president of the Junta de Castilla y León, Juan García-Gallardo, even going so far as to request his departure from politics. The PP has repeatedly referred to the two parties that formed the central government, personalising their offensive criticism towards Pedro Sánchez, but above all towards Unidas Podemos. Furthermore, they directed vitriolic rhetoric towards other parties not directly implicated in the investigation, such as Bildu. This was due to the fact that one of the central tenets of their discourse was the criticism of the agreements between the PSOE and the Basque party.

It is noteworthy that Vox has been the party that has directed the majority of its criticism towards its political opponents, with a particular focus on the PSOE. Nevertheless, left-wing forces, such as UP and Bildu, have also been subject to criticism with regard to their stance on the 2030 Agenda. Citizens has only been referenced once by Unidas Podemos.

Table 2. Number of inter-party hate speech

Transmitter Receiver	Vox	PP	UP	Citizens
Vox	-	0	2	1
PP	4	-	6	0
UP	3	2	-	0
Citizens	0	0	1	-
PSOE	12	8	0	0
Bildu	3	2	-	-
Total	22	12	9	1

Source: own elaboration

The videos address a number of themes, two of which are particularly noteworthy. The videos address two key themes: "Nationalism, separatism and plurinational-centralism", which has been emphasised by Vox and the Popular Party, and the theme of "Justice, democratic quality, corruption and transparency", which has attracted greater transversality, with ideologically opposed parties such as Vox and Podemos focusing on it, are two of the most prominent themes in this area. In third place is the topic of "Detailed assessment of government action." In this area, the PP and Vox have attacked the PSOE in order to demonstrate their opposition to the government's policies. It is also noteworthy that the far-right has also concentrated its attention on immigration, which represents a significant aspect of its ideological corpus. A perusal of Table 3 reveals that they have levelled a destructive critique on a number of issues. Conversely, UNO Podemos, the sole government party to disseminate such a message, concentrated its efforts on matters that align more closely with its political identity, including the battle against corruption, sexual and cultural diversity, and environmental concerns.

Table 3. Themes on which political parties focused for their narrative of hatred towards other formations

Theme/Party	Vox	PP	UP	Citizens	Total
Nationalism, separatism. Centralism-plurinational	4	4	0	0	8
Justice, quality democracy, corruption and transparency	3	1	3	0	7
Detailed assessment of government action	3	2	0	0	5
Diversity. Racism vs. migrants and multiculturalism.	3	0	0	0	3
Social rights and health. Welfare state vs. freedom	1	1	0	0	2
Diversity. Machismo vs. equality	1	0	1	0	2
Non-sectoral personal confrontations	2	0	0	0	2
Environment and animal welfare	0	0	1	1	2
International politics and globalism	2	0	0	0	2
Public anecdotes, curiosities	0	0	1	0	1
Diversity. Homophobia vs. LGTBI Policies and Rights	0	0	1	0	1
Economy, Finance and economic sectors	1	0	0	0	1

Source: own elaboration

In terms of focus, across all parties, 'political issue' (86.1%) strongly predominates over other 'more serious' issues that fall under the heading of 'policy issue' (8.3%). It is curious, especially in the time frame of the research, that only UNO Podemos launched hate messages with an electoral focus (5.6%).

Within these themes, the parties used different linguistic constructions and expressions to create their hate messages (Table 4). Of all the categories examined, two stand out: "insulting or degrading language", used by parties on the right of the ideological spectrum, Vox (6) and PP (4), and "dehumanising metaphors and comments", used mainly by political forces on the extremes, Vox (4) and UP (4). To a lesser extent, they were also used by the PP (2) and Ciudadanos (1). Given the characteristics of TikTok, political forces have tried to capture the attention of the platform's audience through rhetoric linked to entertainment. The Vox party, on the other hand, is the only one that has used "false facts" to disqualify its opponent, which encourages disinformation by using populism and demagogy to win over voters.

Table 4. Type of language used by parties to generate hate speech towards other parties

Type of language/Party	Vox	PP	UP	Citizens	Total
Insulting or degrading language	6	4	3	0	13
Metaphors. Dehumanising comments	4	2	4	1	11
False facts	4	0	0	0	4
Divisive language or language of otherness	2	1	0	0	3
Trap argument	1	1	0	0	2
Stereotype-Bias	2	0	0	0	2
Justification, jokes, trivialisation of violence towards 'the others'.	1	0	0	0	1

Source: own elaboration

The linguistic constructions in question gave rise to a plethora of hate speech, encompassing a spectrum of forms and intensities. The results are remarkably consistent in this regard (Table 5). The most prevalent category of hate speech was expressions of bad taste, particularly those that originated from irony. It appears that this phenomenon is related to the idiosyncrasies of this entertainment platform. Similarly, the figures are comparable to those of more serious expressions. The figures for Vox, UP and PP were 4, 3 and 2, respectively. A comparison by party reveals that the Partido Popular is the party most frequently targeted in this manner, with three messages directed at the "honour or personal dignity" of the political adversary. Vox also has three posts in this regard; in both cases, the target was the PSOE, with particular emphasis on the figure of its Secretary General and President of the Government. Despite the classification of these types of speeches as hate speech, according to Miró Llinares (2016), they are of a relatively low intensity. However, Vox has taken a more extreme stance by employing a range of other forms of rhetoric to express its hatred towards its political opponents, such as: "Expression of bad taste through conspiracy-mongering", "Incitement to discrimination" and "Humiliation of the group".

Table 5. Purposes of hate speeches issued by parties towards other formations

Purpose of hate speech/Party	Vox	PP	UP	Citizens	Total
Expression of bad taste through irony	4	2	3	1	10
Tasteless or serious expression	4	2	3	0	9
Personal honour or dignity of lesser intensity	3	3	0	0	6
Expression of bad taste through conspiracy-mongering	4	0	0	0	4
Incitement to discrimination	3	0	0	0	3
Colloquial expression of bad taste	0	1	1	0	2
Humiliation of the group	2	0	0	0	2

Source: own elaboration

While this research is primarily concerned with the analysis of messages from political parties, it is nevertheless important to consider the manner in which these messages were received. In this context, seven of the ten posts with the highest level of interaction were signed by Vox. The Popular Party and

Podemos, with two and one videos, respectively, complete this ranking. In five of the aforementioned videos, the nationalist debate constituted the primary focus of the message, which may suggest that this is the issue that most challenges the major political parties in Spain and in which supporters are most engaged.

With regard to the latter, it is possible to observe in the most viral videos how many users participated in this belligerent and aggressive rhetoric. To illustrate, if we consider the video with the greatest number of interactions, we can observe comments such as the following: The user J.J. Lucas commented, "They are somewhere between creepy and disturbing." Furthermore, other insulting, degrading, or directly racist messages were also identified, which serve to illustrate the polarising nature of these videos. Such content could potentially impede the promotion of calm debate and encourage hatred towards certain groups. "Unfortunately, that's how it is (sic), the Spanish work themselves to death, while others live on benefits and get up (sic) at 12 noon (sic)".

4. Discussion and Conclusions

One of the objectives guiding this research was to analyse whether Spanish political parties were promoters of a type of belligerent discourse on social networks. Specifically, this research has capitalised on the opportunity presented by the local and regional elections to ascertain the communication strategies employed by the main political parties on a network that has emerged as a new arena for political discourse: TikTok was also considered. The Chinese-owned platform has been gaining strength in the political and electoral sphere as a result of its spectacular growth in the number of downloads (Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo, 2021). It is logical to conclude that this increase has provided the political sphere with a niche of potential voters that cannot be ignored in a context where the logic of entertainment, the simplification of the message and the ridiculing of the adversary seem to have become basic ingredients in the way politics is done and communicated on social networks (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2014; Gil Ramírez and Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas, 2020).

The findings of this research are consistent with those of previous studies on the confrontation between politicians and the current climate of polarisation (Engesser et al., 2017; Iyengar et al., 2012; Miller, 2020; Nieto-Jiménez, 2022). As in the other scenarios, political communication on TikTok also participates in the discursive trends of the present day, where the promotion of ideas is lost in favour of attacking and discrediting the opponent. It is accurate to state that the development of TikTok as a voter recruitment tool is still in its infancy (Cerví and Marín-Lladó, 2021; Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas et al., 2023). Nevertheless, beyond the parties' efforts to adapt to the lighthearted and playful tone that characterises the popular video platform, a significant presence of discourse focused on the implementation of polarising strategies has been observed. This discourse has the potential to generate attitudinal changes among the electorate, as has been demonstrated in previous studies (Wolley and Howarrd, 2019). Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the strategic divergences between the principal Spanish political parties.

During the election campaign, all political parties allocated a significant proportion of their posts to mention their rivals on both sides of the political spectrum. In excess of half of the posts published on TikTok omitted government proposals and instead referred to their opponents, pouring forth criticism and negative comments. With the exception of the Socialist Party, which adopted a different style, focusing on highlighting the achievements obtained after more than five years at the helm of national politics, the remaining accounts studied sought to gain a foothold on the platform through an accusatory tone and rhetoric characterised by the introduction of components of hate crypto-discourse (Herrero-Izquierdo et al., 2022; Reguero-Sanz et al., 2023; Berdón-Prieto et al., 2023). The two parties that most frequently employed this communicative style, which allowed for the observation of confrontational and hostile components, were Vox and the Partido Popular. Consequently, the initial hypothesis (HE1) is not substantiated, as it is not the two most extreme parties (Vox and Podemos) that are the most belligerent. These findings suggest that future studies should consider a comparison between conservative and progressive forces.

The analysis of the videos in the sample therefore reveals a discrepancy in behaviour between the PSOE, which was committed to supporting its electoral programmes, and the main opposition parties.

In contrast, UNO Podemos allocated considerable space and audiovisual time to its opponents, particularly the Partido Popular.

The use of insulting language, metaphors, false facts and divisive language is a common feature of this type of confrontation between parties. This highlights the increasingly recurrent use of a mode of communication that is reproduced on other platforms and whose risks are not unknown. These include fostering dynamics of distancing, confrontation and, in extreme cases, promoting an offensive discourse that encourages discrimination and contempt.

It is noteworthy that one party employed a form of hate speech that this paper categorises as high intensity. Vox appears to utilise polarising mechanisms more effectively than other parties in order to reinforce the beliefs of its community. Consequently, expressions of poor taste, group and individual humiliation, in addition to other forms of rhetoric employed to persecute those deemed different, have become central to the arguments of this political force, which undoubtedly garners a high level of engagement as a result of this type of message. It is noteworthy that a considerable number of Vox's TikTok videos, which employed a negative tone in their critique of their political opponents in the House, also registered the highest number of views. This was also the case with regard to the interaction data.

It is possible that the success of what was once called the last great emerging party in entering Parliament after 2018 is due to a certain "technological link" that it maintains with the younger generations. These generations of voters have been disillusioned with the two-party system of the PSOE and the Popular Party and have been attracted to simple, rapid, and easily shareable messages (Gallardo-Paúls and Enguix Oliver, 2016), which have also included notable aggressive components. Vox represents the paradigm of this type of communication, although both new and old parties appear to have adopted a similar approach to polarisation, which presents a considerable risk for the future. The utilisation of this particular form of rhetoric does not permit the confirmation of the second hypothesis (HE2).

In this context, and with considerable justification, Tajadura (2022) has indicated that the primary responsibility for the challenges currently facing the democratic system lies with the political parties themselves, who are its principal actors. The author notes that it is the parties themselves who have the power to replace the current fraternal political culture with one centred on the search for pacts and agreements. It is therefore evident that the key to implementing solutions on different fronts lies with the political parties themselves. In the case of digital communication, this would involve a reflection on the way in which the interaction between the political class, its representatives and the citizens themselves takes place. It is important to note that this does not imply that other institutions and even networks such as TikTok themselves should be overlooked. Unfortunately, it seems that they are still unable to prevent the community from fostering distancing dynamics.

Finally, with regard to the most frequent theme in digital messages, it has been postulated that nationalism is one of the central issues that continues to be the order of the day in Spanish politics. In a similar vein to other European countries, criticism of nationalist political formations is often accompanied by an exclusionary rhetoric that precludes them from participating in political life. This is either because their policies are deemed to have unacceptable consequences for other political forces or because they are considered illegitimate partners. De Lázaro (2018) posits that this experience is also the result of a more polarised and fragmented party system, which could also lead to a problem of delegitimisation of politics. In addition, the second most frequently asked question, which pertains to the themes of justice, transparency, corruption, and democratic quality, serves to illustrate that public trust in the system has been significantly eroded.

Nevertheless, the most concerning aspect of the phenomenon of polarisation, in terms of its impact on society, is the prevalence of violent or aggressive discourse. It can be argued that citizen participation is a fundamental aspect of guaranteeing the quality of a democracy. Therefore, it is important to consider how political parties encourage this interaction in the digital sphere. It is evident that political communication in networks continues to be affected by the incorporation of this type of messages. Consequently, it is crucial to emphasise the necessity of detecting and controlling new forms of hate speech or crypto-discourse, which is still challenging due to the lack of established standards for their classification. This research has attempted to take a further step in this direction, although it is aware of its limitations, its exploratory nature and the constraints imposed by the time period of the analysis.

5. Acknowledgements

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