

TikTok Use in Municipal Elections: From Candidate-Majors to Influencer- Politicians

El uso de TikTok en las elecciones municipales: de candidatos a políticos-influencers



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Abstract

TikTok is without any doubt the most successful social network among Gen Zers and, consequently, is increasingly becoming their preferred place to discuss, share opinions, rally around social issues, and express political alignments. Accordingly, both politicians and political parties around the world are joining the platform to connect with young voters: previous exploratory studies, however, have shown that most political actors struggle to adapt to the platform's affordances, appearing cringy, out of touch, or simply using TikTok as an «old medium», without utilizing it to enhance interaction with citizens.

This article contributes to the emerging stream of literature looking at the political uses of this platform in electoral campaigns by studying its application in a local election, focusing on how Ada Colau, candidate mayor for the 2023 Barcelona Municipal elections, has integrated TikTok in her communication strategy. Applying an affordance-based multimodal content analysis of all the tiktoks posted during the campaign, the paper discloses that, although not fully exploiting the platform's affordances –in particular its participatory potential– the candidate optimally adapts to its vernaculars and cultural environment, constructing a highly recognizable personal style, which seems to borrow and implement the marketing techniques used by influencers and internet celebrities.

Therefore, the study concludes that Ada Colau can be considered an example of a new category of celebrity politician, the «influencer-politician», suggesting that future research should dig deeper into this novel dynamic of hybridization and cross-pollination between politics and digital cultures.

Keywords

TikTok; electoral campaigns; political communication; influencer-politician; affordances.

Resumen

TikTok es la red social de mayor éxito entre la llamada Generación Z y se está convirtiendo en su lugar preferido para debatir, compartir opiniones sobre temas sociales y expresar su posicionamiento político. Por consiguiente, los políticos quieren usar la plataforma para conectar con los jóvenes: sin embargo, estudios anteriores han demostrado que la mayoría de los actores políticos tienen dificultades para adaptarse a las posibilidades de la plataforma, pareciendo fuera de lugar o utilizando TikTok como un «viejo medio», sin aprovecharlo para mejorar la interacción con los ciudadanos.

Este artículo contribuye a la corriente académica que estudia los usos políticos de esta plataforma en las campañas electorales analizando su aplicación en unas elecciones locales, centrándose en cómo Ada Colau, candidata a la alcaldía en las elecciones municipales de Barcelona 2023, ha integrado TikTok en su estrategia de comunicación. A través de un análisis de contenido multimodal basado en las affordances de los tiktoks publicados durante la campaña, se revela que, aunque no explote plenamente las affordances de la plataforma –en particular su

potencial participativo–, la candidata se adapta de forma óptima a este entorno tecnológico y cultural, construyendo un estilo personal altamente reconocible, que parece replicar las técnicas de marketing utilizadas por los influencers y las Internet celebrities.

El estudio concluye que Ada Colau puede considerarse un ejemplo de una nueva categoría de político, el «influencer-político», sugiriendo que futuras investigaciones profundicen en esta novedosa dinámica de hibridación y mutua polinización entre la política y las culturas digitales.

Palabras clave

TikTok; campañas electorales; comunicación política; político-influencer; affordances.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the Internet has driven a major transformation in the field of political communication (Casero-Ripollés, 2020); social networks, in particular, have become essential tools in the communication strategy of parties and politicians, especially during campaign periods (Lalancette & Raynaud, 2019; Stier *et al.*, 2018).

A wide and rich international literature scrutinizes the use of social networks in national elections (Cervi & Roca-Trenchs, 2017): in the Spanish context, different studies have investigated both national (Gordillo Rodríguez & Bellido-Pérez, 2021) and regional campaigns (among others Garrido & Mora, 2022; López Fernández, 2022), but municipal elections remain highly understudied, since they are considered second-order elections (Ortega-Villodres & Recuero-López, 2020).

Aligning with Jayne (2011), I contend that mayors, especially mayors of global cities, should not be considered «lower level» politicians (Ortega-Villodres & Recuero-López, 2020), as in the globalized world they have become «avatars», (Jayne, 2011: 802), sort of personifications of the politics of their cities, which have acquired predominance in the world stage (Baylis, 2020).

In addition, in the context of a growing personalization of politics (Metz *et al.*, 2020), local elections' intrinsic personalized nature, somehow compelling candidates to pay more attention to the construction of their political personae, provide researchers with a unique opportunity to scrutinize this phenomenon.

Accordingly, this paper aims at investigating social network usage in the construction of candidates' image in a municipal election campaign, focusing on the last municipal election held on May 28, 2023, in the city of Barcelona, Spain.

The analyzed electoral campaign presented two peculiarities: first, it was the first campaign in which candidates have integrated a new social network, TikTok, into their campaign strategy, and second, it has basically consisted of a «plebiscite pro/against Ada Colau» (Noguer, 2023), the current mayor.

Being Gen Zers' preferred social network (Abidin, 2020), TikTok offers politicians a great chance to connect with young constituencies (Cervi *et al.*, 2021); on the other side, if they do not fully blend in, adapting to its affordances, vernaculars, and cultural environment, the platform entails the inherent risk of seriously damaging their image, by making them appear unauthentic and out of place, or –to say it in TikTok's slang– *cringy*.

Ada Colau, besides being the absolute protagonist of the campaign, was the first candidate to join TikTok when she was the mayor and has been the candidate that employed TikTok most constantly during the campaign consequently reaching the highest numbers of likes and followers.

As displayed by Table I, the other candidates either opted for a limited presence on the network, such as Jaume Collboni and Xavier Trias, or did not manage to get enough attention. Ernest Maragall, the candidate for *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, is not represented since he opted not to join the platform.

Table I. Candidates on TikTok.

Candidate	Party	Tiktoks during the campaign	Followers	Likes
Xavier Trias	Junts	14	121 665	
Ada Colau	Barcelona en Comú	70	32.000 577.300	
Jaume Collboni	PSC	14	6.249 207.000	
Eva Parera	Valents	9	23.700 351.400	
Daniel Sirera	PP	40	336 3.151	
Gonzalo de Oro	Vox	25	2.342 42.300	

Source: elaborated by the author .

This work, therefore, concentrates on Ada Colau's TikTok strategy, disclosing how the candidate has implemented it in her campaign strategy, looking at the adaptation to the platform's affordances, the type of content shared and how/if the platform has contributed to building her narrative and her image as a candidate.

2. TikTok and politics

TikTok has evolved from an app purely dedicated to entertainment to a sort of Gen Z' *agora*, young people's preferred arena to discuss politics (Abidin *et al.*, 2022) and rally around social issues (Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

The reasons behind this evolution are complex and multifaceted, however, it is already widely recognized that the platform's peculiar affordances engender a unique style of communication, which encourages content creation (Boffone, 2022) and political expression (Medina Serrano *et al.*, 2020).

First, TikTok's immense selection of easy-to-use professional filters, music, and editing services, grants every user the possibility to create content (Boffone, 2022). Music, in particular, besides functioning as a tool to capture audiences' attention, allows creators to produce and remix meanings, constructing personal narratives which can be politically charged (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022).

In addition, TikTok's hyper-personalized algorithmic recommendation system, centered on the «For You» page, offers every user the same possibility to go viral, embedding an intrinsic democratizing potential, (Cervi *et al.*, 2021), which motivates creators to share their personal political opinion «via an audiovisual act» (Medina Serrano *et al.*, 2020: 264) and engendering «highly personalized spaces for everyday politics» (Highfield, 2016: 3).

Thus, as «politicking on social media is growingly performative in nature» (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019: 888), TikTok's affordances and broader cultural environment foster creators to pursue collective action and influence public opinion in a more personal and creative way (Abidin, 2021). As a consequence, a new type of «playful activism» (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022) is emerging: this new form of activism is characterized by «hacking» the platform's affordances to create politically charged playful performances, allowing users to advocate for different issues, tackling hard topics in a more personal and ludic way (Vijay & Gekker, 2021).

In the last American campaign, for instance, tiktokers allied with K-Pop fans communities to troll Donald Trump: a false registration campaign was launched, resulting in many unexpected empty seats in a Trump rally in Tulsa (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020). In the same campaign creators also organized «hype-houses» in support for different candidates (Medina Serrano *et al.*, 2020).

As noted by Cervi and colleagues (2021), under these premises, TikTok has attracted political actors worldwide willing to join the app «to (re)connect with young people» (p. 12); nonetheless, the emergent stream of research on the political use of TikTok reveals that internationally both political parties and actors are having a hard time in adapting to the platform's vernaculars and general techno-cultural environment (Cervi *et al.*, 2021).

In particular, this literature highlights that most political actors, rather than optimizing the possibilities offered by the platform to generate a new/alternative form of (more) direct communication with the audience (Zurovac, 2022), use it as an old media, that is to say as a unilateral instrument for promotion (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021); the same conclusions have been reached by studies scrutinizing the last German (Bösch & Ricks, 2021), Peruvian (Cervi *et al.*, 20123; Montúfar-Calle *et al.*, 2022) and Italian political campaigns (Zurovac, 2022; Battista, 2023).

Moreover, it has been found that when politicians try to capitalize on the performativity of the platform, their content becomes more and more leaning toward politainment (Battista, 2023; Cervi *et al.*, 2023), a portmanteau of the words «politics» and «entertainment», which refer to the blending of politics and entertainment into a new type of political communication (Berrocal *et al.*, 2014), through the use of entertainment formats, techniques, and strategies.

2.1. Political uses of TikTok in Spain

In Spain the first work analyzing the use of TikTok by political parties (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021), although studying the political use of TikTok in its embryonic stage and not in a campaign period, agrees that political actors do not take full advantage of this social network; these results have been later confirmed by Morejón-Llamas, (2023), Zamora-Medina *et al.* (2023), and Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas *et al.* (2023).

In addition, the abovementioned study also stresses a clear difference between «old» and «new» politics, disclosing that Podemos and Vox seem to better adapt to the platform's affordances and global vernacular, getting better results both in quantitative (Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Cox, 2022: 227) and qualitative terms (Castro and Días, 2021), while traditional parties are somehow trapped in old strategies, still using it as a simple unidirectional promotional showcase (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021).

Podemos stands out as the party that uses TikTok with greater assiduity and adaptability (Cervi *et al.*, 2021), timidly stimulating interaction, while in the case of Vox, although agreeing on the party's better capacity of adaptation to the platform, studies point at different directions. On the one hand, Castro Martínez and Díaz Morilla (2021) find that its language and arguments appeal to fear and to the stigmatization of immigrants or to leftist parties, agreeing with López-Fernández (2022), who considers that confrontations and accusations between leaders represent the most demanded content by the community of followers. On the other, González-Aguilar and colleagues' (2023) findings show that not only hate speech is uncommon in the party's posts, but it actually plays against engagement, consequently arguing that TikTok may downplay the most controversial issues of the populist right. In the same vein, Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2023) note that positive and optimistic appeals play a significant role in the content produced for TikTok by Vox, proving how the party tries to adjust its communication to the broader cultural environment of the medium.

No study so far has analyzed the use of TikTok in municipal elections in Spain.

3. Ada Colau and the 2023 elections

After participating in the *V de Vivienda* Housing Movement and the Workshop against Real Estate Violence, Ada Colau was one of the organizers of the Platform of People Affected by the Mortgage (PAH) in Barcelona, which brought

together several movements related to this social problem, focusing on mortgage debt and evictions (Forti & Spena, 2019).

The 15M Movement helped disseminate and popularize different of these platforms' demands (Sintes-Olivella *et al.*, 2020): therefore, being the spokesperson of the PAH, Colau became well-known to the Spanish public before taking the leap into politics (Forti & Spena, 2019).

On May 7, 2014, she announced that she was stepping down as spokesperson for the PAH to lead *Guanyem Barcelona*, a citizen platform created with the aim of building a confluence candidacy for the 2015 municipal elections in the Catalan capital; the platform was crowdfunded and organized around an online collaborative platform that aggregated policy inputs from thousands of citizens (Font & García-Espín, 2019).

After several months of work, in February 2015 the electoral coalition *Barcelona en Comú* was presented with the confluence of *Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds, Esquerra Unida i Alternativa, Equo, Procés Constituent*, Podemos and the *Guanyem* platform (Carretero & Establés, 2019).

The coalition won the election: thus, to put it in Font and García-Espín's (2019) words, Ada Colau rose from Indignad@ to Mayor of Barcelona.

Her activist-politician character, together with her often provocative declarations and radical policies attracted media attention both nationally and internationally, transforming Ada Colau into a polarizing (either loved or hated) celebrity politician (Loxham, 2019).

She run for a second turn in the municipal elections of May 26, 2019: although the list came second in the number of votes (20,7% of the total valid votes), she was re-elected mayor, after reaching a government pact with the PSC and thanks to the vote in favor of the three councilors of Manuel Valls.

3.1. Election 2023

Colau decided to run for a third term in the election of May 28th, 2023: as previously mentioned, because of her polarizing profile, these elections have been defined as a plebiscite pro/against her (Noguer, 2023), since all the other candidates blamed her and presented themselves as anti-Colau options, somehow asking citizens to decide whether Barcelona should continue to follow Colau's model (more restrictions for tourism, control of housing market and active environmental campaign to reduce Co2 emissions) or go back to the pre-Colau era.

Barcelona en Comú, on its side, retaliated using humor, popularizing the slogan «La culpa de todo la tiene Ada Colau» (It's always's Ada Colau's fault), printing it on t-shirts and different gadgets sold to finance the campaign. Specifically, the slogan was presented as «La culpa de todo la tiene Yoko Ono» (playing with the diffused pop-culture stereotype/urban legend according to which Yoko Ono was guilty of everything that happened to John Lennon and

the Beatles) corrected –following a popular meme format– using a red line to substitute the name of Yoko Ono with the name of Ada Colau (see Image 1).

Image 1. La culpa de todo la tiene Yoko Ono/Ada Colau.



Source: TikTok.

The very nature of *Barcelona en Comú* –formed by activists from social movements and members of counter-hegemonic or minority political parties– and its decentralized organization (Forti & Spina, 2019) places digital networks at the center, both in its internal and external organization, thus, since its emergence, it has been characterized to heavily rely on digital networks as a political communication tool, (Sintes-Olivella *et al.*, 2020; Carretero & Establés, 2019; Castelo-Heymann, 2018).

Thus, *Barcelona en Comú* was the first Spanish party to join TikTok, in 2019 and, as previously mentioned, Ada Colau’s TikTok profile has been the first to be created, the one that has published the most during the campaign reaching higher engagement rates.

The 2023 election was finally won by Xavier Trias, the candidate of *Junts*, with Colau obtaining the third place with 131.594 votes (approximately 200 votes less than Jaume Collboni, the Socialist candidate that got the second place) and 9 Counselors (Ministerio de Interior, 2023).

By the time I am writing this article negotiations are taking place to decide who can be the Mayor.

4. Methods

All the tiktoks published by Ada Colau during the electoral campaign (May 12-26, 2023) have been analyzed; in addition, to broaden the data universe, 2 posts published on the «silence day» and on the day of the elections together with 33 posts published during the pre-campaign period have been included, to sum a total of 105 tiktoks.

Data have been manually collected by the author due to the absence of any commercial API for the platform and the unit of analysis is represented by tiktoks, understood as the video content, music, and effects together with the accompanying text, but excluding comments.

The research methodology combines quantitative and qualitative multi-modal content analysis (Serafini & Reid, 2019): basic codes have been developed following prior literature and, in order to generate additional codes an inductive approach informed by grounded theory principles (Birks & Mills, 2022), has been used.

The analytical variables are displayed in Table II.

Table II. Analytical variables.

TIKTOK AFFORDANCES							
Genre							
Video	Duet	Challenge	Stitch	Other			
Source							
Original	Cross-posted	Media	Creators	Other			
Format							
Only video	Video with text	Video with music	Video, music and text	Video with effects and music	Video with effects and text	Video with effects, text, and music	
Type of recording							
Selfie		Professional		POV			
Music (Type)							
Original		TikTok's viral trends		Other			
Music (Role)							
Accompainment		Main role		Other			
Hashtags							
Original		Viral		For you			
Content							
Main topic							
Political			Personal		Entertainment		
Campaign	Issue frame	Game frame		Professional	Intimization	Pure	Politically charged
		Praise	Attack				

Language				
Spanish		Catalan		Other
Main actors				
Candidate	Other politicians	Citizens	Journalists	Celebrities
Secondary actors				
Candidate	Other politicians	Citizens	Journalists	Celebrities
Location				
Public	Private	Institucional	Media	
Persuasive appeal				
Ethos		Pathos	Logos	
Candidate image				
Statenmanship/ Administrator		Celebrity	Ordinary woman	
Interaction				
Information and promotion		Deliberation and discussion	Participation and mobilization	

Source: elaborated by the author.

The first part assesses the candidate's adaptation to TikTok's affordances, focusing on disclosing whether her TikTok account fully exploits the platform's technical possibilities. Besides observing whether Colau follows TikTok's common genres, such as Challenges or Duets (Abidin, 2020), and capitalizes on TikTok's wide choice of effects and type of recordings, the originality of the content has also been taken into consideration, acknowledging that the platform prioritizes content originally created for it (Schellewald, 2021). Music and its role in the creation of the narrative have also been observed.

As per the content, following Cervi and Marín-Lladó's (2021) categorization, I isolated «Political», «Personal», and «Entertainment» content.

The first category collects all the tiktoks that are explicitly political and differentiate content according to how politics is framed, discerning between «issue frame», gathering content that centers around political issues and concrete proposals, and «game frame», mainly referring to the political game, that is to say representing politics as a competition, a battle or a war.

Within this last category, the quantity of content focused on praising the candidate and/or attacking the competitor has been calculated to measure the balance between the positive and the negative campaigning.

In addition, posts related to the campaign, such as those showing campaign events, campaign videos, etc. have been codified as «campaign issues» (Zamora-Medina *et al.*, 2023)

Further on, conceding that any Municipal election inherently entails certain degrees of personalization, under «personal content» I have categorized only what Metz and colleagues (2020), define as «private personalization», that is to say, content dealing with the candidate's private persona, showing aspects of her private life (family, hobbies, etc.) and personal characteristics.

Finally, the category «Entertainment» gathers all the tiktoks that are shared for their entertaining value.

In this case, recognizing that, as previously explained, TikTok vernaculars allow to «play politics» (Vijay & Gekker, 2021), that is to say, to insert political meaning in apparently innocuous entertainment content, I have subdivided this category into «pure entertainment» which gathers all the posts that have no relation to politics and are shared uniquely for their entertaining value (dances, pranks, jokes, etc.) and «politically charged entertainment», content that contains a (more or less hidden) political meaning.

The main and secondary characters of each post, together with the location have been added, due to their importance in the narrative and in the construction of the political message.

Assuming that all the messages published in an electoral campaign entail a persuasive discourse, the persuasive strategy has been assessed, inspired by Zamora-Medina and colleagues (2023), according to the classical Aristotelian categories of «*logos*», «*ethos*» and «*pathos*».

Moreover, the candidate's image has been evaluated: attending to the literature on visual framing (Goodnow, 2013; Grabe & Bucy, 2009) I have differentiated between «Stateswoman/Administrator», «Celebrity» and «Ordinary woman». The statesmanship/administrator image appears when the politician is portrayed deploying her/his official role (Goodnow, 2013); the «Celebrity» image is constructed by representing a political actor mobilizing and/or leading the masses (Street, 2019) and the «Ordinary man/woman» image portrays the candidate as an ordinary man/woman, as «just like us» (Wood *et al.*, 2016), to signal his/her closeness to the people.

Finally, to assess whether the candidate promotes interaction with the audience, and which type of interaction, the scale proposed by Lilleker and Vedel (2013) has been applied. The first, and less interactive level, information/promotion, is reached when the political actor uses social networks only to disseminate information; deliberation happens when the candidate promotes discussion, for example by asking or answering questions; and participation and/or mobilization level, the higher level of interaction, is achieved when the candidate openly encourage citizens to participate both online (for instance by sharing or creating content) and/or offline, by taking part in events, volunteering, etc.

5. Results

Before starting with the detailed analysis, it is important to note that Colau's tiktoks follow six clear formats: 1) Candidate speaking directly with the audience; 2) Candidate paying a visit to the city's neighborhoods; 3) Candidate meeting people; 4) Campaign events; 5) *#uncafeamb*; 6) Media appearances.

The first format shows the candidate directly looking at the camera and speaking to the audience explaining her proposals or answering people's questions collected on TikTok; the second is made of identically recorded tiktoks displaying Colau standing in a highly recognizable place of each district of Barcelona accompanied by one or more counselors of that district showcasing her administration's achievements in the neighborhood and proposing new policies; the third portrays the politician «on the street», walking or attending different non-political events (fairs, festivals, etc.) in the city, cheering and talking to people.

Campaign events either show extracts from the event itself (Colau speaking, people listening, music, etc.) or are recorded backstage, showing her preparing or talking to her team while the hashtag *#uncafesamb* collects the content from a transmedia podcast consisting of Colau having a coffee with one or more guests (celebrities or people who relevant to her life, such as her sisters), while sitting at the emblematic *Cafè de l'Òpera* located in even more emblematic Barcelona's *Ramblas*; finally, media appearances are constructed by reposting short TikTok-adapted extracts of Colau's appearance on different media, such as debates or interviews.

From an affordance perspective, the majority of the tiktoks posted are plain videos: Colau does not adhere to any challenge nor follow any of the platform's pre-established genres.

Most of the content (67,7%) is originally produced for TikTok, while 17,1% of it is represented by media extracts (mostly political debates or interviews), adapted to the platform's visuals, and ideos collected under the hashtag *#uncafesamb* (a coffee with), which make 15,2% of the total content, are cross-posted from other platforms.

Generally cross-posting is considered unsuitable for TikTok (Schellewald, 2021), nonetheless, in this case, as previously mentioned, the format is a podcast that the candidate distributes both on YouTube and Spotify, which, not only constitutes a sort of personal genre but also highlights the candidate's transmedia strategy.

The majority of the tiktoks (64,6%) do not display any music, willing to center the audience's attention on what the candidate says and viral tracks, which might help to increase her content visibility (Vizcaino-Verdú & Abidin, 2022), are never used.

However, it is seminal to underline that when music is used, it plays an important role in the construction of the political narrative: first, it contributes to the linguistic diversity of Colau's content, since in the great majority of the videos (95,7%) the politician speaks Catalan and, although all the tiktoks are subtitled in Spanish, the accompanying texts are also Catalan, but music –when it contains voice– is almost always in Spanish.

Interestingly, the most recurring music is represented by *rumba catalana*, a musical genre born and developed within Barcelona's Roma community: this type of music is first of all meaningful for the city, as it is recognized as «made in Barcelona» (Faure-Carvalho & Gustems-Carnicer, 2020). In this

vein, it is important to note how different videos play «Gitana Hechicera», a song performed by Peret, considered both the symbol of *rumba catalana* and a sort of love letter to/ non-official anthem for the city of Barcelona, which is praised and defined as *poderosa* (powerful).

Most importantly, this music, created in Barcelona by the Roma minority derives its rhythm from the Andalusian flamenco, with influences from Cuban music and rock and roll (Faure-Carvalho & Gustems-Carnicer, 2020), therefore, it inherently contains intercultural values; but within the Catalan context it specifically embodies the *charnego* culture (Menacho, 2020), understood as the culture of immigrants from the rest of Spain integrating into Catalan society while proudly maintaining their original traditions. Thus, the use of *rumba catalana*, besides adding linguistic diversity, allows Colau, who has made inclusivity and the defense of minorities and refugees one of her trademarks (Forti & Spena, 2019), to inject an extra-inclusivity message into her communication.

Image 2. Ada Colau dancing.



Source: TikTok.

In the same vein, the second most recurrent musical genre is Latino music: Image 2 perfectly displays this dynamic: the candidate is portrayed dancing with a group of immigrant women to the music of a traditional dance from Latin America and the accompanying text mixes Catalan and Spanish.

All the tiktoks are categorized under a hashtag especially created for the campaign, *#barcelonaobrecami*, and, when it is the case, under the previously mentioned *#uncafeamb*, while viral hashtags are not implemented and the candidate does not use the common hashtag *#foryou* to attract TikTok's algorithm and increase virality (Abidin, 2020).

In sum, although the candidate does not fully implement TikTok's wide choice of effects, use viral genres such as challenges, or use viral hashtags or music to increase the virality of her posts, her content is altogether coherent and matches TikTok's vernaculars.

In particular, in the previously mentioned tiktoks collected under the hashtag *#uncafeamb* (a coffee with) she creates her own personal video format and in posts displaying the candidate explaining a proposal she uses the format «En menys d'un minut» (I explain it to you in less than a minute) which is a typical educational video format on TikTok (Tejedor-Calvo *et al.*, 2022). In other words, despite not fully exploiting TikTok's affordances, Colau seems to have perfectly understood the dynamic of the platform, succeeding in creating a highly recognizable personal style that strengthens her personal brand identity (Pich & Newman, 2020).

From the content perspective, a great majority of content, 76,6%, is political: a quarter of it is dedicated to campaign-related issues (events, debates, etc.).

Within the political content it is possible to retrieve a clear difference: in all the videos specifically created for TikTok (videos portraying the candidate directly speaking to the audience, videos where she visits different neighborhoods and videos where she is among the people) politics is entirely tackled through the «issue frame», dealing with concrete policy issues, mostly city-related issues (mainly referring to housing and the environment), but a great emphasis is also placed on tackling the broader importance of defending children's and mothers' rights.

On the other side, tiktoks displaying campaign events and even more media extracts show a prevalence of «game frame», in which Colau predominantly attacks the opponents. In particular, the focus is on rising fear against the possible alliance between Collboni, candidate for the Socialist party and former partner in Colau's government and Xavier Trias, candidate for the conservative *Junts*.

In other words, it seems that the candidate differentiates her communicative strategy adopting a more confrontational style when she is interacting with «old media» and «old politics» and using more positive and optimistic issue-based appeals, adjusting to TikTok's vernaculars and broader cultural environment (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023).

Purely personal content showcasing her personal life and characteristics only represents 8,2% of the total content and mostly gears towards humanizing the candidate, revealing Colau as a woman, especially a mother and an ordinary person, who does the same thing as anyone else (such as, for example, getting emotional at Bruce Springsteen's concert, or chatting with her family).

In this vein, it is important to note that even in the strictly political tiktoks the politician is humanized by showing her emotions (she is represented hugging and kissing in 76 out of 105 videos) or her spontaneity (the candidate is portrayed dancing in 10 videos and having fun singing along music in practically all the campaign videos).

Content shared for pure entertainment is not present, while politically charged entertainment represents 15,2% of the total content: in particular, within the *#uncafeamb* format, while Colau discusses a variety of non-political topics with her guests, the discussion always more or less directly emphasizes her positive qualities both as a person and as a mayor.

Therefore, it is possible to state that Colau constructs her TikTok image successfully by applying the technique of influencers: as these seek to establish a feeling of perceived interconnectedness with their audiences by offering an insight into their private lives in order to monetize the trust of their followers by recommending different kinds of products (Starita & Trillò, 2022), Colau tries to establish a relationship with her audiences by displaying her «normal» private life or dealing with common-sense non-political issues, infusing the content with (more or less hidden) messages that *de facto* function as advertisements of her political agenda.

In this sense, this content can be ascribed to the category politainment (Berrocal *et al.*, 2014) since, as seen, politics mix with pop culture and the humanization of the politician and political messages are vehiculated in an engaging way, if not infused into entertainment content.

Ada Colau appears as the main character in 102 out of 105 videos, however in more than three-quarters of the tiktoks she appears accompanied: the most recurrent secondary actor is people, highlighting her closeness to people, again underlining her closeness to her constituency, the second most recurrent secondary actor is represented by celebrities.

The above mentioned transmedia podcast *#uncafeamb*, in fact, hosts many celebrities amongst which the most recurring are comedian Andreu Buenafuente and actress Silvia Abril. Colau also interacts with local influencers such as *El Comidista* (a popular foodie influencer based in Barcelona) or Rustem, a Barcelona-based Pakistani shop owner that has become a TikTok sensation.

In third place, we find other politicians: besides counselors of different neighborhoods or members of her party, the most recurring character is Yolanda Diaz, the leader of *Sumar*.

In April 2023 *Barcelona en Comú*, and Colau personally, attended the presentation event for *Sumar* coalition led by Diaz, who, in return, traveled to Barcelona to support Colau for her campaign.

The scenes are almost always located outdoors, in public spaces, exhibiting Colau as a woman «of the street», connected to the local reality: , in tiktoks where she pays visits to the different neighborhoods, videos are always recorded in what she calls «pacified areas», that is to say areas in which she has improved the space (such as for instance creating a children playground) to stress out her successes as mayor.

As per the main persuasive appeal, it is possible to observe how «*ethos*» is the first category making 60% of the total content: most of the posts play on Colau's charisma, on the way she rose to politics (representing her as a

justice fighter) and on what she has previously done for the city. «*Pathos*», that is to say the appeal to emotions, gathers 35% of the total content and is represented by tiktoks that either capitalize on the fear of the previously discussed possible alliance between Collboni and Trias or play with the idea of Colau as a mother, thus as a caregiver and a protector, while «*Logos*», the appeal to the audience's reason, building up logical arguments, is almost absent representing only 5% of the content, disclosing how persuasion is mostly entirely based on emotions, trying to trigger an emotional reaction from the platform's affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015).

As for the image of the candidate, Colau is represented as an administrator in only one video: the rest is balanced between the celebrity (56,3%) and the ordinary woman (43,7%). As previously discussed, in most content related to campaign events and whenever she is surrounded by people she is portrayed like a super-star (signing autographs, taking pictures with them), with people representing her political fandom (asking her to take pictures, hugging and kissing her, showing emotion and affection towards her).

In Image 3 a «fan» show Colau that he has the words «Colau, we love you» tattooed on his leg.

Image 3. Colau's fandom.



Source: TikTok

All the personal content, together #*uncafeamb* posts and in the videos displaying the backstage of events, on the other side, the focus switches to her personal life revealing her ordinariness, her being «one of us»: four of #*cafeamb* videos are dedicated to her chatting with her mother and sisters about her private life, narrating intimate stories about, for example, her bothering her sisters by obsessively playing an Italian singer's music on her return to Barcelona after an Erasmus stay in Italy when she was a student.

In other words, Colau's character construction on TikTok perfectly matches Wood, Corbett and Flinders's (2016) definition of an «everyday celebrity politician», who seeks to convey an apparent image of authenticity and simplicity, based on the mediatization of his/her private persona: this kind of strategy, once again, seems to follow the same marketing techniques implemented by influencers to create their personal brands.

Finally, as per the level of interaction, a great majority of the tiktoks do not promote any form of interaction, consisting mainly in promoting the candidate: only 3 posts openly appeal to citizens' participation, concretely asking them to vote and to volunteer as *apoderados* (party representatives at the ballots).

However, although limited in numbers, it is seminal to underline that 7,6% of the posts promote deliberation, since on the day of the opening of the electoral campaign, the candidate posted a video asking the audience to posit questions and promised to answer them: accordingly, 8 videos are dedicated to her answering tiktokers's questions (see Image 4).

Image 4. Colau answering users' questions.



Source: TikTok

6. Discussion and conclusions

Ada Colau's communicative strategy on TikTok, although apparently not exploiting all the possibilities that the platform offers, disclose a good understanding and adaptation to the platform's functioning. As seen, the candidate successfully creates a very recognizable personal style made of originally created content and format that, on the one hand, integrates TikTok's vernacular and on the other engages in TikTok's cultural environment.

In this sense, the choice of not using music as a viral tool or not playing with algorithmic visibility, that is to say not using hashtags or trends, appears to be more a strategic choice rather than a lack of understanding of the platform's affordances.

These results, therefore, show that Colau stands out in comparison to the rest of the Spanish parties, nonetheless, recognizing that the politician promoted deliberation by answering citizens' questions, her level of interaction with the audience is still low and TikTok is mostly used for promotion, confirming, as shown by previous studies, that TikTok's democratic potential is not fully taken advantage of.

In the same way, politainment (Berrocal *et al.*, 2014) content is prevalent, confirming Cervi and colleagues' thesis (2023), according to which TikTok's affordances and cultural environment have the potential to become a hotbed for politainment.

However, these results also disclose how the politician in order to convey a feeling of authenticity and establish a close relationship with her audience, trigger their feelings of trust and community through calculated self-disclosure and staged amateurism (Abidin, 2020): in other words, Colau, presenting herself as the «everyday celebrity politician» described by Wood, Corbett and Flinders (2016) clearly borrows influencers and/or internet celebrities' strategies, transforming herself into a sort of «influencer politician», who, «adopts the style and vernacular of social media influencers to establish a seemingly intimate relationship with their followers-constituents in order to cement their political capital» (Starita & Trillò, 2022: 350).

Although different studies are pointing out the emergence of this new hybrid figure that stands at the crossroad between politics and digital culture (Starita & Trillò, 2022; Cervi, 2020), as Casero-Ripollés (2020) highlights, research is still embryonic: multidisciplinary research investigating the mixing and cross-pollination of influencer culture, celebrity politics, and digital political communication is, thus, necessary to disclose whether we are facing a new era of political communication or just another form of politainment.

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