

Article

# Securing the Youth Vote: A Comparative Analysis of Digital Persuasion on TikTok Among Political Actors

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## Abstract

In the context of “pop politics” and “politainment,” the irruption of TikTok has changed the landscape of social media and become the fastest-growing application among young people. Based on the peculiarities of the social platform’s affordances and the political personalization approach, we explore the differences between political parties and political leaders in terms of digital persuasion on TikTok in Spain and Poland. This work contributes to the scarce knowledge about the strategic use of TikTok for political purposes. It also attempts to fill the gap in the comparative research into the practical uses of TikTok in different political contexts. The study explores the three classical persuasion appeals—pathos, ethos, and logos—based on a visual, quantitative analysis of  $N = 372$  videos posted on the official TikTok profiles of the main political parties and leaders from January 1st to March 31st, 2022. Differences were found in how political parties and political leaders used TikTok’s affordances as well as in the main rhetorical resource they use to persuade. We noted the use of more rational resources (logos) in the case of political parties and more emotional resources (pathos) for political leaders. Further, the rare presence of the personality in the videos of the political actors (ethos), along with their unusual privatization role, indicate that personalization on TikTok is far from being considered as part of their digital persuasion strategy.

## Keywords

digital persuasion; personalization; political communication; social media; TikTok; visual framing

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of “pop politics” (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019) and politainment (Berrocal et al., 2021), visual images are gaining more importance (Veneti et al., 2019); consequently, the irruption of TikTok embodies a new challenge for political contexts (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). This short-video-based social network had an exponential growth in popularity during the global lockdown that took place in 2020, reaching two billion downloads and 800 million monthly active users worldwide by

the end of 2020 and 205 million downloads in the second quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2023a).

The increasing importance of political spectacularization has led to alternative forms of political participation for audiences who were previously almost impossible to reach. Having first used Instagram and Snapchat, political actors are currently turning their attention to TikTok as the most relevant social network for communicating with younger people (Hortelano, 2022; “Internetowa ofensywa,” 2022). In fact, 43% of TikTok’s global audience is between 18 and 24 years old (Kemp, 2021).

TikTok represents the hyper-postmodern aesthetic based on visual components, orientated toward entertainment and playful political participation among the youth (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). It has been recognized as a grassroots social media platform that allows a collective political expression for the youth to play a role in political self-expression (Vijay & Gekker, 2021) or as a back channel (Seglem & Haling, 2018) for youth to share their points of view and to encourage free social conversations. Furthermore, this social network is even used for image management to create a closer and more humanized political image of populist leaders (Bianchi, 2020).

Previous studies on TikTok-based campaigns underlined how TikTok has been shown to be a new form of political communication to create, share, and diffuse information (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020) and how the platform's design and playful architecture shape political discourse and encourage participation among the youth (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). It is also demonstrated that the kind of personalization Generation Z wants to see from political actors on visual platforms is based on a backstage culture, showing not only their daily activity but also how they feel about it (Parmelee et al., 2022). Accordingly, how political actors are persuading on social media based on personalization represents an important research issue.

This article presents a comparative quantitative content analysis of  $N = 372$  TikTok videos from political parties and leaders in two different European countries, Spain ( $N = 214$ ) and Poland ( $N = 158$ ). Our aim is to explore the digital persuasion potential of this platform in both countries based on Aristotle's three classical persuasion appeals—pathos, ethos, and logos. We focus on the presence of ethos, being one of the most common rhetorical strategies used by politicians in interactive spaces, to further ground our work on the personalization of political communication and to identify possible differences in the implementation of TikTok between political parties and leaders in each country. Specifically, we explore whether the political parties and politicians in Spain and Poland use the opportunities offered by TikTok and whether they use it as another traditional one-way communication channel.

## 2. Digital Persuasion in Social Media

For more than two thousand years, Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) rhetoric has been the foundation for the study and practice of the art of speaking and persuasion in different contexts (Dillard, 2019). Aristotle articulated three means of persuasion: (a) ethos, establishing the credibility or authority of the speaker, making the audience more likely to trust the speaker; (b) pathos, appealing to the emotions of the audience, trying to make them feel angry or sympathetic; and (c) logos, appealing to the audience's reason using logical arguments.

The digital transformation of visual politics and the blurring of the boundaries between persuasion and

entertainment has been included in some relevant studies (Messaris, 2019). Although the current literature refers to online social networks as being the new rhetorical space of the 21st century, specific research linking the ethos, pathos, and logos modes of political persuasion and their use on online platforms is scarce (Fahmy & Ibrahim, 2021). Most of the studies on digital persuasion show that the most common rhetorical strategy used by politicians in interactive space is ethos, followed by pathos (see English et al., 2011; Johnson, 2012).

Concretely, studies focusing on visual rhetoric revealed that the appeal to ethos on YouTube political videos, measured as the credibility of the message source, was the most credible appeal, followed by logos and pathos in the 2008 US presidential campaign (English et al., 2011). On the contrary, studies focused on verbal rhetoric (Bronstein et al., 2018; Johnson, 2012) found that pathos is as relevant as ethos to persuade. Johnson (2012) specifically found that the motivation behind most of Romney's tweets during the 2012 US presidential campaign was to establish logical connections and to build credibility (ethos). Bronstein et al. (2018) revealed that pathos was the most important element in all the Facebook posts of Israeli political leaders during the 2015 general election, with the aim of creating an affective bond with the audience and the public.

In many cases, the use of pathos and ethos had a positive impact on audience engagement, while logos generated the lowest number of audience interactions. In this sense, Bronstein et al. (2018) revealed that both presidential candidates chose emotional and motivational approaches using the pathos element on their Facebook posts to lead users to identify with them during the 2012 presidential elections. Similarly, Samuel-Azran et al. (2015) found that ethos was the most prevalent rhetorical strategy used by Israeli politicians on their Facebook walls during the 2013 elections, while pathos-based appeals attracted the most "likes."

As the literature shows, there are no specific works on persuasion appeals on short-video-based platforms so far. This work aims to fill that gap using the case of a visual social network such as TikTok; we consider that the analysis of videos based on the three persuasion modes is the most appropriate framework to study how political actors are persuading on this platform.

## 3. TikTok's Affordances in Political Communication Contexts

Recent studies have focused on specific TikTok features through design and structural elements that can be strategically used in political contexts for persuasive purposes (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Vijay & Gekker, 2021). We consider TikTok's main affordances under the framework of digital architectures of social networks in general (Bosetta, 2018) as well as the efforts of other scholars to identify specific affordances of TikTok in political contexts (Guinaudeau et al., 2021; Hautea et al., 2021).

From the structural perspective, TikTok represents the hyper-postmodern aesthetic based on a “memetic text” (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) that encourages imitation and remixing on a platform level with a particular focus on influencer culture and popular culture. Compared to other social networks, TikTok videos provide a more viral and fully immersive experience since they incentivize users to create videos that will go viral (Guinaudeau et al., 2021). Through the algorithmic recommendation system, TikTok uses artificial intelligence that obliges users to follow an algorithmically generated feed of personalized videos through the “For You” page.

In this work, we focus on TikTok’s functional affordances pertaining to how content is disseminated and spread on the platform. In this sense, Hautea et al. (2021) underlined the visibility, editability, and association affordances of TikTok as being the most important in facilitating interactivity and participation on social media. Political actors need to adapt existing content using these affordances in which mimesis, creativity, emotionality, and soft content play an important role.

First, visibility affordance is related to how to make content easily perceivable and locatable for other users through hashtags, as well as the number of shares, likes, and comments on these videos. Second, the editability affordance allows TikTok users to craft messages carefully based on a range of editing options, filters, and effects, like other popular visual platforms, and so it has become a place for creative expression and playful sociality (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). In this sense, the background music on TikTok videos represents the core message and may serve as part of a dance routine, a lip sync battle, or as the backdrop for a comedy skit, and so it plays a key role in the storytelling (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). Finally, association affordance enables users to take part in message co-creation by combining old and new content (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). In fact, one of the features that makes this platform distinct is the possibility for replication and virality (Vijay & Gekker, 2021) or “spreadability” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 3) since any TikTok video has the potential to prompt the creation of another.

Scholars have highlighted how TikTok is a user-driven platform that not only allows more creative expression but also better interactivity in comparison to other social media (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020) and the potential of the TikTok specific genres: “challenges” and “duets.” Challenges are community-created hashtags (often sponsored) in which users are invited to create videos showing themselves attempting to do a certain action, dance, or trick proposed by others. Duets are based on users taking another person’s video (original) and adding themselves performing the same action, scene, or choreography. Similarly, the stitch feature on TikTok allows one to splice together multiple videos to create a new one, so it was included here as a variation of the duet.

To understand how political actors use TikTok affordances to persuade their followers, we need to explore

the potential uses of this platform in political contexts from a comparative perspective, including the profiles of both political parties and political leaders in different cultural and political contexts:

RQ1: Do political parties and political leaders significantly differ in using TikTok affordances?

RQ2: Are there significant differences between Spain and Poland in using TikTok affordances by (a) political parties and (b) political leaders?

By including political leaders’ activity separately from political parties, we can identify how each of them is using this platform in functional terms. Previous studies focused on a single specific political actor, concretely Spanish political parties (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021), which showed that they mainly use this platform as a unilateral broadcasting tool for self-promotion and belligerently disqualifying and ridiculing political opponents. In the case of political leaders, the scarce evidence points to a low interactive use overall and with image management as the main function to create a closer and more humanized political image of populist leaders (Bianchi, 2020):

H1: Political parties and political leaders are not fully exploiting TikTok functionalities to create a more effective persuasive strategy.

#### 4. Personalization as a Persuasive Resource on TikTok

*Personalization* of politics can be considered a social media strategy (Larsson, 2019; Metz et al., 2020) that includes a process in which “individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities” (Karvonen, 2010, p. 4). It has been defined as a multi-faceted concept that includes two overarching dimensions: (a) *personalization as individualization*, where individual politicians gain more media coverage than the parties they belong to, and (b) *privatization*, which points to “the rising importance of the politician as an ‘ordinary’ person” (Van Aelst et al., 2011, p. 206) by disclosing more details about his or her private life.

Previous research showed that social-media-based visual political communication is inseparable from personalization as a persuasive strategy (Lindholm et al., 2021; Metz et al., 2020). This trend allows politicians to show more personal lifestyle issues as part of a process of humanizing candidates, which has led to increased citizen identification and decreased psychological distance between politicians and potential voters (Vergeer et al., 2013).

Although scholars have highlighted the online personalization tendencies of either political parties or individual politicians (Hermans & Vergeer, 2013), only a few studies have focused on both groups to compare

differences in personalization. Furthermore, most of these studies have focused on visual platforms, especially Instagram. Only some recent studies on short-video-based platforms from the fields of marketing and advertising have started to explore the effects of personalized persuasive content on TikTok (Chu et al., 2022; Han, 2020).

In our study, we try to shed light on the use of personalization on TikTok as a persuasive strategy in political communication to explain to what extent it is related to persuasion modes, which is something that has not been studied before. Accordingly, we explore the relationship between both forms of political personalization and the use of personality (ethos), among other persuasion appeals for impression management:

RQ3: Do political parties and political leaders significantly differ in personalization in their use of TikTok?

RQ4: Are there significant differences between Spanish and Polish political parties and individual political party members in personalization in their use of TikTok by (a) political parties and (b) political leaders?

Previous literature that compares personalization between both actors detects some differences. Concretely, Larsson (2019) found that Norwegian party leaders were more successful than political parties in gaining audience attention on Instagram, and they offered a higher degree of personalized compared to parties:

H2: Political leaders significantly use more personalized communication than political parties in their use of TikTok.

We further explore the specific modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—used by political leaders and political actors on TikTok, following previous research on digital persuasion (Fahmy & Ibrahim, 2021):

RQ5: Do political parties and political leaders significantly differ in using persuasion appeals on TikTok?

RQ6: Are there significant differences between Spain and Poland in using persuasion appeals on TikTok?

In line with recent studies that have shown the kind of personalization Generation Z wants to see from political actors on visual platforms (Parmelee et al., 2022), we argue that TikTok's affordances can serve as a playful space for politicians. In other words, "adopting a backstage pass aesthetic when showing what politicians do on the job and how they feel about it" (Parmelee et al., 2022, p. 1) can be an effective way of presenting persuasive political communication on social media. Accordingly, we expect political leaders to use ethos as the most common rhetorical strategy in their TikTok videos, compared to pathos and logos:

H3: Political leaders use ethos significantly more than pathos and logos on TikTok.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Data Collection and Sampling

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of  $N = 372$  TikTok videos from the official profiles of political parties and leaders in Spain ( $N = 214$ , with 174 videos from political parties and 40 from political leaders) and Poland ( $N = 158$ , with 63 videos from political parties and 95 from political leaders). These countries were selected based on different characteristics of (a) their political systems but similar (b) characteristics of their political media systems, and (c) social media use. Comprised of two parliamentary government systems based on a multiparty democracy with proportional electoral systems, with Poland being a republic and Spain a monarchy, the sample provides sufficient variation regarding their political systems. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), media systems in Spain and Poland reflect the characteristics of the polarized pluralist model. Spain presents a low degree of press circulation (contrasting with a high level of TV viewing), an authoritarian past in which part of the media was involved in the struggle for freedom, a low degree of autonomy among Spanish journalists under both political and commercial pressure, and a high degree of state interventionism in public media. Similarly, in Poland, journalism underwent a late professionalization and presents high levels of state intervention in public service, a strong tradition of advocacy journalism, and strong media politicization. Finally, in terms of social media use, there are also some similarities. In 2022, TikTok was the sixth most popular social network in Spain, with 8.8 million active users, while in Poland, the TikTok platform had 7.7 million users by that time (Kemp, 2022). In 2021, 41% of the adult users of the platform in Spain were people with ages between 18 and 24 years old. The usage of the video-based social network decreased according to age. Similarly, in Poland, TikTok was most popular among participants between 18 and 24 years, who made up 40% of the app's users in the first quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2023b).

For each country, we first selected the most popular political parties with an official TikTok account. In the case of Spain, five parties were included: Partido Popular (@partidopular), VOX (@vox\_espana), Unidas Podemos (@ahorapodemos), Ciudadanos (@ciudadanoscs), and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (@psoe). In the case of Poland, three parties were considered: Platforma Obywatelska (@platforma.obywatelska), Lewica (@\_\_lewica), and Konfederacja (@konfederacjawin). Two political parties in Poland—Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) and Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL)—did not have official accounts on TikTok. We also included in our sample the TikTok accounts of those political leaders and parliamentary representatives in each country

with an active official TikTok account and a minimum of three uploaded videos. We chose to extend the sample to include members of parliament due to the scarce presence of party leaders on TikTok, even though most political parties were active on the platform.

The units of analysis were all those videos posted on the official TikTok accounts during the first three months of 2022, from January 1st to March 31st. By that time, the main political parties and leaders in both countries had already gained some experience on the platform since most opened their official TikTok accounts in 2020 during the lockdown. Finally, our sample included  $N = 372$  units composed of videos and their captions or textual descriptions. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample, including the accounts of candidates and political parties, with the number of videos in each case for both countries. In the total sample, 57.5% of the videos came from Spain and 42.5% from Poland. In the same period, political parties in both countries were more active (63.7% of the sample) than party leaders (26.3%). Those accounts that include a verified badge to confirm that the account belongs to the user it represents are shown with an asterisk. Political parties also represented a higher number of verified accounts compared to political leaders, as shown in Table 1. The rest of the unverified accounts were confirmed based on the description of the profile and also the content to ensure that they were authentic and could be considered official.

## 5.2. Coding Process

Following previous studies on the use of TikTok in political contexts (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020), we coded for format-related variables, content-related variables, and specific persuasion-related variables.

We first classified each unit based on the production techniques: (a) normal videos (no interactive and no political add style), (b) videos with a political advertising style, (c) still life photos (group of photos without motion), (d) videos with an interactive TikTok style. Based on Lilleker and Vedel's (2013) proposal to measure the interaction level on social media and adapting it to the TikTok context, we classified each unit depending on the functionality of the video: information diffusion, self-promotion, deliberation, criticism of the opposition, mobilization, and humor.

The coding included format-based variables linked to the three features highlighted by Hautea et al. (2021)—visibility, editability, and association. To measure the visibility of the videos, information about the number of likes, comments, and shares was collected manually, as TikTok does not provide a commercial application programming interface for sharing data on user behavior. For editability affordances, we used a series of dichotomous dummy variables to measure whether political parties and leaders have used TikTok's main genres and its main affordances. Hence, following Medina-Serrano et al. (2020), we recorded the different uses of music in the videos. The option of including text in the videos was recorded in two different ways: text in captions and text inserted into the video images. The use of special visual effects for customizing and adding details to TikTok videos was also coded, including the use of pinning stickers, which allow users to pin stickers and emojis on objects in their videos which track them as they move around a scene, thereby making the content more creative and fun. Finally, to measure the association affordance, hashtags were selected if the video included more than one hashtag in the text to help users to share and connect their content with similar conversations about topics of interest.

**Table 1.** Sample distribution of videos among political actors in Spain and Poland.

Total sample ( $N = 372$ )	Political leaders	No. of videos	Political parties	No. of videos
Spain ( $N = 214$ )	@gabrielrufian	7	@partidopular	114
	@irenemontero_	8*	@vox_espana	7*
	@ierrejon	4*	@ahorapodemos	28*
	@ivanedlm	5	@ciudadanoscs	16
	@sandrage76	16	@_psoe	9*
Poland ( $N = 158$ )	@borysbudka	5	@platforma.obywatelska	6
	@rbiedron	18*	@_lewica	8
	@zandberg	5	@konfederacjawin	49
	@magdabiejat	3		
	@beata_maciejewska	24		
	@krzysztofsmiszek	6*		
	@arturdziambor	8		
	@konradberkowicz	8		
@michal_urbaniak	18			
	Total	135	Total	237

Note: \* = verified accounts.

In the second part of the coding, we ensue Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021) and Metz et al. (2020) by including categorical variables for measuring the personalization level related to the video content. Following Van Aelst et al. (2011), we first identified the main actor in the visual content to distinguish the *individualization* dimension of personalization, that is, the relevance of the political leader in the videos from that of the political party and the other actors. Then, the type of content was registered to measure the *privatization* dimension of personalization—professional content (explicitly political activities related to the official role) or private content (non-political activities or personal images presenting politicians as private individuals, including details about their personal lives). Finally, the main function of the videos was also coded to understand the real intention of each video.

For the persuasion analysis, we followed Fahmy and Ibrahim (2021) to code each video for the dominant persuasion technique: ethos, pathos, or logos. Ethos was selected for those videos that mainly focus on the credibility and trustworthiness of the content creator in order to engage an audience in a particular topic. Pathos was selected when the videos appeal to the emotions and deeply held beliefs of the audience in order to draw them further into the subject. Finally, logos was selected for those videos that mainly use logic, reasoning, evidence, and facts to support an argument. We also used categorical variables to identify the key elements of ethos (based on celebrities, authority figures, and credible figures, including the parties' own political leaders and testimonials), pathos (based on inspiration and hope, sadness, courage and strength, hatred), and logos (based on statistics, recorded evidence, historical data, or facts).

### 5.3. Intercoder Reliability

The coding of the 372 videos was conducted by two coders. To assess intercoder reliability, a randomly selected sub-sample of 10% of the sample ( $N = 37$  videos) was coded. By using Scott's (1955) pi for calculating intercoder reliability, we found a satisfactory rate of agreement for all variables included. Specifically, for production technique, the agreement was 1; for the functionality of the video, 0.74; for music, 1; for text captions, 1; for text in the videos, 0.98; for the use of stickers, 1; for the use of visual effects, 0.94; for the type of content, 0.89; for the main issue, 0.82; for the main actor, 0.91; for the dominant persuasion technique, 0.74; and finally, for the tone of the visuals, 0.75.

## 6. Results and Discussion

This study aims to explain the digital persuasion potential of TikTok. In this section, we explain the main results related to our research questions based on the previous literature to discuss our findings.

RQ1 asked whether political parties and political leaders significantly differed in using TikTok affordances. We obtained simple frequencies for each feature in the three main affordances of TikTok highlighted by Hautea et al. (2021): visibility, association, and editability. Table 2 shows how each feature was used by political actors in each country. Overall, association was the affordance that scored the highest, although some editability features also were highly relevant.

In terms of TikTok's visibility features, our findings show how videos by political leaders got higher numbers of shares, likes, comments, and views compared to those by political parties. We found high statistical significance in the cases of the number of likes and number of views.

Regarding association affordances, the most prominent feature was the use of hashtags (89.8%). Videos of political parties (94.9%) used this option significantly lower than videos of political leaders (80.7%). The use of interactive TikTok genres (such as duets and challenges) was scarce, particularly among political parties (7.6%).

Focusing on editability, political parties significantly scored higher when compared to political leaders. Results indicated that the most important feature was the use of text in captions to explain the stories (99.6% for political parties and 90.4% for political leaders). Similarly, the use of text on images was often employed to feature the videos, with a significantly higher presence among political parties (81.7%) compared to political leaders (74.1%). The use of stickers in both text captions and text in the videos was not generalized, although it was also significantly higher among parties (53.2%) than among leaders (28.9%). Surprisingly, one of the most popular features of TikTok videos, the use of music, was included in only half of the sample, with a higher presence among political leaders (63%) than political parties (40%). The role of music in the videos was mainly used as a story builder. Finally, visual effects were seldom employed, especially by political leaders (4.4%). Figure 1 shows some examples of visual effects used by political parties.

RQ2 asked about significant differences between Spain and Poland in using TikTok affordances. As shown in Table 2, the visibility figures were much higher in Poland compared to Spain, but with similar differences among political actors. To answer to RQ2b, it was notable that the use of hashtags among political leaders in Poland was generalized (98.9%), but this was not the case for Spain, with only 37.5%. Similarly, there was a significant difference in the use of TikTok genres as interactive resources among Polish political leaders (29.5%) compared to Spanish ones (2.5%). In relation to RQ2a, we found similar patterns among political parties for editability affordances in both countries related to the use of text in images and text in captions, as well as the use of visual effects. The main difference was the use of stickers, which scored considerably higher among Spanish political parties (67.2%) compared to Polish political parties (14.3%).

**Table 2.** Percentages and averages by which visibility, association, and editability affordances were used in the TikTok videos of political parties and political leaders in Spain and Poland ( $N = 372$ ).

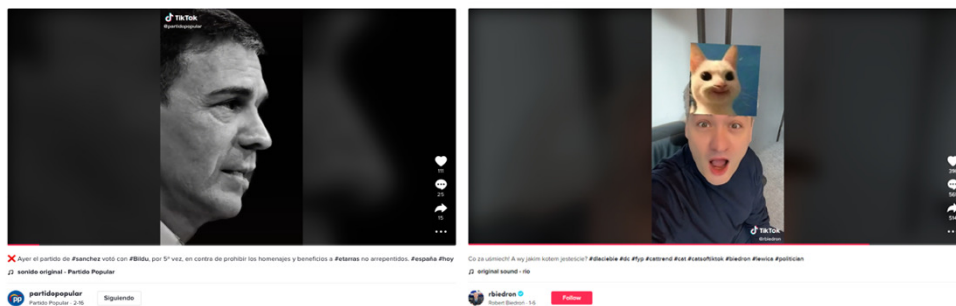
		Spain ( $N = 214$ )		Poland ( $N = 158$ )		Total ( $N = 372$ )		
		Political parties	Political leaders	Political parties	Political leaders	Political parties	Political leaders	$p$ -value
Visibility	No. of shares ( $\bar{X}$ )	110.7	114.4	153.4	180.6	122.1	161	$\leq 0.3$
	No. of likes ( $\bar{X}$ )	1,510.6	1,678.8	2,529.6	5,721	1,783.8	4,566.1	0.00**
	No. of comments ( $\bar{X}$ )	63.3	86.43	213.2	158.7	103.1	137.3	$\leq 0.3$
	No. of views ( $\bar{X}$ )	18,176.6	48,133.2	54,045.8	71,203.9	27,711.5	64,368.1	$\leq 0.01^*$
Association	Includes hashtags (%)	96.6	37.5	90.5	98.9	94.9	80.7	$\leq 0.00^{**}$
	Interactive TikTok genre (%)	7.5	2.5	7.9	29.5	7.6	21.5	$\leq 0.00^{**}$
Editability	Includes music (%)	46.6	52.5	25.4	67.4	40.9	63	$\leq 0.00^{**}$
	Includes text in the video (%)	82.2	85	96.8	69.5	86.1	74.1	$\leq 0.00^{**}$
	Includes text in the caption (%)	100	77.5	98.4	95.8	99.6	90.4	$\leq 0.00^{**}$
	Includes stickers (%)	67.2	22.5	14.3	31.6	53.2	28.9	0.00**
	Includes visual effects (%)	12.1	5	11.1	4.2	11.8	4.4	$\leq 0.01^*$

Note: \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ .

These findings support H1, which predicted that political parties and political leaders are not fully exploiting TikTok’s affordances that could have aided more effective persuasion and continue to broadcast their messages using traditional practices. Most videos from political actors were lacking in key audiovisual elements in terms of editability, such as special effects and the use of music, and seldom included typical TikTok genres, such as duets and challenges, which are crucial for interacting with followers on this platform.

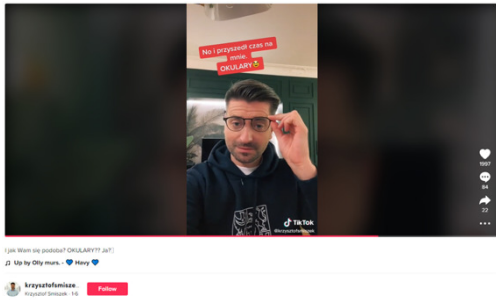
RQ3 asked about the differences related to how political parties and political leaders use personalization

on TikTok for persuasive purposes. To address the first dimension of personalization, the *individualization* level, we first analyzed the main actor in each unit. While the videos of the political parties prioritized other politicians but not always the political leader (40.9%), the videos of political leaders focused on themselves alone (70.3%). For the *privatization* dimension, we analyzed the content of all the units to measure to what extent they included political or personal content. Results showed that 98.7% of the videos by political parties and 92.6% of those by political leaders included mostly political content. In other words, the presence of personal or private



**Figure 1.** Examples of the use of visual effects on TikTok. Note: In the first video, the Partido Popular uses visual effects to transpose one image from the president of Spain onto another with the leader of Bildu, Arnaldo Otegui; in the second video, one of the leaders of Lewica, Robert Biedroń, is depicted with changing pictures of various cats. Source: Biedroń (2022); Partido Popular (2022).

content was scarce. Figure 2 represents one of the rare examples of a political leader using his TikTok account for showing personal or private aspects of his life, away from his political role.



**Figure 2.** Example of non-political content on TikTok. Note: In this video, the Lewica politician Krzysztof Śmiszek is seen trying on new glasses with the caption, “Well, my time has come. Glasses.” Source: Smiszek (2022).

As Table 3 shows, we also found significant differences regarding the main function of the videos, which helps to understand their persuasive role. While videos from

political parties were used to criticize the opposition (48.5%), those from political leaders mainly focused on information diffusion (39.3%).

RQ4 inquired about differences in personalization levels among political parties and individual political party members in Spain and Poland on TikTok. Findings pointed out how political parties in Spain mainly depicted the presence of the political leader as the main actor (71%), even more than among videos from political leaders (RQ4a). In the case of Poland, this presence was even higher for videos by the political leaders themselves (88.6%). There were no significant differences in the type of content between both countries, with political content being the most relevant in both cases. However, the main purpose of the videos in each country differed, especially in the case of political parties. As shown in Table 4, half of all videos by political parties in Spain (55.2%) were based on criticism of other political actors, while political parties in Poland used TikTok videos mostly for information diffusion (42.9%). In both countries, videos by political leaders followed a similar pattern pointing to information diffusion as their main function (RQ4b).

**Table 3.** Percentages and frequencies of video functionality used in the TikTok videos of political parties and political leaders in Spain and Poland ( $n = 372$ ).

		Spain ( $N = 214$ )		Poland ( $N = 158$ )		Total ( $N = 372$ )	
Functionality of the video		Political parties	Political leaders	Political parties	Political leaders	Political parties	Political leaders
Opposition-focused (%)		55.2	35	30.2	29.5	48.5	31.1
Information diffusion (%)		18.4	42.5	42.9	37.9	24.9	39.3
Self-promotion (%)		20.1	17.5	17.5	13.7	19.4	14.8
Mobilization (%)		2.3	0	1.6	9.5	2.1	6.7
Humoristic (%)		4	5	3.2	8.4	3.8	7.4
Total (%)		100	100	100	100	100	100
		$\chi^2 = 11.938$ $p < 0.018$		$\chi^2 = 8.024$ $p < 0.155$		$\chi^2 = 20.257$ $p < 0.001$	

**Table 4.** Frequencies and percentages of the most dominant persuasion technique in TikTok videos employed by political parties and political leaders in Spain and Poland ( $N = 372$ ).

		Spain ( $N = 214$ )		Poland ( $N = 158$ )		Total ( $N = 372$ )	
Dominant persuasion technique		Political parties	Political leaders	Political parties	Political leaders	Political parties	Political leaders
Ethos (%)		63 (36.2)	8 (20)	6 (9.5)	26 (27.4)	69 (29.1)	34 (25.2)
Pathos (%)		39 (22.4)	12 (30)	30 (47.6)	44 (46.3)	69 (29.1)	56 (41.5)
Logos (%)		72 (41.4)	20 (50)	27 (42.9)	25 (26.3)	99 (41.8)	45 (33.3)
Total (%)		174 (100)	40 (100)	63 (100)	95 (100)	237 (100)	135 (100)
		$\chi^2 = 3.922$ $p < 0.14$		$\chi^2 = 9.119$ $p < 0.01$		$\chi^2 = 5.977$ $p < 0.05$	



These findings partially support H2, which predicted a more personalized communication strategy among political leaders compared to political parties. In terms of individualization, videos from political leaders were clearly more focused on their own persona as the main actor compared to those from political parties, and they mostly used their videos to diffuse information, among other functions. However, in terms of privatization, no significant differences were found between political parties, and political leaders and most of the videos were based on political content.

RQ5 asked whether political parties and political leaders significantly differ in using persuasion appeals on TikTok. For this purpose, we measured the frequency of the dominant persuasion technique—ethos, pathos, or logos. As shown in Table 4, some significant differences were found between political parties and political leaders. While the former opted to persuade in their videos by using more rational resources (logos; 41.8%), the latter based their videos on more emotional resources (pathos; 41.5%). Unexpectedly, we should note the low percentage of ethos for both actors, which was particularly low among political leaders (only one in five videos).

RQ6 was also answered in Table 4. We found certain cultural differences by comparing to differences between Spain and Poland in using persuasion appeals

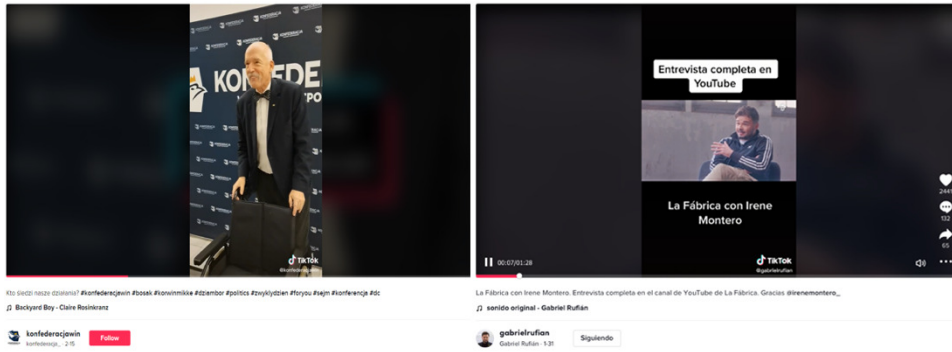
on TikTok. In the case of Poland, pathos was clearly the dominant persuasion technique for both actors (47.6% and 46.3%, respectively), while in the case of Spain, logos was more relevant (41.4% and 50%), although this last relationship was not statistically significant.

Of particular interest was the specific use of pathos, logos, and ethos in each video, as shown in Table 5. The analysis revealed that, in the case of pathos, hatred was the most common emotion in almost one out of two videos by political parties. This result was even higher among Spanish parties (57.5%) compared to Polish parties (27%). Although hatred was also evident in some of the political leaders' videos, they mainly used positive emotions, such as inspiration and hope (23.2%) in Poland or courage and strength (30%) in Spain. Figure 3 includes examples of the use of pathos, with both negative and positive emotions.

Regarding logos, as Table 5 indicates, the use of facts and historical data was frequently employed by political parties (34.6%), while political leaders opted for using recorded evidence in their videos, such as press clippings, audio, and live videos (35.6%). Once more, we found some differences. While the use of facts and historical data was the main persuasive resource in Spain for both political actors, in the case of Poland, the use of recorded evidence was more common. Figure 4 includes

**Table 5.** Frequencies and percentages of the three modes of persuasion in TikTok videos among political parties and political leaders in Spain and Poland ( $N = 372$ ).

Persuasion appeal	Spain		Poland		Total	
	Political parties <i>N</i> (%)	Political leaders <i>N</i> (%)	Political parties <i>N</i> (%)	Political leaders <i>N</i> (%)	Political parties <i>N</i> (%)	Political leaders <i>N</i> (%)
<b>Ethos</b>						
Celebrity/authority/credible figures	114 (65.5)	18 (45)	48 (76.2)	83 (87.4)	162 (68.4)	101 (74.8)
Testimonials	18 (10.3)	8 (20)	1 (1.6)	2 (2.1)	19 (8)	10 (7.4)
Others	0 (0)	0 (0)	9 (14.3)	8 (8.4)	9 (3.8)	8 (5.9)
Not applicable	42 (24.1)	14 (35)	5 (7.9)	2 (2.1)	47 (19.8)	16 (11.9)
Total	174 (100)	40 (100)	63 (100)	95 (100)	237 (100)	135 (100)
<b>Pathos</b>						
Inspiration and hope	29 (16.7)	6 (15)	10 (15.9)	22 (23.2)	39 (16.5)	28 (20.7)
Sadness	6 (3.4)	4 (10)	11 (17.5)	16 (16.8)	17 (7.2)	20 (14.8)
Courage and strength	17 (9.8)	12 (30)	7 (11.1)	14 (14.7)	24 (10.1)	26 (19.3)
Hatred	100 (57.5)	10 (25)	17 (27)	15 (15.8)	117 (49.4)	25 (18.5)
Other	22 (12.6)	8 (20)	14 (22.3)	27 (28.4)	36 (15.2)	35 (26)
Not applicable	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (6.3)	1 (1.1)	4 (1.7)	1 (0.7)
Total	174 (100)	40 (100)	63 (100)	95 (100)	237 (100)	135 (100)
<b>Logos</b>						
Statistics	0 (0)	0 (0)	10 (15.9)	10 (10.5)	11 (4.7)	10 (7.4)
Recorded evidence	25 (14.4)	5 (12.5)	22 (34.9)	43 (45.3)	47 (19.8)	48 (35.6)
Facts/historical data	70 (40.2)	14 (35)	12 (19)	5 (5.3)	82 (34.6)	19 (14.1)
Other	9 (5.2)	9 (22.5)	5 (7.9)	10 (10.5)	13 (5.5)	19 (14.1)
Not applicable	70 (40.2)	12 (30)	14 (22.2)	27 (28.4)	84 (35.4)	39 (28.9)
Total	174 (100)	40 (100)	63 (100)	95 (100)	237 (100)	135 (100)



**Figure 3.** Examples of persuasion based on pathos on TikTok. Note: On the left, different politicians from Konfederacja party are shown in attractive scenes of their everyday lives, displaying positive emotions; on the right, Gabriel Rufián, shows his TV interview with Irene Montero where he calls politicians from the far-right VOX party as being “nazis,” displaying negative emotions. Source: Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (2022); Rufián (2022).

an example of the use of historical data in a video by a Spanish political leader.

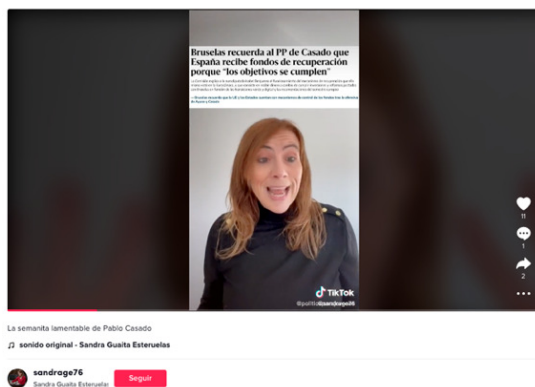
Finally, for persuasion based on ethos, the results show a common trend among political parties (68.4%) and leaders (74.8%)—the use of celebrities or authority figures who can persuade the audience with their credibility. Some of these authorities were the parties’ own political leaders, as Figure 5 illustrates, or other political personalities who use their character to persuade. This pattern was similar in both countries.

With these findings, H3, which predicted political leaders would use ethos significantly more than pathos and logos on TikTok, was not supported. The presence of ethos as a persuasion appeal was rather scarce for both actors and unexpectedly low among political leaders. Instead of using their videos for image management based on their credibility as a persuasion feature (ethos), political leaders opted for more emotional resources (pathos), while videos from political parties used more arguments and evidence (logos) to persuade.

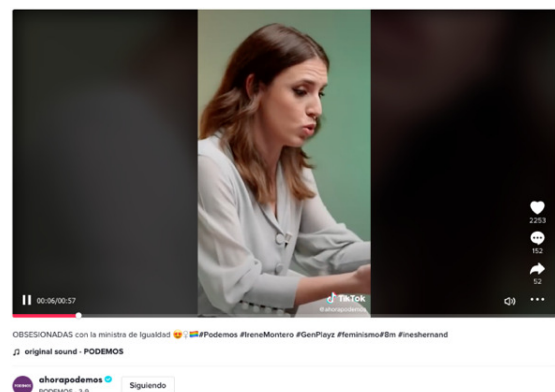
### 7. Conclusions

Our study explored the use of digital persuasion for political purposes on TikTok. Specifically, we examined the differences between political parties and leaders in how they used this platform’s affordances to strategically frame their visual communication following the classical rhetorical persuasion appeals.

The visual analysis of 372 videos posted on the official TikTok profiles of the main political parties and leaders in Spain and Poland supports previous literature regarding the use of TikTok by political parties (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). Our findings confirm that political actors are not exploiting the full potential of TikTok’s affordances and continue broadcasting their messages largely using traditional communication practices. Although this is a new scenario for online political communication for both actors, we can appreciate certain differences regarding visibility. Political leaders get more views and likes in their videos than political



**Figure 4.** Example of the use of historical data as a logos resource to persuade on TikTok. Note: In the video, the political leader Sandra Guaita ironically explains how the Partido Popular channeled its opposition to the EU funds policy; she uses several newspaper clippings as evidence of the story. Source: Guaita Esteruelas (2022).



**Figure 5.** Example of persuasion based on ethos on TikTok. Note: In this video, Unidas Podemos uses the image and reputation of their political leader, Irene Montero, to explain the main feminist ideas. Source: Podemos (2022).

parties. In line with previous studies, we found that political parties used TikTok mainly for belligerently ridiculing political opponents (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). In the case of political leaders, we also confirmed the use of this platform as self-promotion for image management (Bianchi, 2020), with a very low degree of interactivity. Most videos were lacking in key audiovisual elements in terms of editability, with the absence of music being one of the most important factors. In terms of association, we found a scarce presence of the typical TikTok genres aimed mainly at encouraging interactivity between users. Only a few examples of creativity in the videos from political leaders were noted.

Our findings also contribute to the scarce knowledge about the use of personalization on specific short-video-based platforms as a persuasion strategy. Our study identified the use of personalization on TikTok among videos from political actors. However, we could not conclude that this political communication strategy was more determinant among political leaders compared to political parties. Even though political leaders offer more personalized content to gain audience attention compared to political parties, as shown on other visual social networks (Larsson, 2019), our findings did not support the use of personalization in terms of privatization. Political actors use TikTok to diffuse mostly political content but hardly any personal or private content. Overall, the findings reveal that political actors are not using personalization on TikTok as a strategy for humanization or identification with potential voters. Instead, they assume a conservative role or a more traditional use of this platform.

Regarding the relative use of personalization on TikTok, our main contribution focuses on the extent political actors use persuasion techniques in their videos. Based on the classical rhetorical resources of ethos, pathos, and logos, our study reveals some important differences. Evidence points to the use of more rational resources (logos) in the case of political parties, such as using recorded evidence, press clippings, and audio to persuade and more emotional resources (pathos) for political leaders. Moreover, positive emotions such as inspiration and hope were more frequently used by political leaders, and more negative emotions were employed when pathos was used by political parties, with hatred being the most common emotion among political parties. Unexpectedly, the scarce presence of the personality of the political leaders (ethos) compared to logos or pathos among political leaders for impression management could be explained by the relatively low use of both forms of political personalization (individualization and privatization).

Finally, this work further demonstrates that the political context really matters in order to understand digital persuasion on TikTok. Significant differences were found with respect to how this platform is used by political actors in two different European countries, Spain and Poland. Although we found similar patterns regarding the editability affordances in both countries, Polish

political leaders show higher figures in terms of visibility and make better use of TikTok genres as interactive resources compared to Spanish political leaders. It is also notable that political leaders in Poland, more than in Spain, frequently appear as the main actor in their videos. However, the content of these videos was mainly political in both cases, and so the personalization trend was relative in both countries.

Perhaps the most important difference that we found is related to the mode of persuasion and the purpose of the TikTok videos in each country. Given that the presence of ethos was scarce in both cases, political actors in Poland base their persuasion appeals mostly on the use of positive emotions (pathos), while in Spain, the use of emotions, which were mostly negative criticism of their opponents, were combined with the use of arguments and evidence (logos). A different persuasion style in each country can explain this result since political actors in Poland follow a more idol-centric political communication style, whereas, in Spain, the more logos-centric style, where personality is less important than concrete proposals, seems more relevant.

In conclusion, this study represents one of the first attempts to explore the strategic use of TikTok for political purposes from a comparative perspective. Future online campaigning research may build on the findings of this study as well as address its limitations. This study represents only two specific countries, and so, for a comparative and more global perspective, it would be interesting to expand this work using international data from other political contexts. The authors are also aware of the limitations of the choice of using a method that is mostly used for still images to apply to moving images. Since the main goal of this article focused on content aspects instead of technical aspects, we consider that limitation doesn't affect the validity of the findings. Finally, it should be noted that some of the main political leaders from the most important political parties were not included since they did not have an official TikTok account at that time. Further research could also extend the sample to explore the role of short visual video platforms for political persuasion.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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