

# Political polarization and politainment: Methodology for analyzing crypto hate speech on *TikTok*

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## Abstract

*TikTok* has become an international benchmark: In 2022 it was the most downloaded application in all of Europe. Political discourse has not stayed on the sidelines, and its rhetoric has been adapted to a young electorate who feels at home with this new platform. Given this social network's explosion, the main objective of this research is to analyze which topics and approaches the parties with the greatest parliamentary representation use most frequently by looking at their activity on *TikTok* and determine how they have leveraged a time of polarization and political confrontation to a network geared toward entertainment. To achieve these objectives, a methodological triangulation based on three analyses –quantitative content, discourse, and qualitative content– is used. The sample consists of 250 posts from the official profiles of the following Spanish political parties: *Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)*, *Partido Popular (PP)*, *Ciudadanos (C's)*, *Unidas Podemos (UP)*, and *Vox*. Specifically, a non-random stratification system was used, selecting the 50 videos from each party that had with the highest number of views since they launched their profiles on this social network. From a theoretical standpoint, this study proposes a new concept, the aggressive critical message (ACM), which is presented as a further contribution to the conceptual framework of emerging studies on crypto hate speech. From an empirical standpoint, the results obtained reveal that the partisan rhetoric on *TikTok* is not homogeneous, and substantial differences are seen between the topics addressed by the different parties. It also is concluded that the parties are implementing techniques used in entertainment alongside polarization itself, which trivializes politics, aiming to go viral rather than to provoke thought.

## Keywords

Political polarization; Political communication; Politainment; Political parties; Hate speech; Crypto hate speech; *TikTok*; Social networks; Social media; Engagement; Aggressive critical message; Discourse analysis; Content analysis.



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**1. TikTok and politics: A pairing to be explored**

In a short period of time, *TikTok* has become a social network on the rise and an entertainment tool that is outpacing other traditional platforms. Launched in 2016 by the company *ByteDance* under its original name *Douyin*, *TikTok* started as an application for short videos (15 seconds), whose maximum length has increased to 10 minutes. Its exponential growth, especially during the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic, has led *TikTok* to become increasingly important in today’s “network-society” even though how some users utilize it is still little understood. The measurable success of this application, according to **Espinoza-Beltrán et al. (2021)**, is due to its interactivity, using reactions such as like, comment, and share, and to the ease of disseminating content in a quick and entertaining way –in fact, as early as 2020, the newspaper *The Guardian* stressed that *TikTok* had impressive potential to generate entertainment. “*TikTok* is designed to be addictive,” stated that article (**Kale, 2020**), which gave an apt description highlighting the platform’s ability to get users “hooked.”

Authors such as **Sidorenko-Bautista, Herranz-de la Casa, and Moya-Ruiz (2022)** have noted that videos that characterize this network are known for being highly visually stimulating or having stories that are amusing or that help the viewer unwind. Short videos, in turn, have emerged as the most popular form of social entertainment, capturing the attention of multiple sectors. The editing technologies offered by the social network also enable quick and easy content editing. This content can also be shared on other platforms such as *WhatsApp*, such that it can go viral in the event that that occurs.

For all of the abovementioned reasons, there is no doubt that *TikTok* is already one of the benchmark networks; in fact, in 2022 it was even ranked as the most downloaded application in all of Europe (*Sensor Tower, 2022*). With its explosion in popularity, the platform has naturally transformed from a place for jokes and challenges to a very powerful communication tool in which numerous players coexist. For political parties and their representatives, *TikTok* has also opened up a fabulous opportunity for communication, just as with other networks that were credited with changing the way politics was done in their heyday (**Tucker et al., 2018**). Consequently, in the field of academic research, there are many studies focusing their attention on the use of this platform to interact with the electorate.

Outside of the purely European studies and those focused on the Latin American context, examinations of how the major Spanish parties use this new network have resulted in interesting research. A good number of them emerged as the platform was evolving and its possibilities were becoming known. Indeed, we can talk about a first stage of *TikTok*’s development, in which some groups such as *Podemos* stood out above the rest (**Cervi; Marín-Lladó, 2021**). However, *Vox*’s situation has not been very different. The far-right party has been known for making clever, albeit dangerous, use of social networks. Its strategy, according to **Morencos-Jaén (2022)**, has been to turn these spaces into an extremely important asset. More specifically, the content disseminated by *Vox* has managed to sell “extraordinarily conservative” content in modern ways, disguising and revitalizing its ideological positions (**Albertazzi; Bonansinga, 2023**). Thus, it is no surprise that this party’s digital communication is among the most effective across the political spectrum.

On *TikTok* specifically, users cause videos posted by *Vox* to go more viral. Using a populist discourse, which helps them go viral (**Gamir-Ríos; Sánchez-Castillo, 2022**), Santiago Abascal’s party has achieved strong engagement with its followers. Their strategy has been to take a confrontational stance on politics and its participants and use emotive rhetoric, which has been found to encourage participation (**Jaramillo-Dent; Contreras-Pulido; Pérez-Rodríguez, 2022; Peña-Fernández; Larrondo-Ureta; Morales-i-Gras, 2022**). What the far-right party offers is not so much an ideology but rather an “identity,” packaged for easy consumption and ready to be launched for a viral campaign (**Applebaum, 2021**). However, **Morejón-Llamas (2023)** has previously highlighted that most parties (including *Vox* and *Podemos*) have not perfected their discursive techniques on the new platform. It is expected that, in this second phase of *TikTok*’s development, the message will be tailored to the “conversational” characteristics “and slang” and that the young audience is accustomed to (**Ortega-Fernández; Rodríguez-Hernández, 2021**).

**2. Young people: New media realities in a polarized environment**

Users who belong to younger age groups deem media such as the press or radio to be more credible, but mostly look to audiovisual and multimedia channels such as television, the Internet, or social networks for information on political issues (**Gómez-de-Travesedo-Rojas; Gil-Ramírez, 2020**). Those who fall within the so-called Generation Z or subsequent Generation Alpha form a niche of future voters for the political establishment that cannot be overlooked (**Aguirre-Quezada; Gómez-Macfarland, 2018**). These young people started off using social networks such as *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube* and

have been migrating to other more trendy platforms such as the one described here. It is important to note that, in 2021 in Spain, there were about 8.8 million active *TikTok* profiles, of which 41% of the users were between 16 and 25 years old (**Fernández-Lores; Escandón-Montenegro;**

Short videos have emerged as the most popular form of social entertainment, capturing the attention of multiple sectors

**Tejedor**, 2022). Furthermore, these data clearly point to a potential audience that has grown used to a type of politics that places the irrelevant before the relevant, the individual before the societal, the episodic before the thematic, the personal before the impersonal, and the emotional before the rational (**Reinemann et al.**, 2012). In a time when political news is starting to be covered in this way, *TikTok*, owing to its spontaneity and ability to “filter” –the substantial from the banal, the hard from the soft, the in-depth from the easily consumable– has become an important place for vote-catching.

This task of attracting the digital vote relies on the use of radical, rather than moderate, discourse. In this sense, it should not be forgotten that political polarization on networks has long been associated with greater hostility when it comes to communication (**Literat; Kligler-Vilenchik**, 2021). The academic literature has also pointed out the risks of this phenomenon, and in a situation in which there are divergent opinions, social networks is a “theater” in which these battlegrounds are leveraged, eliminating all types of debate and encouraging mockery, harassment, and discrimination (**Cuevas-Calderón; Dongo; Kanashiro**, 2022). The platforms’ response has been to use their own algorithms to detect voices that are degrading others and expel them from their communities. Despite imposing these control systems on the dissemination of certain types of expressions, it is still common to find messages circulating without impunity, encouraging exclusion and promoting a type of discourse that shares the characteristics of hatred.

In this regard, authors such as **Wheatstone** and **Ciaran** (2020) have focused on *TikTok*’s “lax” security, which made it a space for promoting sensitive content. **Logrieco et al.** (2021) noted that hate speech on *TikTok* is expressed in a “covert” manner, taking advantage of gaps in the security and leveraging the rapid spread of rhetoric that has already been categorized. The “crypto hate speech” analyzed in recent research has been one of the first descriptions of this type of communication that adds a new interpretation of the traditional rhetoric of hate. This traditional rhetoric of hate has typically been understood as a set of offensive and derogatory expressions directed at certain individuals or groups owing to their identifying features, such as race, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, or religion (**Gómez-García; Paz-Rebollo; Cabeza-San-Deogracias**, 2021). However, this description does not resolve the vagueness inherent to it due to the ample leeway granted for the exercise of freedom of expression in a democratic state. This has allowed some forms of crypto hate speech, such as the critical–aggressive messages studied in this research, to enter the sphere of public deliberation and the world of politics today, making ideological clash and confrontation the order of the day, and bypass the list of expressions that could be considered to break the rules.

In the first study of this phenomenon, **Herrero-Izquierdo et al.** (2022) propose that crypto hate speech occurs when political representatives focus their arguments on the clash between ideologically distant or antagonistic groups, consolidating a collective imaginary in their electorate in which two opposing views are pitted against each other and in which the destruction of one of group means the survival of the other. This research indicates that social networks are the natural environment in which this phenomenon takes place and that policy-makers are the ones who promote this type of communication. **Reguero-Sanz, Berdón-Prieto, and Herrero-Izquierdo** (2023) continue to delve into the characteristics of this emerging concept, stressing that crypto hate speech is structured around emotional rhetoric and that, not only is it used by representatives of various parties, but it is also adopted by anonymous users. Despite the fact that previous research has begun to establish the characteristics of crypto hate speech, there are still several unknowns –for example, which features these messages must and must not have to be considered crypto hate speech– that need to be determined to systematically typify this type of speech and take necessary measures.

In addition, there is a clear relationship between this type of message and the evolution of politainment. **Zamora-Medina and Rebolledo-de-la-Calle** (2021) pointed out that the social audience of political infotainment programs was not as interested in content meant to improve the public’s political awareness as it was in emotional content. This reality has been embedded into a social network environment in which politics are sensationalized and simplifying messages is one of its primary characteristics (**López-Rabadán; Doménech-Fabregat**, 2021), which creates a notable polarization of the public debate (**Abejón-Mendoza; Mayoral-Sánchez**, 2017). Messages that fall under “crypto hate speech” are closely tied to this atmosphere of perpetual confrontation in which political content aims more to entertain than to encourage a thought-provoking debate, an atmosphere that also resonates with the young audience. In fact, **Ruiz-Díaz and Danet** (2022) have already warned of the younger generations’ polarized view due to their acceptance of certain “radical” assumptions on issues once debated and considered settled (gender equality, immigration-related issues, the political and social rights of ethnic minorities and LGBTIQ+ people, etc.), which at times condones violence and aggression toward opposing groups and individuals (**Lobato et al.**, 2020).

It is precisely this shift –that of partisan bickering and polarization– that makes it necessary to study this ‘hidden side’ of *TikTok* (**Weimann; Masri**, 2020). Known for its popularity, its effectiveness when it comes to entertainment, and its use as a means of promotion that tends toward politainment (**Cervi; Tejedor; García-Blesa**, 2023), its possible excesses and threats need to be addressed. With this in mind, the work presented here is based on the following hypotheses and objectives.

### 3. Objectives and hypotheses

In such a polarized political media environment in which social networks play such a key role, the first objective of this study is to analyze which topics and approaches Spanish political parties use most frequently on *TikTok*. In relation to this examination, our research focuses on finding out what degree of aggressiveness political players exhibit in their content on this platform. In addition, since it is a new network with different characteristics than those qualified as “traditional” –as it is designed for entertainment, targets a young audience, and has greater potential for addiction– it is important to identify what differential tactics are used by the political parties in this environment.

The general hypothesis (GH) of this study is that political parties are using *TikTok* in the same way as other networks despite the fact that it is a communicative innovation that it has different objectives than other social networks. To confirm or refute this idea, the study poses two specific hypotheses:

SH1: The political parties use this platform for partisan confrontation, prioritizing the differentiating points of their political platforms regardless of the political debate taking place at the time.

SH2: In *TikTok* we are also observing dynamics related to hate speech centered around political confrontation, which has been termed “crypto hate speech” (Reguero-Sanz; Berdón-Prieto; Herrero-Izquierdo, 2023). This term, recently incorporated into the Royal Academy of Spanish, should be further elaborated upon, and new concepts should be incorporated to substantiate it.

### 4. Methodology

In this context there are two factors that shape the objectives of political communication on social networks: the design of the platform itself, with its formal characteristics, and the political purpose for which the digital space was created (Medina-Serrano; Papakyriakopoulos; Hegelich, 2020). This research applies three tools: a quantitative content analysis, a discourse analysis, and finally, a qualitative content analysis. The sample used for this study is 250 *TikTok* posts from the official profiles of the five parties with the most representation at the national level: *Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)*, *Partido Popular (PP)*, *Vox*, *Unidas Podemos (Podemos)*, and *Ciudadanos (C’s)*. Specifically, a non-random stratification system was used, selecting the 50 videos with the highest number of views for each party. To achieve this, the *Google Chrome* extension “Sort for *TikTok*,” which sorts profiles according to number of views, was used.

Quantitative content analysis was used to compare the popularity of the different videos. It was necessary to add new layers of analysis to the classic variables that have been used to measure impact such as the number of likes, shares, or comments and to use engagement (Chen *et al.*, 2021):

$$\frac{n^{\circ} \text{ likes} + n^{\circ} \text{ comments} + n^{\circ} \text{ shares}}{n^{\circ} \text{ views}} \times 100$$

This concept is becoming increasingly important in a great deal of research (Chan-Olmsted; Wolter; Wang, 2017; Macnamara; Sakinofsky; Beattie, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2015; Sobaci; Hatipoğlu, 2017; Tarín-Rubio, 2013; Triantafillidou *et al.*, 2015). It means that a clear definition of this variable has not yet been settled on, and it varies depending on the field. For this study, the definition created by Ballesteros-Herencia has been taken as a reference, as it focuses on social media engagement:

“(…) A psychological state of users as a desired outcome of social networking tactics that manifests itself in behaviors of varying intensity, from simple actions such as viewing and reading, to others such as liking, commenting, or replying to and sharing a post” (Ballesteros-Herencia, 2019).

Thus, it has been possible to determine the correlations between the engagement and impact of the network’s users and the different types of messages according to their communicative purpose and the specific topics of each video. For the overall typology, the categorization made by Mazzoleni (2010) has been taken as a reference, although the existing biases have been taken into account since an electoral campaign is not being discussed, and for content specification, the catalog of 18 issues from Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo (2022) has been used. It should be remembered that the study sample is made up of the videos from each party that have the most views. Therefore, it is possible to make the mistake of assuming that this is directly related to posts that are better received. To avoid this, a similar micro-study was conducted, consisting of a sub-sample of the 10 least-impactful entries from each party.

Through this content analysis, the formal elements of the posts were also examined in depth. Using saturation sampling, we have categorized various variables: sound effects, use of subtitles, additional superimposed messages, modification of the video speed (slow motion or timelapse), color filters, or shot changes. Three different researchers carried out the coding of this content analysis; therefore, a reliability process has been carried out through the calculation of Krippendorff’s alpha using the *ReCal* tool. This operation was carried out on two occasions prior to data collection with a subsample of 10% of the total. In the first, a result of 0.78 was obtained. After a discussion among coders to standardize concepts, the test was repeated, and the value of 0.83 was achieved.

“Users cause videos posted by Vox to go more viral”

The second tool used, discourse analysis, allowed us to determine the degree of aggressiveness of the posts and to assess whether or not crypto hate speech could be observed in those with an extremely polarizing tone. This was carried out in several steps. First, the sentiments emanating from the videos were classified: irony, humor, aggressiveness, emotionality, neutral, and criticism. These five emotions were selected through saturation sampling. Later, to evaluate the videos' additional content, that is, the text that acts as the posts' titles, the free tool *Voyant Tools* was employed to identify which terms were used the most and the correlation between them.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the overall trends of each party's posts were examined.

Known for its popularity, its effectiveness when it comes to entertainment, and its use as a means of promotion that tends toward politainment, its possible excesses and threats need to be addressed

Finally, to conclude whether the most aggressive messages had characteristics typical of crypto hate speech, a detailed case-by-case analysis was carried out. Using qualitative content analysis, we were able to categorize each video based on its intensity of hate, according to the studies of **Watanabe, Bouazizi, and Ohtsuki (2018)** and **Gitari et al. (2015)**—extreme hate, hate–insult, neutral speech, and upstander—and the type of language used—insulting and degrading language, language that incites or calls for violence, trivialization of violence, divisive or othering language, stereotype–prejudice, rumors, false facts, misleading claims and dehumanizing metaphors—commentary, and irony. This typology has already been tested by the *Alreco* project (Hate speech, racism and xenophobia: Alert mechanism and coordinated response) in its document “Protocol and indicator systems for the detection of hate speech on social networks” (*Alreco* 2017). To apply this last tool, the same coders were used as in the aforementioned content analysis. In this case, it was only necessary to carry out a single reliability test with 10% of the sample since the answers of the three greatly coincided, achieving a result of 0.94.

## 5. Results

Political parties have based their communication strategies on *TikTok* around a variety of overall themes to which they have attached varying levels of importance depending on their political objectives. It is striking that, despite being parties that coexist in the same “political arena,” their approaches are so different (Table 1).

Table 1. Overall themes of the study sample broken down by party.

	Ciudadanos (%)	Podemos (%)	PP (%)	PSOE (%)	Vox (%)	Total (%)
Public anecdotes, curiosities	0	0	2	0	4	1.2
Detailed accounts of the government's actions	2	2	4	16	6	6.0
Tension versus agreement	2	0	0	0	2	0.8
Social rights and health: welfare state <i>versus</i> liberalism	6	8	2	12	6	6.8
Diversity: homophobia <i>versus</i> LGBTI policies and rights	4	28	0	4	0	7.2
Diversity: male chauvinism <i>versus</i> policies of equality	2	30	2	10	12	11.2
Economy and finance	8	2	32	0	2	8.8
Education, culture, science, and sports	0	4	0	10	0	2.8
Non-sectoral personal confrontations	6	10	14	0	22	10.4
Justice and quality of democracy	12	2	8	10	4	7.2
Environment and animal welfare	0	0	2	0	0	0.4
Nationalism, separatism: centralism–plurinationality	34	0	12	0	0	9.2
Patriotism <i>versus</i> anti-patriotism, monarchism <i>versus</i> republicanism	2	2	0	6	12	4.4
International politics and the European Union: globalism	8	0	6	4	0	3.6
Promotion of the party	10	6	6	20	24	13.2
Totalitarianism/populism <i>versus</i> democracy	2	4	0	4	2	2.4
Labor, employment, pensions	2	2	10	4	4	4.4

As for the purpose of the video messages, 74.8% of the total ( $N = 187$ ) focused on those issues related to the “actors' day-to-day game for positions of power and influence” (**Cabrero-Mendoza, 2005**), that is, far removed from any government or opposition action and within the category of political issues. Of the remainder, 14% ( $N = 35$ ) were aimed at mobilizing political party campaigns, 8% were aimed at government actions, and the rest (3.2%,  $N = 8$ ) were aimed at promoting a specific politician.

The impact data of the different parties were influenced by each party's number of followers. *TikTok* is a platform that is still in the process of consolidation, and as a result, there are major differences between the various parties. *Podemos*

(446,800) has the largest number of followers. Lagging far behind is *Vox* (126,100). The rest –*PP* (35,100), *PSOE* (5,100), and *Ciudadanos* (3,900)– do not even add up to 10% of the followers of the purple party, *Podemos*. Therefore, it is necessary to use the engagement formula, as discussed in the previous section. In this way, the differences in the various parties’ use of this platform can be addressed.

Despite applying this “corrective” formula, owing to the differences in followers, the parties with the largest presence on *TikTok* are the ones with the best figures: *Podemos* (mean [M] = 17.32) and *Vox* (M = 9.19). However, this does not hold true for the three parties with the fewest followers, as *PSOE* (M = 6.02) is ahead of *Populares (PP)* (M = 4.66) and *Ciudadanos* (M = 4.92). These data are deeply influenced by the posts that lead the ranking; the first 10 belong to *Podemos*. Meanwhile, the 10 that are ranked lowest are from *Ciudadanos* (7), *PSOE* (2), and *Podemos* (1). Moving into a detailed study of the 10 videos that generated the most engagement on the network, it should be noted that they deal with general ideological issues (political issues) and, specifically, with “diversity and equality,” both in the debate over “male chauvinism versus feminism” (7) as in the one focused on “LGBTI rights” (2). There was also a post about “culture, science, and sport.”

The emotional tone of the videos was tied to political polarization. In this study, 74.4% (N = 186) were critical as opposed to being neutral, which was perceived in only 8% (N = 20). Emotionality, humor, and irony were also not very significant, with 8.8% (N = 22), 6.4% (N = 16), and 13.2% (N = 33), respectively. Another 6.4% of the sample showed aggressive tendencies that will be analyzed in detail below.

As for the tone of the 10 messages with the highest engagement, confrontation, using either a provocative or violent tone, was observed in all of them, which have been recoded as “critical or aggressive messages” (ACM<sup>2</sup>). In contrast, in those posts that were less well received by the public, this phenomenon only occurred in the opposition parties. In *PP* and *Vox*, 9 of the 10 least successful messages were also critical or aggressive; in *Ciudadanos*, something similar occurred, but in 8 of the 10 cases. Meanwhile, for the coalition parties that make up the Spanish Government, the situation was the opposite since there was only one ACM for each *PSOE* and *Podemos*.

Being from the government or from the opposition was not a determining factor in the study of the emotions found in the sample, as shown in Table 2, which reinforces that high polarization was encouraged by the main political parties regardless of whether or not they were in the opposition. However, there were no differences in group dynamics, or at least in general terms, particularities between parties can be observed.

Table 2. Distribution of sentiments observed in the sample of each party.

	Aggressiveness (%)	Criticism (%)	Emotionality (%)	Neutral (%)	Irony (%)	Humor (%)
<b>Ciudadanos</b>	5.26	80.70	0.00	0.00	12.28	1.75
<b>Podemos</b>	3.33	65.00	6.67	3.33	11.67	10.00
<b>PP</b>	3.17	74.60	4.76	0.00	11.11	6.35
<b>PSOE</b>	3.64	38.18	14.55	30.91	12.73	0.00
<b>Vox</b>	11.29	53.23	11.29	1.61	8.06	14.52

Once the predominance of the political parties’ ACMs was recognized as the main draw, the format of the ACMs was analyzed to delve deeper into how the hostile rhetoric is constructed (Figure 1). Some devices such as changing shots,

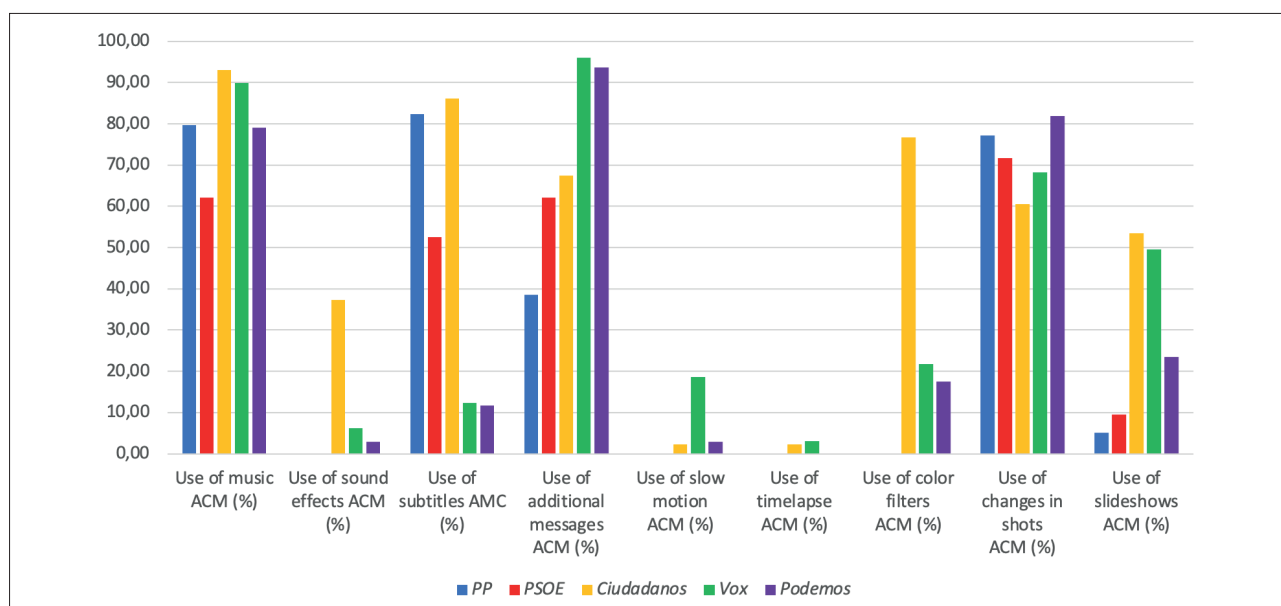


Figure 1. Use of editing capabilities in the subsample of ACMs

music, or additional messages were used again and again by all parties—something characteristic of this platform. However, there were features that differentiated the parties; for example, sound effects (loudspeakers, transitions, noises, onomatopoeia, etc.) were exploited by *Ciudadanos* and not so much by the rest of the parties. Something similar happened with the color filters, which appeared in 76.78 % ( $N = 33$ ) of this party's ACMs but only in 21.70 % ( $N = 7$ ) and 17.56 % ( $N = 6$ ) of ACMs from *Vox* and *Podemos*, respectively. Slideshows were frequently used by *Ciudadanos* (53.51 %,  $N = 23$ ) and also by *Vox* (49.60 %,  $N = 16$ ). Subtitles appeared in a high percentage of the ACMs from *Ciudadanos* (86.09 %,  $N = 37$ ), the *Partido Popular* (82.29 %,  $N = 32$ ), and the *PSOE* (52.61 %,  $N = 11$ ). Pretty much only *Vox* applied the device of altering visual rhythm in the form of slow motion (18.60%,  $N = 6$ ). There is a higher prevalence of these devices in the aforementioned subsample of ACMs than in the overall research. The percentage increase was clear in all parties, with the *PSOE*'s being the smallest (1.56%) and *Vox*'s the largest (13.60%).

As for the text accompanying the posts, as Table 3 shows, no party stood out for its vocabulary density. *Podemos* was the only party that was able to keep the repeated terms down to less than half of the total number of words used. When analyzing the words used most by the parties, the three opposition parties did not hesitate to include the term "Spain" recurrently. In addition, both *PP* and *Ciudadanos* focused these texts on Pedro Sánchez and the Government. In *PSOE*'s case, there were no references to other parties or leaders, at least in the videos analyzed. The socialists did not release as many ACMs as the rest, which are usually dedicated to the work of other parties, and the main theme of their posts with the highest engagement was promoting the party. This is common in the arena of political communication strategies since the governing party does not pursue such hostile strategies and seeks to defend its administration. *Vox* also focused on self-promotion—unlike *Podemos*, which used its text to focus on its main political opponent: *Vox*. It also highlighted the promotion of Irene Montero or key issues of its policy related to inequality: feminism or LGBTI measures.

Table 3. Linguistic indicators of the text from the posts from the various parties.

	Vocabulary density	$\bar{X}$ words/sentence	Frequent term (TF-IDF) <sup>5</sup>
<i>PP</i>	0.330	57.1	Viral (44), Spain (43), Current (36), Government (13), Sánchez (12)
<i>PSOE</i>	0.487	15.4	<i>PSOE</i> (34), SpanishPolitics (12), PedroSánchez (10), WeMoveForward (9), TheGovernmentOf-TheAgent (4)
<i>Ciudadanos</i>	0.448	28.2	Spain (18), Government (11), Sánchez (10), Taxes (4), <i>Ciudadanos</i> (4)
<i>Vox</i>	0.483	24.2	<i>Vox</i> (41), Spain (22), SantiagoAbascal (20), LongLiveSpain (10), MacarenaOlona (6)
<i>Podemos</i>	0.532	27.6	<i>Vox</i> (19), Feminism (19), <i>Podemos</i> (16), IreneMontero (13), Igbti (12)

Source: Elaborated with *Voyant Tools*

Cross-references between leaders and political parties were also observed through various correlations. For the *PP*, for example, there were correlations between the terms "Cuca" and "Pedro"<sup>3</sup> ( $r = 1$ ) and between the terms "Feijoo" and "YolandaDiaz"<sup>4</sup> ( $r = 81$ ). For *Ciudadanos*, there was also this particularity between "Arrimadas" and "President" ( $r = 94$ ). For *Vox*, there was no such confrontation between a leader of the party and another party, but there were significant correlations between other politicians such as "PabloIglesias" and terms such as "Politics" and "Viralvideo" ( $r = 0.88$ ). In the case of *Podemos*, leaders were not used as much, but other parties were used, confronting them regarding very specific sectorial measures. For example, "LGBT" maintained a high correlation with "PP" ( $r = 1$ ).

## 6. Hate as a device, also on TikTok

Finally, a qualitative content analysis of those messages considered to have an aggressive tone was carried out to determine whether they could be included in the category of crypto hate speech (Table 4). The results showed that 91% of them could be described as hate speech, and in one of the posts, there was even violence, which placed into the "extreme hate" category. In these videos, insulting and degrading language stood out (4.4% of the sample,  $n = 11$ ); however, it could not be considered hate speech according to the usual standards, since it did not target a group at risk of exclusion.

It was clear that the love affair between *Vox* and aggressive discourse was also present on *TikTok*. It is evident, in this regard, that the humor and entertainment components that characterize this platform have not been prevented it from becoming (like its predecessors) a particularly well-suited space to implement and replicate strategies and dynamics of political polarization. At some point, all parties, without exception, resorted to this type of communication that is far removed from debate and that is unbecoming of the democratic ideal, in which the exchange of opinions and proposals should prevail. The dangers associated with this problem can also be seen in the type of language used by the different parties, which ranged from incitement to violence to the dissemination of potentially false facts, using insulting rhetoric aimed at challenging the attitudes and beliefs of users.

The emotional tone of the videos was tied to political polarization. In this study, 74.4% ( $N = 186$ ) were critical as opposed to being neutral, which was perceived in only 8% ( $N = 20$ )

Table 4. Qualitative content analysis of posts with an aggressive tone.

Party	Abstract	Intensity	Type of language
Vox	Will Smith labeled with a Vox Spain Agenda sign slaps Chris Rock (representing the 2030 Agenda).	Extreme hatred	Inciting or calling for violence
Vox	Parody of the opening credit of the series <i>Friends</i> , attributing adjectives to members of the government and other social groups	Hate-insult	Divisiveness or othering
Vox	Animated cartoon of Santiago Abascal (Vox) stopping a plane when Pablo Iglesias wants to leave the country	Hate-insult	False facts
Ciudadanos	Speech by Inés Arrimadas in which she claims that Mertxe Aizpurúa ( <i>Euskal Herria Bildu</i> ) has read a communiqué from ETA on the floor of the Congress	Hate-insult	False facts
Podemos	Speech by Irene Montero ( <i>Podemos</i> ) in which she confronts a Vox congressman and calls her a hypocrite	Hate-insult	Insulting and degrading
PP	Speech by Ana Vázquez ( <i>PP</i> ) criticizing the President of the Government for using the term “ <i>Piolines</i> ” [“Tweety Pies”] to refer to national police officers	Hate-insult	Insulting and degrading
PSOE	Speech by Félix Bolaños ( <i>PSOE</i> ) calling the Vox congress members Francoists	Hate-insult	Insulting and degrading
Ciudadanos	Toni Cantó ( <i>C's</i> ) insults various leaders of <i>Podemos</i> and <i>PSOE</i> on a television program in regard to the situation in Venezuela	Hate-insult	Insulting and degrading
Vox	Santiago Abascal (Vox) asks the President of the Government for explanations about issues related to the <i>Organic Law 10/2022</i> .	Neutral speech	Not applicable
PP	Comparison in which the <i>PP</i> applauds a victim of ETA and the <i>PSOE</i> applauds the Minister of the Interior.	Hate-insult	Misleading claims and false facts
PSOE	Speech by the President of the Government ( <i>PSOE</i> ) in the Senate in which he accuses the <i>PP</i> of being a “dirty” party	Hate-insult	Insulting and degrading

## 7. Conclusions

Politics has seen social networks as an opportunity to reach the electorate. *TikTok*, owing to its characteristics, is geared toward a young target audience (Gen Zers), and political discourse has been adapted to this new platform, mostly by mixing information and entertainment (Cervi; Tejedor; García-Blesa, 2023). However, the partisan rhetoric is not homogeneous, and substantial differences can be perceived between the topics used by the various parties. In accordance with Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo (2022) and in response to the general objective of the study, this research showed that the major national-level parties focused their attention on the “differentiating points” of their political platforms.

For *Ciudadanos*, the nationalist debate is key to the party’s project (Robles-Almeida, 2008). For *Podemos* and *Vox*, the situation is the opposite. According to the *Center for Sociological Research (CIS)* barometer for February 2023, 32% of interviewees indicated that the purple party, *Podemos*, is doing the most for equality, whereas the ultra-right party *Vox*, with 52.8%, is seen as the one that is doing the least for equality (CIS, 2023). This should be reflected in the government–opposition relationship that these parties maintain. The content from the party led by Ione Belarra (*Podemos*) highlighted the government actions carried out in the area of equality.

In contrast, Abascal’s party (*Vox*), taking a critical stance, challenges these policies. For this reason, if *Vox*’s most generic themes are removed from the analysis, it most frequently posts anti-equality videos. As for the *Partido Popular*, in its last political paper approved in their 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress held in 2012, they clarified that their objective for the public was “achieving economic progress” (PP, 2012), a theme that predominated in the messages analyzed. Lastly, the main themes of the main government party (*PSOE*) on *TikTok* are more piecemeal. Most of the videos focused on general issues, both related to assessing the government’s actions and promoting the party itself.

The purpose of the videos, in which the political issues focused more around administration predominate, goes hand in hand with the type of communication that appears in a system in which the “mediated populism” of which Mazzoleni (2010) speaks is proliferating, resulting from the intersection between populist sentiments and the media dynamics originating from the explosion of the Internet and digital websites. In this environment, according to Freedman (2018), it is the parties with more extreme ideological positions that proclaim themselves as the “winners” of the public debate, as shown by the quantitative data regarding the engagement of *Podemos* and the qualitative development of the ACMs by *Vox*.

This concept (ACM), developed based on this research, is presented as a further contribution to the theoretical-conceptual framework of the studies about crypto-hate speech. These messages are the source of this emerging phenomenon. Specifically, it has been shown how the use of this type of content helps to improve the impact data of government parties, but does not have an effect in the case of the opposition.

“The socialists did not release as many ACMs as the rest, which are usually dedicated to the work of other parties, and the main theme of their posts with the highest engagement was promoting the party”



With regard to the relationship between the parties' use of ACMs, it is striking that *Ciudadanos* uses them the most, or at least, that its use results in the best viewing data. From its beginnings, the orange party, *Ciudadanos*, tried to sell itself as a party that implements "useful politics" based on making proposals for governance without "getting embroiled" in political noise (Perea, 2021). *Podemós*, considered a technopopulist party and, therefore, dominator of social networks (Bickerton; Invernizzi-Acetti, 2018), shifts the tone of its videos on *TikTok* toward other sentiments such as humor or irony (although criticism remains the priority). In the head-to-head match between *PP* and *PSOE*, there is a clear difference between the governing party (*PSOE*) and the opposition (*PP*). The conservatives, *PP*, maintained a critical tone in three out of four videos in the sample, but the progressives, *PSOE*, tended much more toward neutrality than the rest. *Vox*, another populist party (Megías; Mora; Villaplana, 2022), tended toward irony and humor, which, granted, are more characteristic of *TikTok*; however, with regard to the ACMs, a significant share of posts still had an aggressive tone.

“All parties, without exception, resorted to this type of communication that is far removed from debate and that is unbecoming of the democratic ideal, in which the exchange of opinions and proposals should prevail”

These results validate the specific hypotheses put forward. However, it should be noted that, in the case of SH<sub>2</sub>, not all ACMs could be considered to be crypto hate speech, as suggested by previous research (Reguero-Sanz; Berdón-Prieto; Herrero-Izquierdo, 2023; Herrero-Izquierdo *et al.*, 2022). Only messages with a level of criticism parallel to overt aggression were considered as such. The hostile tone of these posts presented a rhetoric similar to what is termed hate speech (Paz-Rebollo; Montero-Díaz; Moreno-Delgado, 2020). Although its presence in the sample was not significant, several examples of such crypto hate speech along the lines of traditional hate speech appeared on *TikTok* (Cuevas-Calderón; Dongo; Kanashiro, 2022). This type of rhetoric has no relation to democratic debate; as the data showed, these messages of hate enter public awareness without being denounced and are a consequence, and possible cause, of the normalization of the polarizing climate.

Some limitations can be noted, in particular in the choice of the sample and the period analyzed. The 50 most viewed posts for each of the parties were examined, excluding from the sample certain content that could have perfectly matched the characteristics described. Moreover, since we did not evaluate a specific period of time, it was not possible to carry out a chronological and longitudinal study, which would be useful in determining whether political parties have been adapting, modifying, or perfecting their communication techniques. In this respect, it would be interesting to analyze these variables in future lines of study and in different contexts, such as that of an electoral campaign. In this way, it would be possible to study how crypto hate speech has been embedded in political communication, the tools that could be used to identify it, and the effects it continues to have on society. It would also be advisable to carry out comparative analyses using other platforms, countries, and cultural contexts, adapting the study to their characteristics to observe whether this is a phenomenon isolated to *TikTok* in Spain or a global trend.

Despite all of the above, this article has been able to delve into how crypto hate speech has reached a new social network geared toward a young audience, and this is because of the political parties themselves, which shows how little interest these parties have in avoiding polarization. In adapting this type of content to formats that hybridize information and entertainment (politainment), the different forces trivialize politics and the high degree of confrontation rife in it today, focusing on going viral rather than provoking thought.

## 8. Notes

1. This application uses Pearson's correlation coefficient for this.
2. All those messages in which the use of a critical or aggressive tone was observed.
3. The first name of the spokeswoman of the *Partido Popular* and that of the President of the Government.
4. Reference to Alberto Núñez Feijoo, president of the *PP* since 2022, and Yolanda Díaz, second vice-president of the Government and minister of Labor and Social Economy in the 14<sup>th</sup> legislature.
5. TF, term frequency; IDF, inverse document frequency

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