



## NEW LEADERSHIP AND THE RISE OF SPECTACULARISATION ON TIKTOK: Electoral Strategies in Spain and their Impact on Citizens

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### ABSTRACT

*TikTok is becoming a key political platform at the European level, especially during election campaigns. This study analyses the specific case of Spain, specifically the leadership building of twelve mayoral candidates during the 28 May 2023 campaign, examining 268 videos from seven different municipalities and parties. Using content analysis based on the 5W model, personalisation, attributes, formal resources and engagement are evaluated. The results show the constant prominence of citizens, highlight professional qualities in leaders and show that more posts do not guarantee greater impact. In addition, six types of leadership are identified according to regularity of use, professionalism and narrative.*

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## 1. Introduction

In the age of digitalisation and instant communication, social media platforms have emerged as crucial battlegrounds for political influence and electoral mobilisation. TikTok, a network that has captured the attention of millions with its short and engaging audiovisual content, has become fertile ground for strategic experimentation in political communication. This study explores how this platform is reshaping the landscape of political communication during election campaigns, allowing parties and individual leaders to connect with young and not-so-young audiences who turn to this virtual space to escape and entertain themselves without giving up receiving news snippets or getting involved through activism (Hindriaty, 2022).

In Europe, research addressing the political use of TikTok is emerging. Unlike networks such as Snapchat, which have not caught on in this geographical area, the Chinese platform has managed to make its way into the galaxy of Web 2.0 successor *apps* that are also regularly used by institutions and civil society to gain presence and influence in the digital public sphere. However, there are still not many studies that focus on municipal campaigns and candidates to discover how TikTok fits into smaller, local areas, where proximity is a key element. A relevant case that fits in perfectly with this work is the contribution by Cervi (2023), who analyses the communication of Ada Colau, candidate for Barcelona en Comú in the 2023 municipal elections and presents her as an example of a *political influencer*.

Therefore, in order to advance knowledge in this area, we propose the following main objective (MO) and specific objectives (SO):

PO. To characterise the political use of TikTok by mayoral candidates active on this social network during the municipal election campaign held in Spain on 28 May 2023.

SO1. To analyse the construction of leadership and the management of the formal resources that make up the audiovisual production of these political actors, as part of a strategy of spectacularisation.

SO2. To ascertain the publication patterns and impact of the videos shared in terms of *engagement*.

Our sample, like Cervi's work (2023), also includes videos posted on TikTok by Colau, but it also includes those by Joan Ribó, Rita Maestre, Xavier García Albiol, Javier Ortega Smith, Eva Parera, José Luis Martínez Almeida, Jaume Collboni, Natalia Chueca, Sandra Gómez, Paco Cuenca, and Carlos Velázquez. All of them are candidates of varying popularity from different parties and cities. This has allowed us, through the technique of quantitative content analysis, to track trends in the use of the platform, as well as to reflect on how citizens in municipal contexts receive this content.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Image and political spectacle on social media

Politics has always been visual. The use of non-textual symbols and the dissemination of stories that embody universal values to create political myths is not unique to our recent era, but dates back to the earliest manifestations of power (Arroyo, 2012). In any case, the centrality of the image as a tool that reflects and constructs political reality has been studied as a growing phenomenon since the mid-20th century, following the birth of television. The democratisation of this device is associated with a revolution in the way political actors present themselves to the public, as its audiovisual nature and mediatization, the need to adapt to the grammar of the mass media, condition their strategies (Mazzoleni, 2008). A revolution that takes the form of spectacularisation (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2015), that is, a style of communication based on the primacy of image over words, entertainment over political programmes and ideas, theatricalised dichotomous rhetoric and emotion over rational debate, and the personal attributes of the leader over the party collective (Laguna, 2011; Martínez, 2006). All of this is aimed at achieving the much-desired media coverage, which, in turn, feeds on the attention of an audience that must be seduced rather than persuaded (Laguna, 2011).

The transition from television to social media has marked the beginning of a new era in visual politics (Bustos Díaz, 2024; Lalancette and Raynald, 2019). Digital platforms have democratised access to audiences, allowing politicians and their followers to create and share visual content instantly and on a large scale. This platformisation marks a turning point in the way visual political information is communicated, perceived and consumed (Marquart, 2023), increasingly influenced by *politainment* (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2022) as new digital narratives heighten the emotions, conflicts and scandals inherited from the television format (Pérez-Curiel and García-Gordillo, 2020). On networks such as

YouTube, this is evident in the styles of so-called political *influencers* (Carcavila-Puey, et al., 2024). Images are becoming more necessary than ever in the face of the information overload that reaches us from all fronts and the lack of time and resources to deal with it, as they represent a cognitive shortcut to verbal and textual communication (Viounnikoff-Benet, 2018) and a powerful tool for constructing the political image understood as identity (Schill, 2012). In short, images, symbols, memes and videos are central and strategic elements in the configuration of political discourse on digital platforms, where they find greater acceptance and reach (Devia Acevedo, 2024).

For some, the future of social media in the context of platformised visual politics lies in the supremacy of short videos (Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Piñero-Otero and Martínez-Rolán, 2020). Interest in this format has grown steadily since the days of the Vine app (Schellewald, 2021) and is reflected in the success of audiovisual networks such as YouTube and, more recently, TikTok. The latter, as we shall see below, is the "new frontier" of digital politics, the paradigm of the triumph of fast-paced, algorithm-filtered and visually appealing content (Umansky and Pipal, 2023), where spectacularisation finds an ideal territory to take root.

## **2.2. The political emergence of TikTok in Europe, Spain and its influence on citizens**

TikTok is a Chinese social network that was launched worldwide in 2018 following the merger of Musical.ly and the international version of Douyin. Since 2020, due to the lockdowns resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, this platform has experienced sustained growth, reaching 1.2 billion monthly active users worldwide (Dixon, 2023) and 18 million users in Spain (TikTok, 2023). TikTok's popularity lies in its continuous and endless stream of short videos ranging from music to humour to information and educational content, its powerful content recommendation algorithm, its mobile interface that automatically plays videos in full screen, and its ability to easily create and viralise multimedia pieces that encourage interaction and editability by the community (Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Umansky and Pipal, 2023).

In the European context, TikTok has stood out for its ability to viralise content related to the war in Ukraine (Olivares et al., 2022), for conveying the fusion between pop culture and politics in elections in countries such as Italy (Battista, 2023), for mobilising young people through emotions in European elections (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025), and for serving parties such as the AfD in Germany to deploy alternative communication strategies (Bösch, 2023).

On the other hand, this social network has been implemented at the political level in Spain since 2020, when parties and leaders began to realise its potential for gaining visibility and reactions from new audiences by taking advantage of its light-hearted nature (Anderson, 2020; Cervi et al., 2021). Above all, its use has increased as a result of various elections (Morejón-Llamas, 2023). Although having a political profile on the platform has become commonplace, these actors still need to move beyond traditional communication practices, explore TikTok's own genres and dare to innovate (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021; Gómez de Travesedo et al., 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023).

The existing literature highlights that Podemos has been one of the most active and committed parties on TikTok alongside VOX (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021), with the latter being the most successful in adjusting its content to user demands and the characteristics of the medium (Castro and Díaz, 2021; Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo, 2022). The key is the dissemination of very short pieces, music, informal content, clear messages, the use of emoticons and visual effects, and criticism of their opponents (Castro and Díaz, 2021), as well as a variety of topics of interest to young people, such as LGBTI rights, equality, patriotism, curiosities and anecdotes, assessments of government, etc. (Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo, 2022). In general terms, it has been observed that Spanish parties do not use TikTok strategically, considering it a one-way channel where information and promotion take precedence over deliberation, mobilisation and dialogue (Morejón-Llamas, 2023).

As for the reception of publications, some studies emphasise that the number of videos shared on the platform is not always a determining factor in digital success, as is the case with VOX, which benefits from the slogan "less is more" (Gómez de Travesedo Rojas et al., 2023). This success is often associated with content that is trivial, spectacular, and confrontational, which all parties try to embrace across the board (López Fernández, 2022). Therefore, it can be observed that the most popular posts are those most closely related to *politainment* (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021). On the other hand, although TikTok is a platform that can promote the spread of disinformation (Alonso-López et al., 2021), polarisation

(Hindriaty, 2022) or audience fragmentation (Palau-Sampio and López-García, 2022), it also engenders new forms of citizen participation, such as playful activism (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2022).

### 3. Methodology

The technique used is quantitative content analysis, commonly used in communication research to categorise large groups of textual or audiovisual messages in order to observe the frequency of these categories and draw conclusions. Busquet and Medina (2017, p.231) define it as a "method that studies and analyses communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner with the aim of finding measurement variables". The categories of analysis we have chosen are grouped around two variables that help us evaluate the degree of spectacularisation: personalisation (strategic management of prominence and strategic orientation of leadership towards certain attributes) and formal resources. On the other hand, the publication pattern has been studied by recording the videos shared each day by each leader, and to evaluate the impact, their overall *engagement* has been measured based on the average *engagement* received by all videos, calculated using the formula  $[(\text{comments} + \text{likes}) / \text{views}] \times 100$  (Table 3).

For our template of spectacularisation categories, we have based ourselves on two of the five "Ws of digital image" by López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2018; 2021): the "who" (Table 1) and the "how" (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Personalisation analysis protocol

Categories		
Protagonist / Co-protagonist	Leader	
	Party members	
	Other politicians	
	Party	
	Citizens	
	Media	
	Impersonal / No co-stars	
Attributes	Family or friends	
	Others	
	Professional	Statesman Manager Communicator Mass leader Protector Others
	Personal	Family or partner Friends Hobbies Other
	Not applicable	The leader does not appear in the video

Source(s): Own elaboration, 2024.

**Table 2.** Protocol for analysing formal resources

	Categories
<b>Duration</b>	Less than 30 seconds
	Between 30 seconds and 1 minute
	30 seconds
	Less than 3 minutes
	Less than 5 minutes
<b>Orientation</b>	Carousel
	Vertical
<b>Subtitles</b>	Horizontal
	Yes
<b>Music</b>	No
	Yes
<b>Editing and/or effects</b>	No
	Yes
<b>Source of images</b>	Match
	Media
	Citizens and civil society
	Institutions
<b>Type of production</b>	Others
	Total own production
	Partial own production
	External production

Source(s): Own elaboration, 2024.

**Table 3.** Protocol for analysing publication patterns and impact

<b>Publication pattern</b>	Daily record of the number of publications by each leader during the election campaign and during a control week
<b>Impact</b>	Average <i>engagement</i> received by all videos, calculated using the formula $[(\text{comments} + \text{likes}) / \text{views}] \times 100$

Source(s): Own elaboration, 2024.









Regarding the final definition of the sample, we selected 268 posts, corresponding to all the videos shared on TikTok by twelve mayoral candidates between 12 and 28 May 2023, i.e. the two weeks of the election campaign prior to the municipal elections on 28 May in Spain, plus the day of reflection and election day. On the other hand, a control week was selected, from 3 to 9 July 2023, to check whether the regularity of campaign posts continues in a normal political period.

Table 4 lists the twelve leaders, both men and women, who have been selected according to three criteria: popularity, geographical context and ideological orientation. Regarding the popularity criterion, which is used to order the names in Table 4, the TikTok profiles of local Spanish politicians (mayors and councillors) were reviewed to check their number of followers, and those with the most followers, exceeding 10,000, were selected. This resulted in a list of seven leaders. To expand and diversify the sample, politicians with average popularity below that number of followers were selected. Thus, we find four popularity ranges in the sample: <10,000 followers, between 10,000 and 20,000 followers, between 20,000 and 30,000 followers, and > 30,000 followers.


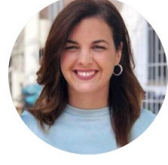


The two remaining selection criteria, geographical context and ideological orientation, have been applied to those local candidates with fewer than 10,000 followers, to ensure the representativeness and heterogeneity of the sample. Thus, although there are candidates in Spain with a higher number of followers than some of those we have included here (Pilar Lima, Roberto Sotomayor, Dani Pérez), they have been discarded in favour of others from different cities and parties, ensuring a minimum balance. For example, Carlos Velázquez, the Popular Party mayor of Toledo, has been included despite having 100 fewer followers than the socialist Dani Pérez from Malaga. We also took into account that during the campaign days, the accounts were minimally active and that the profile showed previous activity. We also found media cases such as that of Paco Cuenca, former socialist mayor of Granada, who has appeared in the press as one of the Spanish pioneers in the use of TikTok. However, other politicians with considerable public exposure in major Spanish cities are not included in the sample because they

do not have (or at least did not have at the time of the analysis) a TikTok account. This is the case, for example, of María José Català, the Popular Party candidate for mayor of Valencia.

**Table 4.** List of leaders analysed

	City and number of inhabitants*	Party	Followers**
	Valencia 807,693	Compromís	35,000
<b>Joan Ribó (@joanribovlc)</b>			
	Barcelona 1,660,122	Barcelona en Comú	31,800
<b>Ada Colau (@adacolau)</b>			
	Madrid 3,332,035	Más Madrid	28,700
<b>Rita Maestre (@ritamaestre)</b>			
	Badalona 225,957	PP	28,500
<b>Xavier García Albiol (@albiol_xg)</b>			
	Madrid 3,332,035	VOX	26,300
<b>Javier Ortega Smith (@ortega_smith)</b>			
	Barcelona 1,660,122	Valents	23,700
<b>Eva Parera (@evapareraescrichs)</b>			
	Madrid 3,332,035	PP	17,400
<b>José Luis Martínez Almeida (@martinez_almeida)</b>			
	Barcelona 1,660,122	PSOE	6,292



<b>Jaume Collboni</b> <b>(@jaumecollboni)</b>			
	Zaragoza 682,513	PP	4,070
<b>Natalia Chueca</b> <b>(@nataliachueca_)</b>			
	Valencia 807,693	PSOE	3,959
<b>Sandra Gómez</b> <b>(@sandragomezvalencia23)</b>			
	Granada 230,595	PSOE	3,084
<b>Paco Cuenca</b> <b>(@pacocuencagr)</b>			
	Toledo 86,070	PP	1,521
<b>Carlos Velázquez</b> <b>(@cvelazquezromo)</b>			

Source(s): Own elaboration. \*INE data for the year 2023. \*\*Followers in May 2023.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The election campaign as a key moment for publishing content

After counting the videos shared during the 17 days of monitoring, we found that Ada Colau was by far the candidate who published the most content on TikTok during the 28 May campaign. Colau was followed by Sandra Gómez and Xavier García Albiol, Natalia Chueca, Rita Maestre, Carlos Velázquez and Joan Ribó. At the bottom of the list, posting an average of less than one video per day, we find Jaume Collboni, who uploaded 14 posts, Javier Ortega Smith, Eva Parera, and Paco Cuenca. José Luis Martínez Almeida, despite his relative popularity on TikTok and his political importance as mayor of Madrid, only posted five videos.

**Table 5.** Videos posted (totals and daily average) during the campaign and control week

Leader	Videos posted (Campaign / Control week)	Daily average (Campaign / Control week)	Will they win the mayoral election?
Ada Colau	70 / 3	4.12 / 0.43	No
Sandra Gómez	33 / 0	1.94 / 0	No
Xavier G. Albiol	30 / 1	1.76 / 0.14	Yes
Natalia Chueca	26 / 5	1.53 / 0.71	Yes
Rita Maestre	21 / 0	1.24 / 0	No
Carlos Velázquez	19 / 4	1.12 / 0.57	Yes
Joan Ribó	18 / 1	1.06 / 0.14	No

Jaume Collboni	14 / 0	0.82 / 0	Yes
Javier Ortega	12 / 2	0.71 / 0.29	No
Eva Parera	10 / 0	0.59 / 0	No
Paco Cuenca	10 / 1	0.59 / 0.14	No
J.L. M. Almeida	5 / 0	0.29 / 0	Yes

Source(s): Own elaboration, 2024.

Once the campaign was over, looking at a random week a few weeks after the elections (we chose the first week of July for our analysis), there was a drastic reduction in the number of posts, as can be seen in Table 5. In fact, a significant number of leaders, whether they won the elections or obtained the majority needed to become mayor or not, did not share any posts during the control week. This is the case for Sandra Gómez, Rita Maestre, Jaume Collboni, Eva Parera and José Luis Martínez Almeida. The leaders who posted the most during those days in July were Natalia Chueca and Carlos Velázquez, both winning candidates, followed by two candidates who did not win: Ada Colau and Javier Ortega Smith. However, none of them posted even half a video per day, when during the election campaign they did reach or exceed that rate. Xavier García Albiol, Joan Ribó and Paco Cuenca each shared a single video between 3 and 9 July.

#### ***4.2. Spectacularisation and management of prominence: citizens as a complement to the leader***

When analysing personal rather than corporate profiles, it is not surprising to see that the candidates appear as clear protagonists in the vast majority of their TikTok videos. Only Xavier García Albiol and Paco Cuenca (Figure 3) set aside their own figures to give a central role to citizens in half of their posts, while Sandra Gómez dedicates 9.09% and 12.12% of her videos to showing members of her party and citizens as protagonists, respectively. Another case that diversifies in this regard is Joan Ribó, as 11.11% of his posts correspond to videos featuring politicians from other parties.

As for the presence of co-stars, it is quite common for citizens to appear accompanying the leader, either in the background or nearby, interacting, to build an image of closeness and accessibility. Those who most often opt for this visual narrative are Carlos Velázquez, Javier Ortega Smith, Rita Maestre, Natalia Chueca (Figure 1), Joan Ribó and Paco Cuenca. Only Eva Parera completely refrains from posting videos featuring citizens, either as protagonists or co-stars; on the other hand, the candidate for Barcelona does involve other politicians in up to 30% of her posts, specifically Ada Colau, in order to confront her. Javier Ortega Smith uploaded another considerable number of posts accompanied by members of VOX, while Jaume Collboni, José Luis Martínez Almeida, Natalia Chueca, Ada Colau, and Carlos Velázquez did the same with members of their own organisations. The only politicians who share the stage with friends or family are Ada Colau (Figure 2) and Joan Ribó.

**Figure 1.** Example of 'citizens' co-starring.



Source: Natalia Chueca's TikTok profile.



**Figure 2.** Example of 'family' co-starring.



Source: Ada Colau's TikTok profile.

**Figure 3.** Example of 'citizens' protagonism.



Source: Paco Cuenca's TikTok profile.

With regard to the roles adopted by municipal candidates in the 28 May campaign, there are two that recur frequently: that of manager and that of leader of the masses. The former is found mainly in the profiles of Natalia Chueca, Ada Colau, Eva Parera, Sandra Gómez and Carlos Velázquez, while the latter is displayed by Paco Cuenca, José Luis Martínez Almeida, Xavier García Albiol (Figure 5) and Javier Ortega Smith. The latter also reinforces his image as a statesman in 25% of his posts, presenting himself as a politician with lofty ideals, capable of looking after the general interest in a somewhat heroic manner. This is an attribute that we also observe in Eva Parera and Jaume Collboni and even in nine videos posted on Ada Colau's account. All these roles are professional in nature. On the other hand, if we look at those of a personal nature, more closely linked to the spectacular style, we find that Ada Colau and Martínez Almeida project a family image in some cases, while Paco Cuenca, Joan Ribó (Figure 4) and Eva Parera share their *background* of hobbies or activities outside politics.

**Figure 4.** Example of the 'hobbies' role.



Source: Joan Ribó's TikTok profile.

**Figure 5.** Example of the 'leader of the masses' role.



Source: Xavier García Albiol's TikTok profile.

#### **4.3. Formal resources: between professionalism and spontaneity**

Finally, we address the formal characteristics of the videos. At this point, we note that the vast majority are between 30 seconds and a minute and a half long. Except for Paco Cuenca, who prefers very short videos of less than 30 seconds (up to 70% of his posts), the rest of the leaders use this format in at least half of their posts, with Eva Parera and Carlos Velázquez using it the most. The very short format is also common in the profiles of Joan Ribó, Xavier García Albiol and Javier Ortega Smith. Martínez Almeida and Ribó occasionally favour a longer format of up to 3 minutes. Sandra Gómez is the only candidate who uses photo carousels instead of videos: 9.09% of her campaign posts.

The vertical format is overwhelmingly dominant in the sample, with the exception of practically only the adverts, and Gómez uses it the most due to the carousels she shares. With regard to editing and effects, there is a clear consensus that they should be included, although Martínez Almeida (Figure 7) and Paco Cuenca deviate more from this trend by incorporating spontaneous and simple videos from mobile phones. There is more polarisation in the use of music and subtitles, a decision that varies among leaders. For example, Martínez Almeida, Ribó, Albiol, Velázquez, Ortega Smith and Cuenca are more in favour of not using subtitles. With regard to extradiegetic music, it is mainly included by Collboni, García Albiol, Velázquez, Maestre, Chueca, Gómez, Ribó and Parera.

Finally, most images originate from the party itself and, secondly, from the media (Figure 6). Cuenca stands out for disseminating images of personal origin. In any case, the images are usually part of videos produced entirely in-house, with hardly any external production detected. We do see some examples of videos where external resources are used to create personalised videos, especially in the profiles of Gómez, Parera and Collboni.

In short, candidates use TikTok's formal resources strategically. Most of them opt for a standard short, vertical video format with high-quality images from mobile phones, produced by the party, with music and subtitles, giving a professional look. However, spontaneity is a tempting style for connecting with the audience and is used in some cases.

**Figure 6.** Example of 'partial in-house production' with media images and subtitles.



Source: Sandra Gómez's TikTok profile.

**Figure 7.** Example of a 'fully self-produced' video without subtitles.



Source: José Luis Martínez Almeida's TikTok profile.

#### 4.4. Connecting with the audience: the role of spectacularisation in engagement

After applying the *engagement* formula  $[(\text{comments} + \text{likes}) / \text{views}] \times 100$  to each video and then calculating the average for each leader by adding up all the percentages obtained and dividing the result by the number of videos published, we obtain the percentages shown in Table 6, where they are listed in descending order.

**Table 6.** Leaders ranked from highest to lowest average *engagement*

Leader	Average <i>engagement</i> (%)	Videos published	Followers
Joan Ribó	8.66	18	35,000
Javier Ortega Smith	6.06	12	26,300
Rita Maestre	6.05	21	28,700
Eva Parera	5.91	10	23,700
José Luis Martínez Almeida	5.45	5	17,400
Ada Colau	5.22	70	31,800
Paco Cuenca	4.66	10	3,084
Carlos Velázquez	4.55	19	1521
Sandra Gómez	4.25	33	3959
Natalia Chueca	4.03	26	4070
Jaume Collboni	4.02	14	6,292
Xavier García Albiol	3.09	30	28,500

Source(s): Own elaboration, 2024.

As we can see, the leaders who post most frequently on their TikTok profiles (Ada Colau, Sandra Gómez, Xavier García Albiol, Natalia Chueca) are not necessarily the ones who receive the most comments and *likes*. Instead, user interaction has more to do with the number of followers (and, therefore, the leader's public profile). Xavier García Albiol is a special case: despite being one of the municipal politicians with the most followers on TikTok, he receives relatively low *engagement*. Ada Colau, although also popular on the platform and posting regularly during the campaign, does not generate the most engagement and is surpassed by other candidates such as Ortega Smith and Eva Parera. Joan Ribó, with 35,000 followers and a moderate number of videos posted, is the most successful. Among the leaders with the fewest followers, Paco Cuenca stands out, whose few videos generate remarkable *engagement*.

In light of this data, we can point to a trend that the key to success lies in connecting with the audience through authenticity, controversy and emotions, rather than the amount of content published. Candidates with a more rational and less spectacular style, even if they post regularly, tend to achieve moderate *engagement*: for example, Ada Colau and Natalia Chueca, despite their professionalism and consistency, do not achieve the same levels of interaction as other leaders. On the other hand, Javier Ortega Smith and Eva Parera, with controversial positions, achieve above-average *engagement* despite not being the most popular. Paco Cuenca, with few followers but a more approachable and personal style, also stands out in this regard.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained raise several reflections on the management of political videos on TikTok in the context of a municipal election campaign such as that of 28 May 2023.

Regarding the first specific objective (SO1) that we set out at the beginning of the research, namely, to analyse the construction of leadership and the management of the formal resources that make up the audiovisual production of municipal candidates as part of a strategy of spectacularisation, we present two findings. First, when examining personalisation, we identified two profiles with two different narratives: public managers, who project a more formal and individual image linked to political achievements (Natalia Chueca, Ada Colau, Sandra Gómez); and populists, who use rhetoric and staging where it is important to show the leader surrounded by people or linked to them through discourse (Xavier García Albiol, Paco Cuenca, Carlos Velázquez, José Luis Martínez Almeida). The predominant roles are intended to mobilise through two mechanisms: one more rational, in which the aim is to persuade potential voters that the leader's political proposals and decisions are better than those of the rest; and another more emotional, in which the aim is to gain the support and backing of the public, perhaps with the *bandwagon* effect in mind (Schmitt-Beck, 2015). Secondly, two other identities can be



identified on TikTok based on the management of formal resources: professional candidates, with a standardised style that generally is based on the use of music, subtitles, editing, captions, limited natural images recorded by the party and a standard duration of between 30 seconds and 1 minute and a half (Jaume Collboni, Eva Parera, Natalia Chueca, Ada Colau, Xavier García Albiol, Rita Maestre, Sandra Gómez, Carlos Velázquez, Rita Maestre, Javier Ortega Smith); and amateur/experimental candidates, who diversify their resources a little more and opt for a more spontaneous style (Joan Ribó, Paco Cuenca, José Luis Martínez Almeida).

With regard to the second specific objective (S02), where we expressed our desire to ascertain the publication patterns and impact of shared videos in terms of *engagement*, we found several relevant trends. On the one hand, looking at the publication pattern, we consider that there are two types of profiles: the committed ones, who publish regularly on the platform and remain loyal to it beyond the campaign (Ada Colau, Natalia Chueca, Javier Ortega Smith, Carlos Velázquez); and opportunists, who jump on the TikTok bandwagon for purely electoral purposes (José Luis Martínez Almeida, Eva Parera, Jaume Collboni, Rita Maestre and Sandra Gómez). Halfway between the two are leaders such as Joan Ribó, Xavier García Albiol and Paco Cuenca, who make themselves noticed outside the campaign, but much less frequently. Be that as it may, no candidate maintains the frenetic pace seen before the elections, and those with the most room for improvement (due to a general lack of videos) are José Luis Martínez Almeida, Eva Parera and Paco Cuenca. On the contrary, Ada Colau is guilty of excess. In terms of impact, we conclude that publishing more videos, even if done consistently and regularly, does not equate to more interaction from users. This reinforces the findings of previous studies (Gómez de Travesedo et al., 2023; Orbegozo-Terradillos et al., 2024). In this sense, the number of followers, i.e. the leader's prior popularity, is more relevant. However, within this framework, we find interesting nuances, as candidates with controversial profiles (Javier Ortega Smith, Eva Parera) or who play with spectacular resources (Joan Ribó, Paco Cuenca) to get closer to the public and seek an emotional reaction seem to elicit more participation. This has also been demonstrated by other authors (López Fernández, 2022). Leaders with fresh content but a more rational approach (Ada Colau, Xavier García Albiol, Natalia Chueca) moderate their *engagement*. Finally, it is striking that the three municipal leaders with the most followers in Spain come from "new politics" organisations: Compromís, Barcelona en Comú and Más Madrid. Perhaps we could draw a parallel between these and Podemos, a party on the left of the spectrum that has set political and communicative trends and was one of the pioneers in the successful use of TikTok (Cervi et al., 2021).

As a general conclusion, we found that municipal candidates on TikTok engage in moderate spectacularisation, creating videos of a political and professional nature, but occasionally daring to expose their more intimate and informal side. This is in line with other research that identifies a neglect of the entertainment function of TikTok by Spanish politicians (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021). The videos uploaded by these leaders are adapted to the platform and tend to have a standard style that takes advantage of TikTok codes (*trending* music, subtitles, text boxes, mobile content, etc.). The campaign is a key moment when almost all of them strive to publish content (Morejón-Llamas, 2023), although the rest of the year their political use is irregular and minor. In any case, the strategies are disparate, and each actor displays a particular type of interaction, content and publication rhythm (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021).

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the real impact that TikTok is having in the public sphere and the consequences of its expansion in terms of citizen participation and civic awareness in contexts such as Spain and Europe. Although candidates such as Ada Colau, Joan Ribó and Rita Maestre have accumulated a significant number of followers, reactions and videos on their profiles, this apparent virtual success has not translated into electoral victories, as these three politicians did not win the mayoral elections in their respective cities. Commitment and professionalisation are not everything, and activity on networks such as TikTok does not always mobilise people but rather is aimed at "offering entertainment in a playful and mass manner, without exerting a direct persuasive influence in the political sphere" (Orbegozo-Terradillos et al., 2024, p.17). This, coupled with TikTok's algorithmic functioning, which sponsors content that is not necessarily beneficial to public debate, and the fact that politicians use the platform as a showcase rather than a channel for dialogue (Cervi et al., 2021) has led some authors to speak of a "de-relational" paradigm in digital political communication (Orbegozo-Terradillos et al., 2024) that does not bode well for the present and future of the media sphere.

Although this study offers some relevant trends on the use of TikTok in political communication during the 2023 municipal election campaign in Spain, it has certain limitations that open the way for future lines of research. The sample, which focuses on a select group of candidates and a specific time period, may not reflect the diversity of strategies employed in other political or temporal contexts. In other words, this is a case study whose results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to other contexts or non-electoral periods.

Furthermore, although rigorous, the quantitative approach could benefit from being complemented by qualitative analyses that delve deeper into the motivations and reception of communication strategies. On the other hand, it would be advisable to test the leadership types we propose in other samples. For future research, it would be enriching to explore the use of TikTok over time, including non-election periods, and to compare these findings internationally. Likewise, investigating the direct impact of these strategies on citizen participation and effectiveness in terms of electoral mobilisation could provide a more holistic understanding of TikTok's role in the contemporary political sphere.

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