

Article

# TikTok and Political Communication: The Latest Frontier of Politainment? A Case Study

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## Abstract

TikTok is without any doubt the most popular social media among Gen Zers. Originally born as a lip-syncing app, it can be exploited in different ways; as such, it represents a new fertile space for political communication. In this vein, previous studies have shown that politicians all over the planet are joining the platform as a tool to connect with younger audiences. This study examines the use of TikTok in the last presidential elections in Peru. Following an affordance-based approach, we analyze all the TikToks published by the main candidates (Pedro Castillo, Keiko Fujimori, Rafael Lopez Aliaga, Hernando de Soto, and George Forsyth) during the electoral campaign, to understand if and how candidates have integrated this platform as part of their electoral strategy and what kind of content they publish and share. Through a content analysis that combines quantitative and qualitative elements, we demonstrate that, although all the analyzed politicians have opened TikTok accounts, they do not seem to take full advantage of the platform's affordances displaying a top-down communication style with almost no deliberative nor participative intentions. Political issues are almost absent since the platform is mostly used to display their personal life and enhance their political persona, with most of the content displaying a clear entertaining dimension. Some differences are discussed but, in general, results reveal that Peruvian candidates use TikTok almost uniquely for politainment.

## Keywords

Peru; politainment; political campaign; political communication; TikTok

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

Already more than 30 years ago, political theorist Murray Edelman (1988) suggested that in the mass media society ideologically motivated actors create policy through the "spectacle" of dramatic public displays. The so-called "political spectacle" (Edelman, 1988) answers to two mutually influencing and interconnected dynamics. On the one hand, politicians need to reconnect with citizenship, in particular with young people (Collin, 2015); on the other, they are forced to keep up with the logic of infotainment (Mazzoleni & Sfardini,

2009). So it is that, as Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. (2022) point out, politics has become pop politics: Extreme mediatisation demands politicians to imitate celebrities in a pop spectacle in which they become TV stars (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009).

The internet has generated a special breeding ground for this type of dynamics. Cyberspace constitutes a fertile territory for political parties, candidates, and media to deploy communication strategies aimed at having a powerful impact on users (Zamora-Medina & Rebolledo, 2021). Politainment (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2014) introduces an era of political communication clinging to the

spectacle, where the quest for engagement requires adapting to platforms' affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and adopting entertainment strategies, such as, among others, gamification (Gómez-García et al., 2022) or emotional appeal (Metz et al., 2020).

In this scenario, TikTok, the platform for dances and frivolous trends (Abidin, 2020), as an adaptive social media that can be exploited in many different ways (Weimann & Masri, 2021), is emerging as an opportunity for political communication (Cervi et al., 2021).

Whereas TikTok use is on the rise throughout Latin America—according to recent data TikTok is among the three applications with the highest growth rates in this area (The World Bank Group, 2022)—no study so far has analyzed in-depth how this medium is used in electoral campaigns. To fill this gap, the present work examines the use of TikTok in the last presidential elections in Peru, focusing on the political strategy and discourse of the candidates that achieved more than 10% of the popular vote: Pedro Castillo, Keiko Fujimori, Rafael Lopez Aliaga, Hernando de Soto, and George Forsyth. Therefore, our work aims at answering the following research questions:

RQ1: Are Peruvian candidates using TikTok?

RQ2: Do they adapt to the platform's specific affordances?

RQ3: What kind of content do they share?

RQ4: Do they use TikTok to interact with the electorate?

RQ5: Is the platform used for politainment?

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. TikTok and Political Communication

TikTok has grown into one of the most popular social media platforms, reaching over one billion monthly active users in 2021 (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021) and becoming the highest-grossing app in the world in 2022 (Perez, 2022). Around 80% of the users are between the ages of 16 and 34 (Iqbal, 2022), making TikTok Gen Z's favorite social medium (Abidin et al., 2022).

With the explosion of its popularity, the platform has somehow naturally mutated from a place for jokes, pranks, and viral dance challenges to an environment where Gen Zers rally around social issues (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). On TikTok, content is filtered creating personalized, algorithm-led experiences (Cotter et al., 2022): This algorithmic recommendation system potentially provides every user the possibility to go viral (Cervi, 2021), motivating creators to engage in politics by spreading their political stances "via audiovisual acts" (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020, p. 264).

Accordingly, young people are increasingly using TikTok for grassroots movements. The app has consti-

tuted a crucial instrument for Black Lives Matter, both in the US and worldwide (Eriksson & Åkerlund, 2022) and become pivotal for the anti-caste protests in India (Subramanian, 2021) and the global #StopAsianHate movement during Covid-19 pandemic (Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Jacques et al., 2022).

In the same vein, TikTok seems to be the breeding ground for climate change activism (Hautea et al., 2021) and activism related to LGBTQ+ has taken the forefront of the app (Simpson & Semaan, 2021).

Recently, the app, with hashtags such as #FreePalestine, has been the theater of an online dispute between Israeli and Palestinian youth, engendering what has been recognized as a new form of activism, "playful activism" (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022), which has granted Palestinian resistance increased and renovated exposure.

The app has also been used by creators to influence the result of elections: Besides turning into the *locus* of youth political discussion (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020), during the last US presidential election, TikTokers, especially K-pop fans, played a key role in organizing a mass trolling false-registration campaign for Donald Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which resulted in many empty seats (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020).

Even if TikTok has an explicit ban against paid political advertisements (Chandlee, 2019), this "Tiktokisation of global politics" (Ball, 2021) has stimulated political actors worldwide to join the app regarding it as a "unique opportunity to (re)connect with young people" (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021, p. 12).

Nonetheless, while general TikTok research is booming (Abidin et al., 2022), specific academic research about how politicians and political parties use the platform for promotion, communication, and especially campaigning is still extremely scarce.

In Europe, Bösch and Ricks (2021) and Zurovac (2022) have scrutinized TikTok usage by political parties in the last German and Italian elections respectively, reaching a similar conclusion: Political actors concentrate on the performativity side of the platform rather than using it as a tool for direct communication with the electorate. In the same vein, two studies in Spain (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Cervi et al., 2021) have analyzed political parties' use of TikTok finding out that very few of them have optimized the app's affordances to strengthen the dialogue with their constituencies, while most of them use it for a form of promotion that leads to politainment.

Finally, an emerging stream of literature is shedding light on how TikTok can also be a source of political polarization and hate speech (Weimann & Masri, 2021), converting into the hotbed for populist right-wing parties' communication (Castro Martínez & Días Morilla, 2021).

In Latin America, studies have concentrated on presidential communication (Figuerero Benítez et al., 2022) and how it has been successfully implemented by political actors for self-promotion during Covid-19 (Acosta & Acosta, 2022).

The very few studies focusing on political campaigns found that in Ecuador TikTok's presence has helped new or marginal candidates get in the spotlight (Muñoz, 2021). In Peru, Montúfar-Calle et al. (2022), analyzing candidates' adoption of different social networks, have concluded that keeping up with new cultural and technological innovations is still an unfinished business for most Peruvian politicians, while Calderón et al. (2022), examining only Conservative candidates, have disclosed that they have used TikTok mostly to fuel social division and to disseminate a polarizing discourse.

## 2.2. Social Media and Politics in Peru

Although data is not precise, with a steady rise in internet penetration—a 30% increase in the last 10 years—currently, a great majority of the Peruvian population has access to the internet and political engagement in social media significantly increased since 2016 (The World Bank Group, 2022).

Former President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski can be considered the first political actor who implemented a social media strategy: In his presidential campaign, he used social media to connect with young voters and humanize his political persona (Mäckelmann, 2017); during his time in office, he used Twitter and Facebook to share his daily activities to strengthen his image as an active, professional, and empathic leader (Mäckelmann, 2017). Kuczynski was so successful that a study found he became the third most popular leader in Latin America with 1.39 million followers on Twitter (Burson-Marsteller, 2017).

Social media have also had, and still have, a fundamental role in activism and social movements (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020; Salzman, 2019) enhancing political participation through humor and protest, especially among young people (Castro Pérez, 2019; de la Garza Montemayor et al., 2021). Social networking, for instance, had a central role in Lima's former mayor Villarán campaign that successfully won the "No" to the revocation process that aimed to oust her from office. Peruvian youth also used social media to organize massive and unprecedented protests against the former President of Congress Manuel Merino (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020; Dargent & Rousseau, 2021): #MerinoNoMeRepresenta (#MerinoDoesNotRepresentMe) and #MerinoNoEsMi Presidente (#MerinoIsNotMyPresident) were the prominent hashtags that lead the campaign (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020).

According to a recent study (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021), TikTok is used by 31% of Peruvians with internet access. The expansion of the use of the platform is largely due to the confinement of people to their homes during the Covid-19 pandemic (Calderón et al., 2022). TikTok is Peruvians' third most-used social network, behind Facebook and Instagram and before Twitter, and the preferred social network of 44% of teens

between 12 and 17 years old and 38% of Gen Zers (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021).

Considering the importance of the young cohorts in the electoral census—one-third of the Peruvian voting population, 6,928,324, is represented by citizens under the age of 30 years—and the increasing popularity of TikTok, it is no surprise that politicians have adopted this social network to connect with the younger audience (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022).

## 2.3. The Elections of 2021

The 2021 Peruvian elections occurred in a moment of deep political instability resulting from the swearing-in of four presidents in the previous five years (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022): President Kuczynski resigned in 2018 due to his involvement in the Odebrecht corruption scandal and Fujimori's pardon, and the Congress was dissolved by president Vizcarra in 2019, with Vizcarra himself finally being impeached in 2020 (Muñoz, 2021).

In a country devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic, President Vizcarra's impeachment worsened the already existing popular discontent towards Congress, especially among young people (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020; Dargent & Rousseau, 2021). After the dissolution of Congress and the election of a new one under the leadership of Manuel Merino, serious social conflict developed in the streets of Lima. The police repression of street mobilizations led to a national crisis that ended up in the death of two university students, missing protesters, president Merino's public resignation five days after his inauguration, and an even more unpopular Congress (Dargent & Rousseau, 2021). After Merino's resignation, Congress changed its leadership and elected Fransico Sagasti as president, a moderate intellectual that voted against Vizcarra's impeachment and managed to stay in office until the end of the presidential mandate despite several impeachment threats by Congress. Amidst this chaotic situation, President Martín Vizcarra initially presented legislation that would set the conditions for a snap election in 2020, but his proposal was rejected.

In addition to this structural crisis, Peru has been the most affected country by Covid-19 in Latin America (Varona & Gonzales, 2021). Because of the pandemic, the Peruvian Ministry of Health established a security protocol that restricted face-to-face electoral campaign activities: This peculiarity, together with the country's law that prohibits contracting political advertising slots on radio and television to regulate the financing of candidates and political parties, made social networks the core of the political campaign (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022).

Elections were finally held on April 11, 2021, in the year of the celebration of the bicentennial of Peru's independence, under the exceptional of 18 official candidates representing both "traditional politics" and newcomers.

The results were surprising: In the first round, Pedro Castillo, a newcomer completely unknown to the public,

received the most votes. In the second round, held at the beginning of June, he faced Keiko Fujimori, former president Fujimori’s daughter, winning with 50.12% of the popular vote.

Castillo was eventually named president-elect by the National Jury of Elections on July 19, and inaugurated on July 28, after the official declaration by the National Jury of Elections was delayed following accusations of electoral fraud by opposition politicians.

### 3. Methods

Our analysis investigates the use of TikTok during the last electoral campaign. To limit the scope of our research, only candidates who have reached at least 10% of the votes have been taken into consideration.

As displayed in Figure 1, these candidates are: Pedro Castillo, a rural school teacher, trade unionist, and former member of Ronda Campesina, an organization that defended rural areas from Shining Path in the 1980s; Keiko Fujimori, contentious former president Fujimori’s daughter, involved in the Odebrecht scandal, for which she has served in pretrial detention since 2018 with con-

ditional release in 2020; Rafael Lopez Aliaga, a conservative businessman who gained political traction due to his ultraconservative rhetoric and with a Trump-like political communication strategy (Zárate & Budasoff, 2021), self-proclaiming himself as “the Peruvian Bolsonaro”; and Hernando de Soto, a famous economist and policy advisor, founder of the Institute for Liberty and Democracy, an economic development think-tank based in Lima.

Moreover, we have purposely added George Forsyth, who, despite not reaching 10% of votes was one of the most mediatized candidates of this electoral turnout (Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022) and perfectly embodies celebrity pop politics (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009): As a former well-known football player, he entered politics without any experience or political affiliation, as the mayor of a local district in Lima (O’Boyle, 2020), and later signed an agreement with the National Restoration party for his presidential run. Upon his registration, the party filed a name change and reorganized into National Victory for the general election.

All the content published by the selected candidates by the date of the data collection (April 11, 2021) has been analyzed. The unit of analysis is represented by

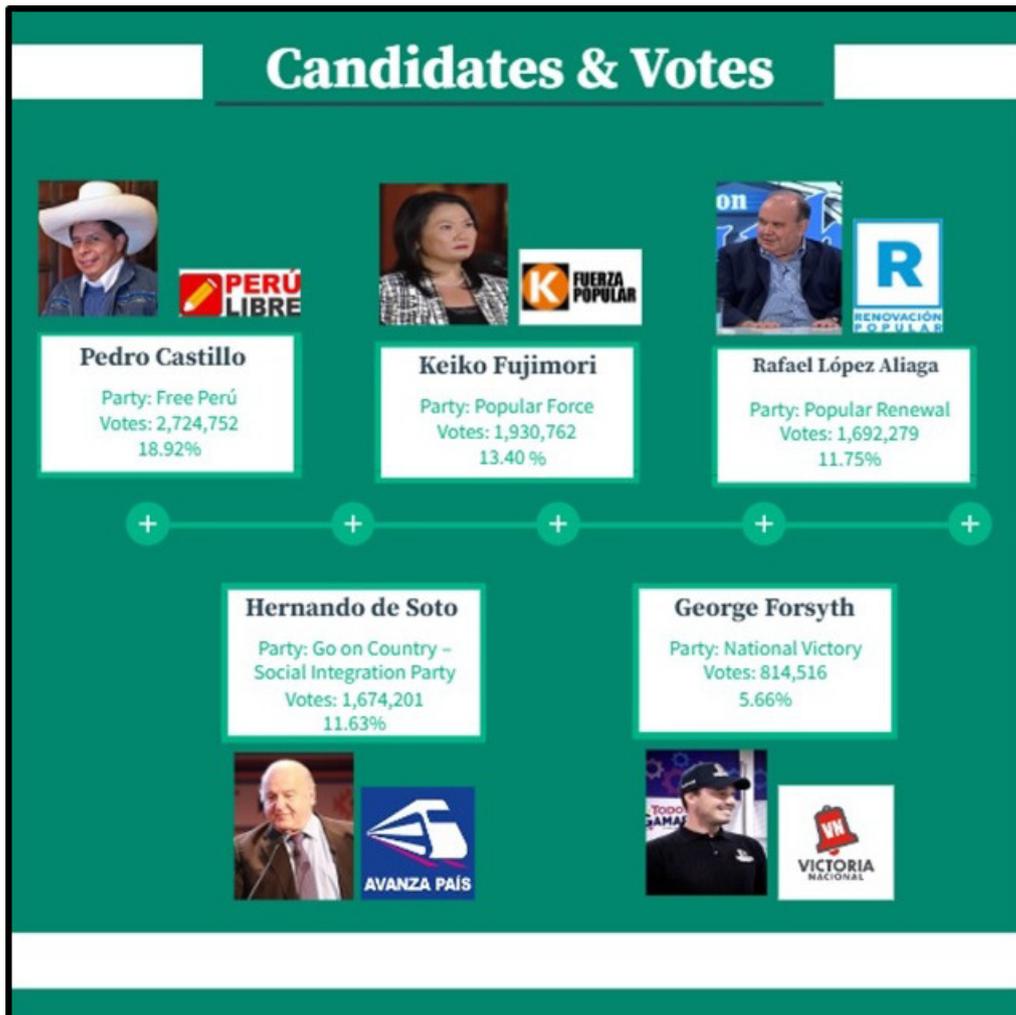


Figure 1. Candidates and votes. Source: Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales (2021).

TikToks, defined as both the video content, the music, and, if present, the accompanying text, excluding comments. Data have been manually collected by the authors due to the absence of any commercial API for the platform. The research methodology combines quantitative and qualitative (Jaraba Molina et al., 2020) multimodal content analysis (Serafini & Reid, 2019). The analytical variables have been built by adopting and adapting the methodology proposed by Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021) and are displayed in Table 1.

First, we have looked at the candidates' adaptation to TikTok's affordances, focusing on disclosing whether they fully understand and apply the platform's technical possibilities in creating their content. As per the content, we have distinguished Political, Personal, and Entertainment content. The category Political Content collects all the explicitly political videos. Following Dekavalla (2018), this category has been further sub-divided according to how politics is framed: In the "issue frame," content centers around political issues and concrete proposals, while in

the "game frame" the message mainly refers to the political game, representing politics as a battle or a war.

Moreover, acknowledging that any Presidential election is *per se* personalized, we have adopted the theoretical conceptualization of Metz et al. (2020), which allows differentiating between "professional personalization" and "private personalization." In the first type of personalization, qualities and individual activities related to the official role are highlighted, while the second capitalizes on the private persona of the candidates, concentrating on their personal life (families, hobbies) and characteristics.

Finally, the category Entertainment, which, as previously mentioned constitutes the main genre of the platform (Abidin, 2020), gathers all the TikToks that have no relation to politics at all and are shared only for their entertaining value (dances, pranks, jokes, etc.).

From the stylistic perspective, video shots have long been studied due to their key role in building a narrative (Rao et al., 2020) and the portrayal of situations

**Table 1.** Categories of analysis.

Genre						
Video		Duet			Challenge	
Format						
Only video	Video with effects	Video with music	Video and text	Video with effects and music	Video with effects and text	Video with effects text, and music
Source						
Party			Media		Users	
Original	Other social networks					
Content						
Political			Personal		Entertainment	
Issue frame	Game frame					
Style						
Video shot						
Close up		Full shot	Two shot	POV	Wide	
Type of recording						
Selfie		Homemade			Professional	
Main ators						
Politician	Other politicians	Celebrities	Anonymous citizens		Journalists	
Interaction						
Information and promotion		Deliberation and discussion			Participation and mobilization	

Source: Authors' work based on Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021)

(Licoppe, 2015; Rao et al., 2020). We categorized the shots based on the work of Rao et al. (2020) adding more shot types that are present and popular on TikTok (Abidin, 2020). We included the close-up, which intends to establish the viewer’s psychological identification with the character due to the facial non-verbal communication and to emphasize the identities of the characters (Rao et al., 2020); the full shot, suitable for portraying an event (Rao et al., 2020); the two-shot, which shows the candidate talking to someone in particular and enhances the dialogue (Cutting & Candan, 2015); the long or wide shot, noted as a tool to provide a zoom out perspective, such as collective participation (Licoppe, 2015); and the point of view (POV), one of the most popular shots on TikTok (Abidin, 2020) which besides emphasizing the character’s perspective (Cutting & Candan, 2015) is known to foster the sense of authenticity (Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2017).

In addition, recognizing that music is probably TikTok’s most distinguishable affordance (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) and that, as a cultural form, it produces meanings, interpretations, and understandings not only by its producers but also by the way consumers interact with it (Garratt, 2019), it has been added as a category of analysis.

Music, besides functioning as a tool to capture audiences’ attention who otherwise would neglect the political message (Way, 2019), can and has been used for political purposes such as propaganda (Street, 2013), but is also constitutive of political expression (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022), as it embodies political values and experiences and organizes political thought an action (Garratt, 2019).

In the present study, we have divided music into two subcategories: global and local, which stand for global mass-culture music and Peruvian music, respectively. This choice of music, in the Peruvian context, especially the juxtaposition between global (mostly American) and local music, particularly indigenous popular music (Tucker, 2019), entails a culturally and politically informed communication strategy.

Furthermore, we have also identified the main character of each post due to its importance in the narrative and political message intended to transmit to the audience, as well as the recorder, a production feature which also provides information on the political communication style of each candidate.

Finally, to disclose and measure how/if candidates stimulate forms of interaction with the audience, the interaction scale proposed by Lilleker and Vedel (2013) has been implemented. According to Lilleker and Vedel (2013), the first and less interactive level is represented by information/promotion, in which political parties/candidates use social networks as they used old media, only to disseminate information, without promoting any type of interaction with the audiences. Deliberation or discussion is found when the party/candidate promotes a bilateral exchange through a

request for feedback (for example asking the audience to give their opinions). Finally; “mobilization” is the higher level of interaction: Political actors openly encourage citizens to participate online, by sharing or creating content, and/or offline, by taking part in events, offering their support, etc.

Despite, as previously mentioned, the variables used are based on previous works (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021) in order to isolate and fix analytical items requiring changes or clarification, we have implemented an intercoder reliability test to an initial subset of the data (7%). The subsequent, and final, intercoder reliability test have met the kappa > 0.80 standard for all the variables (Cohen, 1960).

#### 4. Results

All the analyzed candidates have adopted TikTok. Nonetheless, only Rafael Lopez-Aliaga, Hernando De Soto, and George Forsyth have a relatively decent number of publications, with 33, 41, and 35 posts, respectively; Keiko Fujimori only has 16 and Pedro Castillo three, showing a later adoption of the platform.

Regarding the TikTok genres, most of the candidates only post simple videos, not taking part in TikTok’s main viral formats. Challenges, in particular, were almost absent among all publications. Only Rafael Lopez-Aliaga launches his own challenge under the hashtag #HazLoTuyoChallenge (see Figure 2), while the others only applied it in less than 3% of his posts.

Therefore candidates do not seem to capitalize on TikTok’s main and most viral genres.



Figure 2. #HazLoTuyoChallenge.

However, looking at the format, they tend to use all of TikTok’s technical affordances: 95% of the content posted by the candidates displays a wide use of the different effects provided by the platform (music, special effects, etc.).

Regarding the sources, most of the videos are created especially for TikTok. Only Lopez-Aliaga and Forsyth use extracts from traditional media, such as television interviews, and share them on TikTok. On the other hand, only Lopez-Aliaga and Forsyth post content created by other users showing that candidates are not interacting with other content creators.

From a content perspective, as shown in Figure 3, there is a clear division: While in the case of Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori political content predominates, the rest of the candidates, especially De Soto

and Forsyth, also capitalize on their private persona and share purely entertainment-based content.

Accordingly, Keiko Fujimori mostly uses TikTok to document her efforts to personally tackle contentious issues (see Figure 4) presenting herself as the “mother of the homeland,” the heir of former President Fujimori. Many of her posts show her campaign trips with her as the narrator of the events using the voice-over technique. This trait is very important to note because it matches with the frequent use of wide shots, both characteristics revealing the way she portrays herself and wants to be represented by others: as the omniscient narrator that controls her story and is above reality. In doing so, she also shows perspective and takes distance, and positions herself as an experienced leader that not only knows but controls what she is doing.

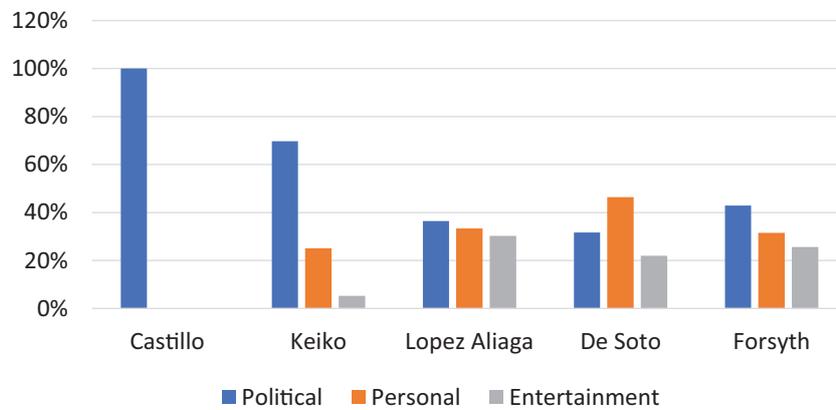


Figure 3. Content of the posts.



Figure 4. Fujimori’s TikTok.

The challenger candidates, on their side, try to show their difference and their remoteness from the establishment and discontent towards political institutions (Carrasco-Villanueva & Sánchez-Mejía, 2020; Dargent & Rousseau, 2021) by focusing on their private personae.

In particular, De Soto positions himself as an academic (see Figure 5) expert whilst Lopez-Aliaga and Forsyth as morally clean outsiders who can fight the corrupted system that the other candidates allegedly represent.

Of note is the case of the latter, who endures his image of an outsider attacking “old school” politicians, by capitalizing on the entertainment and symbolical value of his sports career through the diffuse display of meaningful soccer symbolism, such as soccer teams t-shirts (see

Figure 6). Forsyth, therefore, using the term “*mismocracia*,” which refers to the traditional political leaders as part of an outdated and corrupted elite, positions himself as the only possibility for renewing the political system.

As for Castillo, the limited number of TikToks published does not allow low to draw any conclusions.

In the same vein, as illustrated by Figure 7, while Fujimori mixes issues with “game frame,” the other candidates mostly frame politics as a battle to confront “traditional politics.” In this sense, our results align with those of Dekavalla (2018), confirming that challengers tend to foster the representation of politics as a battlefield to strengthen their outsider position.

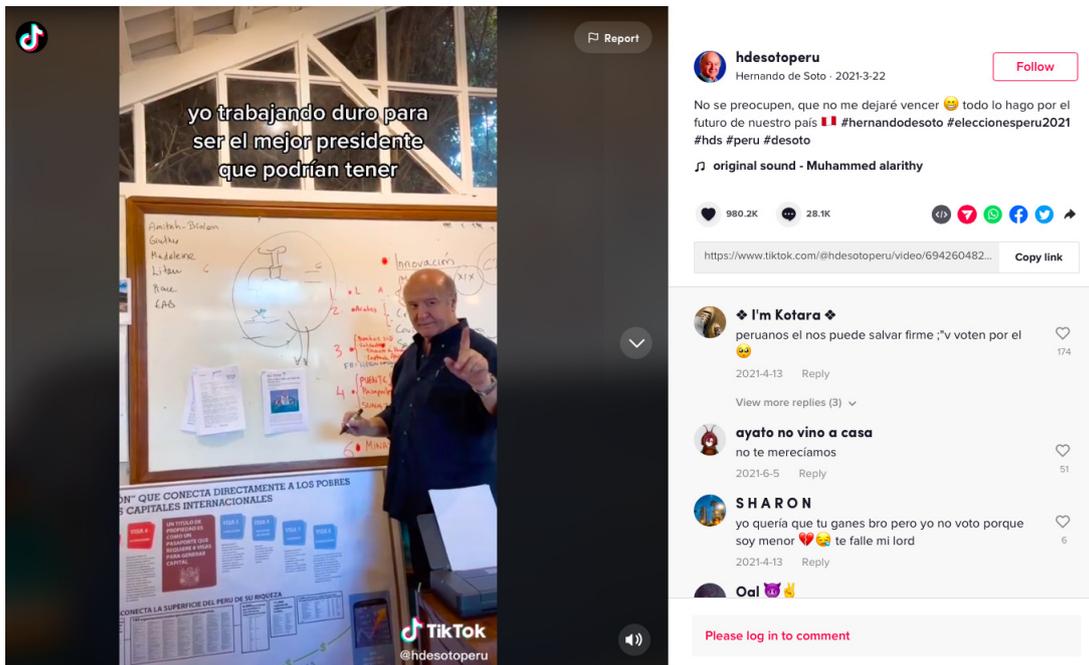
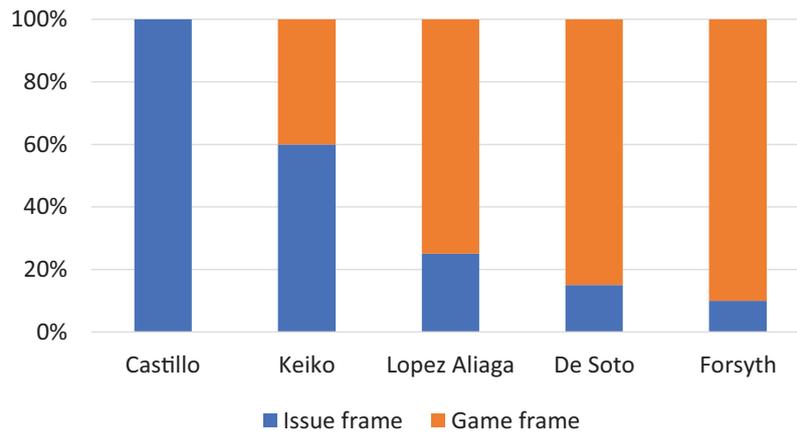


Figure 5. De Soto’s TikTok.



Figure 6. George Forsyth’s TikTok.



**Figure 7.** Game and issue frames.

Professional recording is predominant in most candidates. In the case of Keiko Fujimori, the vast majority of her videos were professionally recorded (93.75%), which is very symptomatic of her political communication style, suggesting a planned, controlled and traditional strategy. Although the professional component prevails among the rest of the candidates, Forsyth, Lopez-Aliaga, and De Soto exhibited homemade videos in moderate but meaningful proportions with 28.57%, 24.24%, and 21.95%, respectively. These videos suggest the candidates’ intentions to appear authentic and relatable, different from the traditional politicians (Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2017). Finally, the use of self-recorded videos was very poor among all candidates (<15%).

Most of the candidates appear as the main character in their posts (Fujimori: 93.75%; Lopez Aliaga: 81.82%; De Soto: 80.49%; Forsyth: 82.86%), which strongly corroborates the predominance of personalist politics. Nevertheless, Castillo is completely absent in his publications as a character: His posts’ characters are anonymous people, other politicians, and his pet.

As for the use of the camera, Fujimori is the candidate that applies the widest range of camera shots, although a great majority are wide shots (62.50%), showing her surrounded by crowds. The full shot and the close-up are the most used by all the other candidates.

POV, on the other side, despite being one of the most popular affordance of TikTok, is the less-used camera shot: It is not present in Castillo, De Soto, and Fujimori’s content and only represents 17.14% and 12% in the cases of Forsyth and Lopez-Aliaga, respectively.

As previously mentioned, music plays an important role in TikTok and an even more important role in Peruvian culture (Tucker, 2019). De Soto, an internationally known intellectual, uses music to connect with young voters. Coherently he mostly uses global music, in particular reggaeton, not only adding it to his videos but also dancing to it. In that sense, music does not only involve the entertaining dimension, but it also embodies a vehicle for the candidate to express and laugh at himself, therefore humanizing himself. This allows for encoding a powerful bridging message to his target audience.

Fujimori, on the other hand, shows clearly differentiated uses of global and local music. Instrumental global music is played as the background of videos in which she narrates her campaign trips, while vocal global music is used in her behind-the-scenes videos, where she shows glimpses of her personal life such as her daily routine at home, her preparations for public appearances (debates, interviews, election day, etc.). Playing and dancing to local music is capitalized as a tool to connect with certain sectors of voters.

Similarly, Castillo’s musical selection seems to answer to a clear strategy: Local music is used to advise and talk about local policy issues, whilst its global counterpart is the background for tackling wider topics, such as immigration.

The case Lopez-Aliaga appears particularly interesting since he is the only candidate with a sort of official soundtrack: the Looney Toons music. As previously mentioned, he constructed his political persona somehow imitating Trump and sharing an ultra-conservative populist discourse that created notable discontent, mainly among young people.

Because of that, critics online started—targeting his physical appearance—calling him by the nickname *Porky* (Looney Toons’ piglet character). The candidate maximized social media attention economy by capitalizing on this nickname through humor by including Looney Toons music and cartoons-related humor in his posts, portraying himself as cute, harmless, relatable, and funny.

Finally, Forsyth uses popular music (both global and local) to appear “cool” and fashionable, exploiting his archetypal physical appearance—a young, handsome, sports star—to display himself as a sort of soap opera “prince charming.” Figure 8, for instance, shows the candidate visiting a popular food market, while attacked by two young fans who wanted to hug him. The story is metaphorically accompanied by the song “Hero” by CNCO.

Finally, looking at interaction, a shattering majority of the posted content only vehicles information and promotion, that is to say, an old media style of unilateral communication (see Figure 9). Almost all the can-

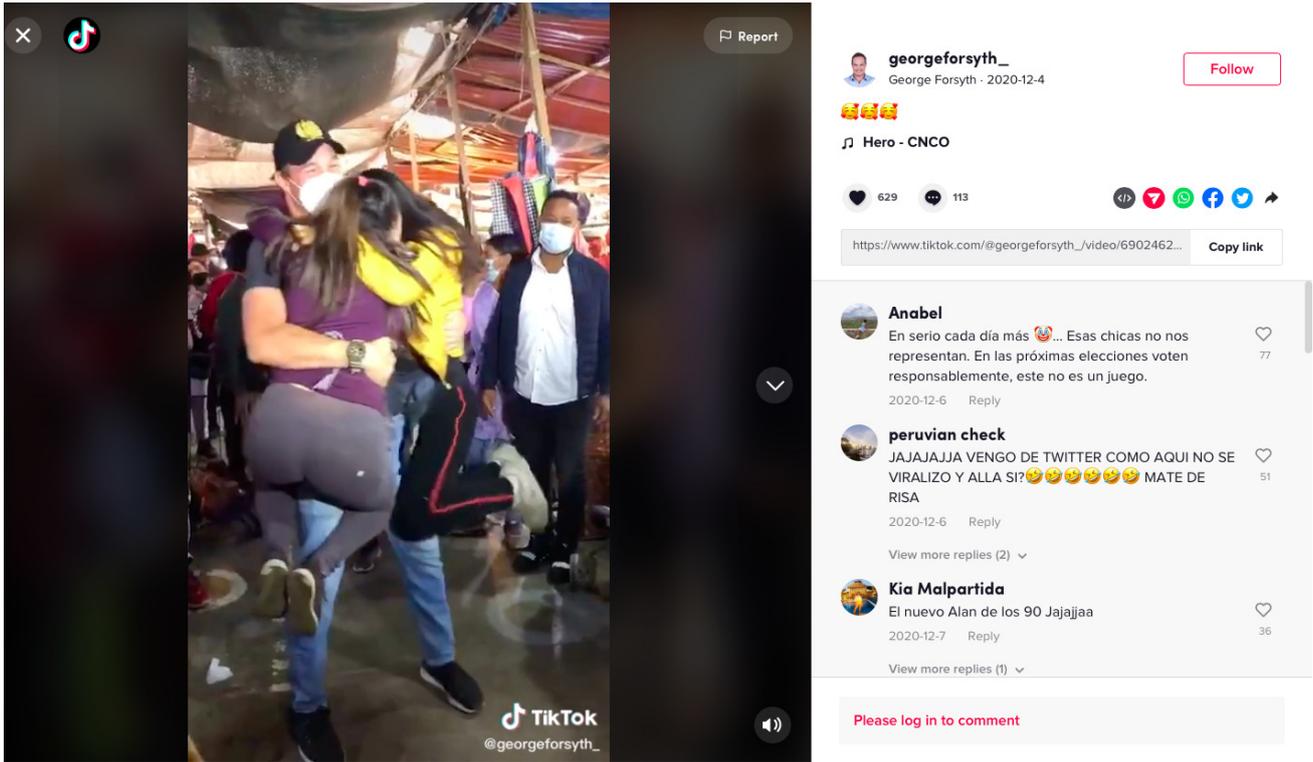


Figure 8. George Forsyth’s TikTok.

didates only use TikTok uniquely as a platform for auto-promotion: No content asking for people’s opinions nor any form of deliberation has been retrieved. Participation, although residual in most candidates (the case of Castillo cannot be considered representative since he only posted three times) is sensibly higher in newcomers.

However, it is important to stress that none of them ask for a real-life form of participation, rather they focus on a “share this” call for action, mostly geared towards

engagement rather than purely political participation. This shows that Peruvian politicians use TikTok neither as a tool to foster dialogue nor participation, but rather they use it as a form of digital showcase that corroborates the previously noted top-down communication approach in Latin America, where politicians use social media to reach out to the public without having to deal with questioning and to attack their critics (Waisbord & Amado, 2017).

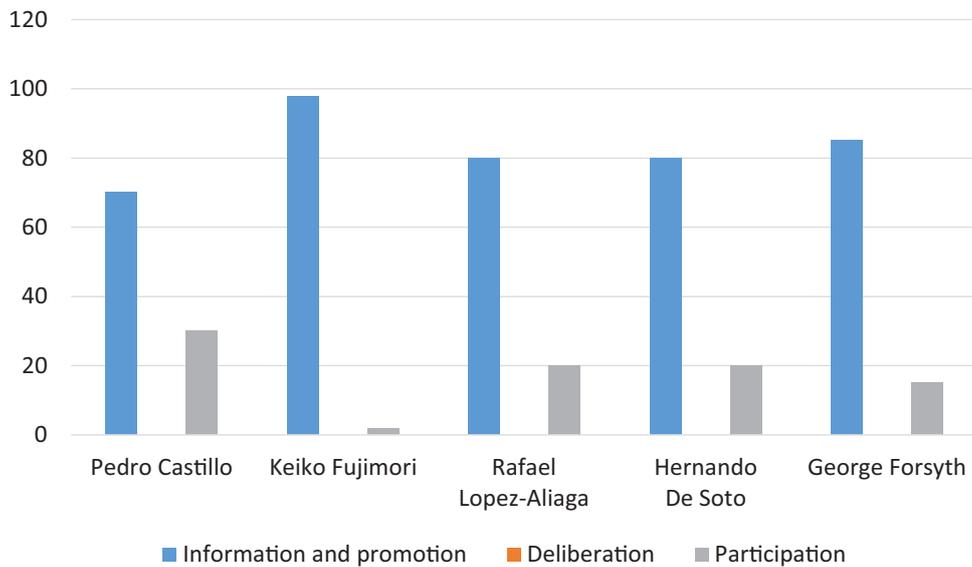


Figure 9. Information/promotion, deliberation, and participation.

## 5. Conclusions

Previous studies (Eriksson & Åkerlund, 2022; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020) have disclosed that the emergence of TikTok is transforming political discussion and participation.

Within this context, our work, using the case of Peru, intends to contribute to the emerging stream of literature focusing on how TikTok can be exploited for political communication purposes by political actors.

Our results reveal that in the Peruvian case, despite all the analyzed candidates having joined TikTok, they do not seem to have fully exploited the platform's wide affordances, since, as shown, hardly ever they used challenges or other TikTok trendy genres to engage their audience.

The same can be said about the interaction possibilities that the platform offers: Most of the candidates tend to use it as a unilateral tool for promotion, displaying a top-down communication style with almost no deliberative nor participative intentions. In this sense, our findings confirm what stated by Montúfar-Calle et al. (2022): Keeping up with new cultural and technological innovations seems to be unfinished business for most Peruvian politicians.

From a content perspective, however, a clear difference between "old school" politicians and newcomers and/or challengers can be noted.

Interestingly, Castillo, although unknown and actually embodying the only real challenge to the status quo, seems to use TikTok in a very similar way to Keiko Fujimori: They mostly use the platform as any other social media, to tackle political issues. Right-wing candidates Lopez Aliaga and De Soto together with the newcomer Forsyth, on their side, as challengers prefer the "game frame," representing politics as a battle, offering a dichotomous vision of the world where they are represented as heroes and traditional politicians as villains.

These aspects resonate with what previous studies have encountered in other countries—for instance, in Ecuador (Muñoz, 2021)—suggesting that TikTok can be an opportunity for marginal/challenger or emerging candidates to gain a place in the spotlight.

In addition, especially candidate Lopez-Aliaga, who humorously portrays himself like a cartoon character with the use of the famous Looney Toons soundtrack, together with Forsyth, able to take advantage of his pre-existing popularity and his physical appearance, seems to have perfectly understood that the best way to maximize TikTok's viralizing power is to "incorporate styles, narratives...of the world of spectacle and entertainment into their communicative repertoire" (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021, p. 12). In other words, it appears that politainment content, capitalizing on the platform's entertainment dimension, is the preferred type of content by candidates in their quest for visibility.

Altogether these conclusions are applicable beyond Peru. Aligning with previous works, such as Berrocal-

Gonzalo et al.'s (2021), which analyzed new actors (native and peripheral) and their use of new strategies, we can expect that within this new platform, originally meant for entertainment (Abidin, 2020), politainment will become prominent.

In the same vein, recognizing that TikTok might have been "the first platform to remix and combine previously disparate affordances, but it will not be the last" (Guinaudeau et al., 2020, p. 22), we can expect a general increase of politainment content.

This trend should be validated by further research, tracking the evolution of TikTok's usage by political actors. In particular, future investigations should recur to international comparative research to confirm if politainment is becoming a global trend or if political actors' behaviour is still dependent on the type of political and media systems they operate in (Hallin & Mancini, 2012).

Most importantly, admitting the existence of an elective affinity (Gerbaudo, 2018) between populism and social media, it is seminal for future studies to examine whether TikTok's playful affordances and attention economy, which foster politainment, can serve as a loudspeaker, if not as a fertile "discursive opportunity" (Koopmans & Muis, 2009), for populist movements in Latin America—where populism is endemic (de la Torre, 2017)—and worldwide.

On another level, our research contributes to the existing knowledge about the communicative opportunities that TikTok can offer to political actors by positively testing the validity of the methodological framework proposed by Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021).

This affordance-based approach allows overcoming the complexity of investigating a platform that combines all the affordances of the other social networks in one app (Abidin, 2020, p. 84), providing a tool that grants researchers the possibility to work with both quantitative and qualitative variables, without losing the focus on the broader TikTok's cultural environment.

This methodology, nonetheless, suffers from the inherent limitation of being supply-side-centered. Specifically, not taking into consideration the users' feedback, it does not permit the evaluation of the effects of political communication.

In order to comprehensively assess both the efficiency and the efficacy of politicians' communication on TikTok, further academic analysis on the users' side is needed. Future works should explore not only comments but any type of interaction between political actors and their audience, deeping, in particular, on whether new affordances are able to engender a new form of political dialogue or (just) constitute an alternative promotional tool for political actors.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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