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ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS ON SOCIAL MEDIA: LEADERS' STRATEGIES IN THE 2023 SPANISH GENERAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Political communication today unfolds within a hybrid media environment, where traditional and digital platforms coexist and complement one another. Social media, in particular, has emerged as a central tool in election campaigns, blending the characteristics of mass communication with interactive engagement. This study analyzes the social media communication strategies employed by the leaders of Spain's main political parties (PP, PSOE, Sumar, and Vox) during the 2023 general election campaign across four social networks: Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. **Methodology:** Using quantitative content analysis, the study evaluated 1,651 posts from July 5 to July 25, 2023. The analysis is based on the 5Ws framework: function, protagonists, space, staging, and technical aspects. **Results:** Most posts focused on agenda promotion and attack strategies, with X/Twitter and Instagram being the most used platforms. Leaders differed in personalization and visual strategies: Vox emphasized mass appeal, while PSOE and Sumar focused on professionalism. **Discussion:** Social media use reflects party differences: traditional parties use private and official spaces, while newer parties favor public, spontaneous settings. Content often overlaps across platforms but adapts slightly to platform-specific norms. Video and visual content dominate, highlighting audience preferences. **Conclusions:** Findings reveal that while communication strategies across platforms do not show substantial variation, recently established political parties demonstrate a stronger ability to leverage advanced functionalities of social platforms, showcasing superior strategic communication management tailored to their audiences' preferences and needs.

Keywords: election campaign; political communication; 2023 general election; Spain; communication strategies; social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional paradigm of political communication has progressively changed over the last few decades. The changes have been numerous, including the consolidation of political actors such as lobbies and think tanks involved in the creation of public policies (Castillero-Ostio et al., 2025; Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020); the increased political participation of the population, which has become an active political actor with its own opinions and judgments (Barandiaran et al., 2020; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999); and the development of new forms of communication through the use of new technologies, among others (Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024).

This research focuses on one of these changes: the use of new technologies for political communication, specifically social media. This type of communication goes beyond unidirectional or monologic communications, where citizen feedback is not allowed, such as campaign posters or media appearances through interviews, debates, or campaign advertising. It also goes beyond traditional bidirectional or dialogical tools, like rallies or door-to-door contact. Political communication via social media allows interaction between all involved actors (Moya Sánchez & Herrera Damas, 2015), showing fewer spatial and temporal limitations compared to traditional bidirectional tools.

The consequence of this is that currently, political communication is currently developing within a hybrid media environment, where traditional and digital media coexist (Bernal-Triviño, 2015; Chadwick, 2013), and where digital platforms have become fully integrated into electoral campaigns around the world (Gamir-Ríos et al., 2022; Moreno-Díaz, 2022; Pineda et al., 2020). In the Spanish context, this shift is particularly evident. According to the Centre for Sociological Research (2023), 61.1% of the Spanish population considers social media the main channel for political information, and 64.3% believe that these platforms stimulate interest in political matters.

In response to these changing social behaviors, political parties and presidential candidates in Spain have adapted to the new communicative practices offered by social networks (Gamir-Ríos et al., 2022; López-García et al., 2018; Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024). As a result, the use of social media by presidential candidates has become an indispensable element of political communication strategies (Bustos & Ruiz, 2021), particularly during electoral campaigns (Fenoll, 2022; López-Meri et al., 2017; Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: USES AND POTENTIALS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL INTERACTION

As mentioned, social media is essential in political-electoral communication, highlighting its strategic importance in presidential campaigns (Davis et al., 2016; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). In contemporary societies, their central role facilitates the amplification of discourses and reaching diverse audiences, which are perceived as more democratic and progressive. Moreover, the absence of intermediaries allows politicians to communicate directly with the public, fostering bidirectional interactions (Túñez López & García, 2011).

Social media favor strategies of 'humanization' in political communication, focusing on the proximity and intimacy of the candidate and presenting a more authentic image. This approach is particularly useful in contexts of mistrust towards political parties, which are often seen as disconnected from citizens' needs (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015; Puentes-Rivera et al., 2017; Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017). In the postmodern era, electoral campaigns tend to prioritize the visibility of the candidate's personal brand identity over that of the party, granting a hyper-protagonism to the candidate (Crespo-Martínez et al., 2022).

Focusing on each social network, Facebook is seen as a platform with divided opinions: some studies praise it for stimulating political participation through effective communicative structures (Di Bonito, 2014; Fernandes et al., 2010; Gibson & McAllister, 2006; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012), while others highlight its negative effects (Baumgartner & Morris, 2009; Gustafsson, 2012; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Pennington et al., 2015). However, it has proven effective in connecting with diverse audiences, projecting images independent of traditional media, and facilitating the segmentation of audiences and messages (Calvo et al., 2017; Puentes-Rivera et al., 2017).

In the case of X/Twitter, it is one of the most widely used platforms by both journalistic and political elites due to its inherently informative nature, which is crucial for electoral strategies and for the success of broader communication efforts (Rodríguez-Andrés & Ureña-Uceda, 2011; Serna-Ortega et al., 2024). Politicians often use this network for self-promotion (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014) and to discredit opponents during elections (Cárdenas et al., 2017). The use of X/Twitter by presidential candidates is often monologic and unidirectional (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Jungherr, 2016; Scherpereel et al., 2017), particularly among candidates from governing parties with a larger number of followers, compared to those in opposition or with fewer followers (Vergeer, 2015).

Instagram's penetration rate has grown considerably in recent years, gradually becoming a complementary network to X/Twitter (López-Meri et al., 2017) and a primary communicative space for political consultants in their campaign strategies (Slimovich, 2020). It focuses on the personalization-humanization of candidates (Filimonov et al., 2016), offering communication with a markedly personal and emotive-ideological character (Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017). The platform has established itself in politics as part of the media spectacle, blending information with personal, ideological, and entertainment elements (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2018; Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017). Although its use has been professionalized, its potential in political communication is still not fully exploited (Tirado-García & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021).

TikTok, the most popular online video-sharing platform among young people, has been integrated into political communication, with an increase in content reflecting political concerns (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). It provides a platform for politicians to connect with young audiences (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). TikTok usage reflects the need for networking, popularity, identity, and self-expression (Bucknell-Bossen & Kottasz, 2020), satisfying the five blocks of human needs: cognitive, pleasure, personal integration, social, and stress reduction. Politically, previous research shows that better communication results are achieved on this platform when incorporating elements of spectacle and entertainment into narratives (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). However, the political use of TikTok is still in its early stages, mainly adopted by recently established parties and not yet fully adapted to the platform's communicative dynamics (Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022).

3. OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this research is to analyze the social media communication strategies of the four main Spanish candidates for the presidency of the government during the campaign for the general elections of July 2023.

In terms of candidates, the analysis focuses on Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Alberto Núñez Feijóo (PP), Yolanda Díaz (Sumar), and Santiago Abascal (Vox). In terms of social networks, it includes Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok.

Based on the general objective, five specific objectives are proposed:

- Assess the communicative function of the posts, identifying the type of content conveyed in each case.
- Examine the representation of primary and secondary actors in the posts, evaluating the centrality of the leader and the presence of citizens, party members, or other actors.
- Analyze the professional and personal attributes projected by the candidates, identifying different leadership styles and self-presentation strategies.
- Evaluate the spatial settings portrayed in the posts, focusing on how location is used to construct political meaning.
- Assess the visual staging of the posts to determine the communicative intentions behind the scenes.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

4.1. Data collection

Data collection was conducted from July 5 to July 25, 2023 (both dates inclusive), encompassing the entire official campaign period for the 2023 Spanish general election, as well as the two days preceding and following it. All posts by Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Alberto Núñez Feijóo (PP), Yolanda Díaz (Sumar) and Santiago Abascal (Vox), on Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok during this period were collected (see Table 1), resulting in a total population of 1,651 posts. The process was performed manually.

Table 1

Candidates' social networks accounts and posts that are part of the analysis

Politician	Usernames	Analysis unit							
		Posts				%			
		FB	X	IG	TT	FB	X	IG	TT
Feijóo	FB: Alberto Núñez Feijóo X: @NunezFeijoo IG: @anunezfeijoo	47	135	76	-	19.10	18.99	11.99	-
Sánchez	FB: Pedro Sánchez X: @sanchezcastejon IG: @sanchezcastejon	60	56	152	-	24.39	7.88	23.97	-
Díaz	FB: Yolanda Díaz Pérez X: @Yolanda_Diaz_ IG: @diaz_yolanda_ TT: _diaz_yolanda	50	261	219	32	20.33	36.71	34.54	53.33
Abascal	FB: Santiago Abascal X: @Santi_ABASCAL IG: @santi_abascal TT: santiabascal_	89	259	187	28	36.18	36.43	29.50	46.67
Total		246	711	634	60	100	100	100	100

Source: authors' own elaboration

It is important to make two clarifications that justify the selection of the candidates and the social networks:

- The four candidates were selected based on pre-election surveys conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), being the only four with more than 10% of the national vote.
- The four social networks were selected based on their current prominence in Spain. According to the Digital Report Spain, approximately 85% of the Spanish population is active on social media (We Are Social, 2023). The report indicates that the five most used social networks in the country are WhatsApp (89.7%), Instagram (74.9%), Facebook (72.5%), X/Twitter (47.7%), and TikTok (47.3%). WhatsApp is excluded since, as of July 2023, it was solely an instant messaging network. Furthermore, the four selected platforms represent a mix of more traditional and established social networks, such as Facebook and X/Twitter, alongside newer networks that have experienced significant user growth in recent years (Statista, 2023).

After reviewing the profiles, two TikTok accounts are excluded from the analysis: Feijóo's account, which did not exist, and Sánchez's account, which was inactive throughout the data collection period.

4.2. Data coding

Data coding was based on a quantitative content analysis of the 1,651 posts that comprise the study population. Each post was coded according to a set of analytical dimensions (see Table 2). The design of these dimensions was informed by previous studies on the use of political images on social media platforms (Abejón-Mendoza & Mayoral-Sánchez, 2017; Abuín-Vences & García-Rosales, 2020; Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022; López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2018; Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017; Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017; Tirado-García & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021; Verón-Lassa & Pallarés-Navarro, 2017). Additionally, their configuration follows the logic of the journalistic 5Ws framework.

Table 2

Standard analysis sheet

Category of analysis (Ws)	Analysis dimensions (variables)	Operationalization (categories)	
1st W. What	Function	Agenda/presence indicator, policy proposal, opinion/recommendation, attack, advocacy, other.	
2nd W. Who	Protagonist	Leader, party members, other politicians, citizens, media, impersonal (places, objects), family/friends, other.	
	Secondary actor	None (leader), party members, other politicians, citizens, media, celebrities, family/friends, symbolic objects, other.	
	Transmitted attributes	Professional	Statesman/woman, public manager, communicator, mass leader, protector, hero/heroine, other.
		Personal	Collaborative, familiar, social, recreational, other.
3rd W. Where	Space	Undetermined, official, private, public.	
4th W. When	Staging	Institutional, strategic spontaneity, posing, other.	
5th W. How	Technical aspects	Format	Photography, poster, video.
		Shot	Long, medium, close up, very close up.
		Angle	Neutral, high, low.
	Appeal	Emotional positive, emotional negative.	

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The coding process for each post across the different categories of each analytical dimension was conducted using a concise codebook (available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HNONP7>), which specifies the criteria for assigning each category. To ensure the reliability of the procedure, 20% of the sample (330 posts) was independently coded by the three authors of this study in the initial phase. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, resulting in a coefficient of 0.81, which indicates a strong level of agreement and confirms that the coding process is consistent and reliable.

The complete dataset of the 1,651 posts, following the coding process, is also available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HNONP7>, and can be provided upon reasonable request to one of the corresponding authors.

4.3 Data analysis

Once the coding process was completed, statistical techniques were applied for the analysis. Throughout the article, both absolute and relative frequencies are reported, and chi-square tests of independence are conducted in specific sections to examine the relationships between selected pairs of variables. Particular attention is given to comparisons both between candidates and across social networks. The analysis was carried out using Excel and SPSS.

The structure of the data analysis and the presentation of results are organized into five sections, each corresponding to a specific research objective. These objectives are aligned with the five main categories of analysis defined in the coding process.

5. RESULTS

During the campaign for the 2023 general election in Spain, the leading candidates for the presidency of the government actively utilized their official social media profiles, posting a total of 1,651 entries, 97.7% of which included images or videos. Notably, X/Twitter, initially designed for text-based content without visual elements, featured less visual content. The leaders of Vox and Sumar opted for the emerging platform TikTok to engage with a younger audience. The distribution of posts varied across leaders and platforms, with Vox and Sumar being the most active, particularly in the days leading up to the reflection period. Overall, political leaders favored X/Twitter and Instagram for the highest number of posts.

5.1 Category of analysis: What

The analysis of the candidates' posts reveals that the majority focus on campaigning and image promotion, although each leader presents their own distinct approach. The primary function of the candidates' posts is to showcase their agenda or increase their visibility, thereby enhancing the likelihood of gaining votes (see Table 3). However, the other categories vary significantly across leaders. Attack-oriented posts are the second most common, particularly for Sánchez, Abascal, and Feijóo, although Díaz surprises with more attack posts on TikTok than her competitors. Political proposals emerge as the third most frequent type of content, with Díaz leading in this category, followed by Feijóo on X/Twitter. The defense of the candidate is most evident in posts by Sánchez and Abascal, especially on Facebook and X/Twitter. Lastly, posts expressing opinion or offering recommendations are typically shared by other politicians from different countries or celebrities, who encourage people to vote for a particular party, as seen with Abascal and Díaz. In Feijóo's case, such posts appear after the election, when he congratulates himself on the results.

Table 3

Function of the posts

	Agenda/ Presence indicator	Policy proposal	Opinion/ Recommendation	Attack	Advocacy	Other
Social network: Facebook (FB)						
Feijóo	63.83	6.38	2.13	23.40	0	4.26
Sánchez	60.00	1.67	0	21.67	8.33	8.33
Díaz	66.00	20.00	0	8.00	2.00	4.00
Abascal	57.30	10.11	3.37	24.72	4.49	0
Social network: X/Twitter (X)						
Feijóo	62.96	10.37	5.93	17.04	0.74	2.96
Sánchez	50.00	5.36	5.36	25.00	7.14	5.36
Díaz	55.56	16.09	6.51	17.62	1.92	2.30
Abascal	51.35	6.95	5.02	31.66	5.02	0

Social network: Instagram (IG)						
Feijóo	78.29	4.61	1.32	13.16	0	2.63
Sánchez	72.37	1.32	0	21.05	2.63	2.63
Díaz	77.63	8.22	3.65	7.76	1.37	1.37
Abascal	74.87	3.21	1.07	17.11	3.21	0.53
Social network: TikTok (TT)						
Feijóo	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sánchez	-	-	-	-	-	-
Díaz	65.53	18.75	0	12.50	3.13	0
Abascal	78.57	0	3.57	7.14	7.14	3.57

Source: authors' own elaboration

An interesting question in this regard is whether there is a dependency between the function of the posts, the social networks, and the political candidates. In both cases, the chi-square tests reveal a significant association between the variables ($df=15$; p -values=0.000), indicating that the communicative functions of the posts depend on both the social network used and the political leader who publishes them.

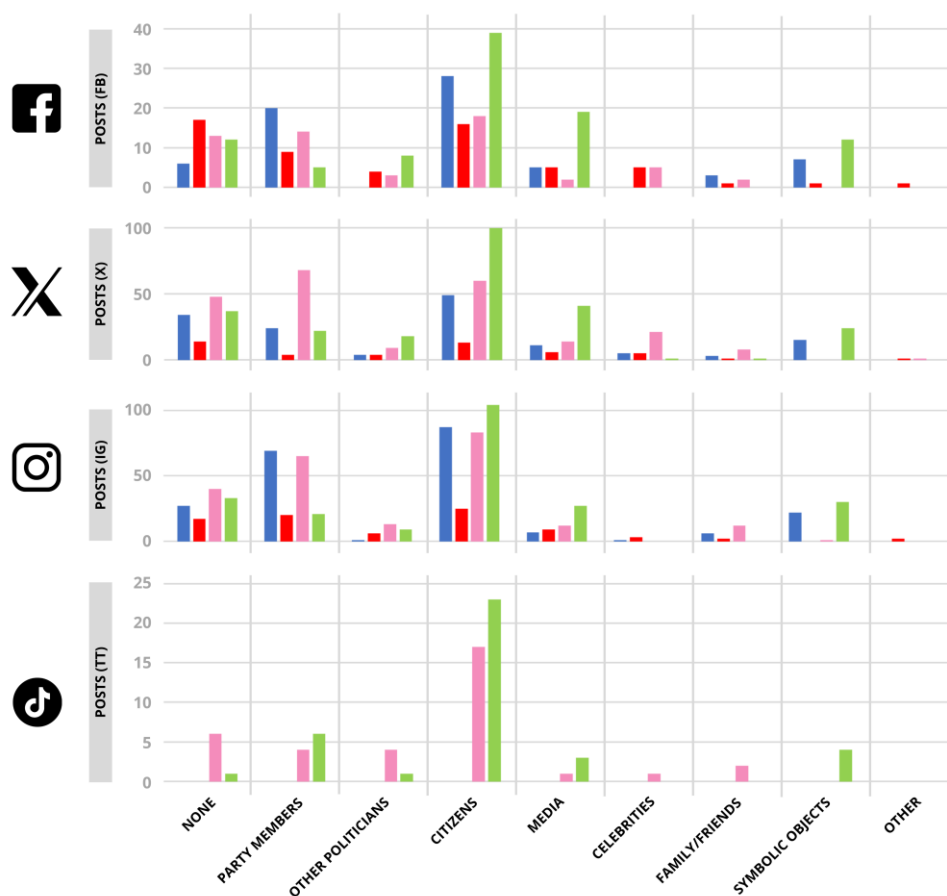
5.2 Category of analysis: Who

In general, the strategy employed by all the candidates is to position themselves as the central figures in the images, with Feijóo particularly emphasizing this approach, followed by Abascal and Sánchez. Díaz, although she also tends to feature prominently, prefers to focus on the citizens, adopting an impersonal approach through posters, announcements of campaign events, and images of her party members. Feijóo and Sánchez also adopt this strategy, albeit to a lesser extent. Abascal, for his part, tends not to highlight his party members as much as the other candidates, instead focusing on making other politicians the central figures, either by sharing posts from international political figures who support him or by criticizing his rivals. X/Twitter stands out as being distinct from other social media platforms, as it tends to feature more impersonal posts, including posters and media content, an aspect not commonly reflected on other platforms.

As shown in Figure 1, the secondary actors in the images or videos are usually citizens, across all social networks, as part of the candidates' strategies, except for Díaz on X/Twitter, where party members are more often featured as secondary actors. It is notable that when citizens or party members are not the focal point, the political leaders often appear alone, centering the post on themselves. Additionally, Feijóo and Abascal make use of symbolic objects, such as Spanish flags or blue and green banners. Díaz, on the other hand, tends to feature secondary actors, and at times even the primary figures, as celebrities such as Almodóvar or actress María Vázquez, using them as symbols of support for her candidacy.

Figure 1

Secondary actor of the posts



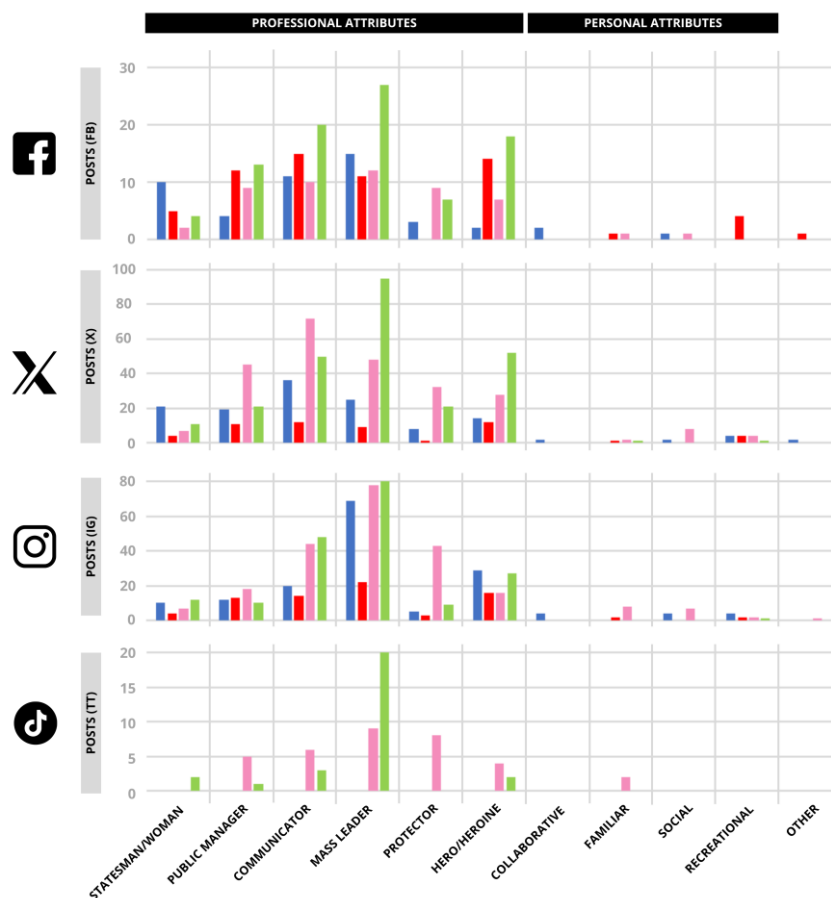
Source: authors' own elaboration

Depending on the social network and the candidate, various aspects stand out when assigning professional and personal attributes (see Figure 2). In this regard, Feijóo presents himself as a statesman, distinguishing himself from the other candidates. The audiovisual content he shares primarily revolves around appealing to Spain. Abascal, on the other hand, stands out as a leader of the masses across all social networks, particularly through videos in which crowds of people impede his movement through cities. He also portrays himself as a hero, declaring in his rallies that he is the only option to "save Spain" from its current situation. The communicator attribute is evident across all candidates, but especially on Facebook and X/Twitter, where they share media interviews. In terms of political proposals, Díaz shines through in the videos where she outlines her plans if she comes to power. The protective attribute is most associated with the leaders of Sumar and Vox, particularly Díaz, who uses her discourse to appeal to the protection of the people, each with distinct strategies.

When it comes to personal attributes, while there is no significant difference across social networks, there is variation between the candidates. Abascal does not emphasize personal attributes, while the others often do, especially on the day of reflection, sharing posts about their hobbies, outings with friends, or moments with family and partners.

Figure 2

Transmitted attributes in the posts



Source: authors' own elaboration

5.3 Category of analysis: Where

The use of image space in the candidates' posts varies significantly. While the leaders of PP and Vox prefer to feature public spaces for their rallies and photo or video shoots across all social networks, the leaders of PSOE and Sumar tend to hold their events and recordings in private spaces (see Table 4). Sánchez stands out from the other candidates in terms of his use of official spaces, as, in his capacity as President of the Government, he posts from locations such as La Moncloa. The undetermined category includes scenarios where the location of the post cannot be identified, typically in close-up shots, or where posters are used.

Table 4

Space usage in the posts

	Undetermined				Official				Private				Public			
	FB	X	IG	TT	FB	X	IG	TT	FB	X	IG	TT	FB	X	IG	TT
Feijóo	12.8	27.9	15.8	-	2.1	6.2	0.7	-	44.7	40.3	46.1	-	40.4	25.6	37.5	-
Sánchez	22	23.1	18.4	-	25.4	19.2	19.7	-	42.3	46.2	50	-	10.2	11.5	11.8	-
Díaz	24	33.6	28.6	21.9	6	6.6	7.8	6.3	46	35.7	35.9	40.6	24	24.2	27.7	31.3
Abascal	33.7	34.3	28.3	0	9	11.6	4.3	3.6	20.2	22.7	22.5	28.6	37.1	31.5	44.9	67.9

Source: authors' own elaboration

5.4 Category of analysis: When

A similar strategy to the use of space is evident in the candidates' presentation (see Table 5). Feijóo and Abascal tend to create seemingly spontaneous scenes, although these are strategically planned across all social networks. In contrast, Díaz and Sánchez rely more on posed images rather than spontaneous moments, with Díaz particularly emphasizing this approach on TikTok, where 71.88% (n=23) of her posts follow this style. Sánchez, although preferring posed images, uses both types of staging in a similar manner on Facebook and Instagram, where he often shares the same posts across both platforms. Once again, Sánchez, due to his position as President, distinguishes himself from the other leaders in terms of institutional staging.

Table 5

Staging of the posts

	Institutional				Strategic spontaneity				Posing				Other			
	FB	X	IG	TT	FB	X	IG	TT	FB	X	IG	TT	FB	X	IG	TT
Feijóo	2.1	1.6	0.7	-	68.1	55.8	63.8	-	29.8	41.9	34.2	-	0	0.8	1.3	-
Sánchez	17	7.7	9.2	-	37.3	30.8	43.4	-	39	50	43.4	-	6.8	11.5	4	-
Díaz	0	5.3	0	0	44	42.2	41.5	25	56	52.1	57.6	71.9	0	0.4	0.9	3.1
Abascal	0	5.2	0	0	73	58.6	77.5	78.6	21.4	36.3	20.9	21.4	5.6	0	1.6	0

Source: authors' own elaboration

5.5 Category of analysis: How

The preferred format for nearly all presidential candidates is video, followed by photos and posters. However, Feijóo adopts a distinct strategy, primarily using photographs in his posts on Facebook (68.09%, n=32) and X/Twitter (55.04%, n=71). On Instagram, all candidates favor images. On TikTok, Díaz and Abascal only post video content, as the platform does not accommodate photos. The leaders of PSOE and Sumar tend to use posters more frequently than the other candidates, especially on Facebook and X/Twitter, to highlight their events.

In terms of shot types, the medium shot is the most used across all social networks, followed by the close-up, general shot, and finally, the big close-up. On X/Twitter, however, both Feijóo and Díaz prefer close-ups (around 40%) more than medium shots (around 35%). The long shot is used similarly by all candidates, except Feijóo,

who uses it less frequently. Feijóo also makes the most use of the big close-up shot, often capturing Spanish flags, blue PP flags, and even the gestures of citizens attending his rallies.

The neutral angle is the preferred choice overall, with few candidates using high or low angles. However, on Facebook, low angles are more common, particularly for Sánchez (8.47%, $n=7$) and Abascal (7.87%, $n=5$). On X/Twitter, this preference shifts, with high angles being favored, particularly by Sánchez. On younger social networks, the use of low angles is more prominent than on traditional platforms, with Abascal standing out at 12.30% ($n=23$) and Díaz using it almost half as much, at 5.99% ($n=13$).

The nature of the appeal is a crucial element in how candidates communicate their messages. Generally, the candidates employ positive emotional appeals in their posts, aiming to promote their own image. However, negative emotional appeals are also used to attack other candidates. As shown in Table 6, Abascal makes the most use of negative emotions across all social networks. On TikTok, however, the difference in the use of negative emotions is less pronounced compared to other platforms.

Table 6

Appeal of the posts

	Appeal	
	Emotional positive	Emotional negative
Social network: Facebook (FB)		
Feijóo	87.23	12.77
Sánchez	91.53	8.47
Díaz	92	8
Abascal	70.79	29.21
Social network: X/Twitter (X)		
Feijóo	89.15	10.85
Sánchez	86.54	13.46
Díaz	86.07	13.93
Abascal	69.32	30.68
Social network: Instagram (IG)		
Feijóo	94.08	5.92
Sánchez	92.11	7.89
Díaz	93.09	6.91
Abascal	82.35	17.65
Social network: TikTok (TT)		
Feijóo	-	-
Sánchez	-	-
Díaz	81.25	18.75
Abascal	85.71	14.29

Source: authors' own elaboration

The dependency between appeal, the social networks, and the political candidates is explored. In this case, there is no significant association with the social networks

(df=3; p-value=0.139); however, there is a significant dependency with the political candidate (df=3; p-value=0.000).

5.6 Category of analysis: Stories

On both Facebook and Instagram, the "stories" feature allows content to be shared 24 hours before it is deleted. Notably, on Facebook, the only candidate utilizing this tool is Pedro Sánchez, with 6.10% (n=15) of his stories published, which makes up 25% of his total content. However, it's important to note that much of his story content is shared simultaneously across both Facebook and Instagram, with no significant distinction between the two platforms.

In contrast, the success of stories on Instagram has led all candidates to adopt it as a key tool for content distribution. On this platform, stories account for 37.85% (n=240) of the total posts across each candidate's profile. However, their strategies differ in terms of how they use this tool. Feijóo, for example, creates 38.16% (n=29) of his stories specifically for this format. These stories typically feature long videos (up to 60 seconds) in which he is seen interacting with crowds at rallies. Sánchez, on the other hand, generates 34.87% (n=53) of his stories, mostly repurposed posts or reels shared from the official political party account. He also shares tweets from other social networks. Díaz shares 31.51% (n=69) of her stories, many of which are reposted from citizens who attended her events and mentioned her. Lastly, Abascal stands out with the highest percentage of story content, 47.34% (n=89), which consists mainly of posts he shares, often with accompanying text that mirrors the content of the video or image.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study provide a comprehensive overview of how Spain's main political leaders used the most popular social platforms during the July 2023 campaign. A key finding is the more strategic management and increased use of social media by representatives of recently established political parties, which reflects their ability to adapt to digital communication. For instance, Vox leveraged TikTok's short-video format to disseminate emotionally charged content, such as rallies with dramatic crowd interactions, while Sumar focused on Instagram stories to showcase behind-the-scenes moments of Yolanda Díaz engaging with grassroots supporters. These tactics contrast sharply with the institutional tone of PSOE and PP, whose reliance on X/Twitter for formal statements and Facebook for polished campaign posters underscores a preference for controlled messaging over spontaneity.

Consistent with previous research (Puentes-Rivera et al., 2017; Ruiz del Olmo & Bustos Díaz, 2020), there is a clear preference for visual content, particularly images and videos, over textual content. This aligns with the growing importance of visual elements in the media representation of political activity (Quevedo-Redondo et al., 2016). As supported by recent studies (Sánchez Hunt & De Aguilera, 2023), video content, in particular, takes on a significant role during electoral campaigns. Notably, TikTok emerged as a space for informal, youth-oriented communication, with leaders like Abascal and Díaz adopting colloquial language and trending audio clips to humanize their people.

The study also highlights that on newer platforms, especially Instagram, more relaxed, personal content related to private life prevails. In contrast, older platforms like X/Twitter prioritize informative content and media appearances, such as interviews and debates, which contribute to image-building (Rodríguez-Andrés & Ureña-Uceda, 2011). X/Twitter, in particular, stands out for its more impersonal posts, emphasizing public statements over personal interactions. This bifurcation suggests a tactical division: newer platforms serve as tools for emotional mobilization, while traditional ones reinforce authority and policy agendas.

An interesting observation concerns the spatial use of locations in campaign posts. Political leaders from the governing parties tend to use private or official locations, while opposition leaders are more frequently depicted in public spaces. Additionally, the staging of images shows a clear difference between parties: leaders of PP and Vox tend to appear in spontaneous, unscripted settings, while leaders from the previous government coalition (such as PSOE) opt for posed images, often in institutional settings, to project the image of governance.

In conclusion, although each social network is used to address different audience preferences and needs, the overall communicative strategies across platforms are quite similar. A considerable amount of content is duplicated across platforms, with slight variations in titles or elements to better suit the network's audience. One notable anomaly is the uneven number of posts across social media platforms, with X/Twitter being the dominant platform for all parties except PSOE, followed by Instagram. This homogeneity points to a "one-size-fits-all" strategy that may undermine the distinctive strengths of each platform.

The findings of this study have practical applications for political campaigns and digital communication strategies. The research sheds light on how different platforms are used to engage with specific audience groups. These insights can help political parties refine their social media strategies for future campaigns, ensuring that their content resonates more effectively with voters. The study also highlights the growing importance of visual and video content in political communication, which could guide the development of media training for politicians. Additionally, the findings emphasize the need for tailored approaches to each platform, considering its unique features and audience dynamics. This approach can support more effective communication in an increasingly digital political landscape.

However, to correctly interpret the results, it is important to consider the limitations. The main limitations of this study lie in its focus on a single electoral campaign, that of July 2023, which restricts the generalization of the findings to other political contexts or time periods. Besides that, the analysis is centred on the most prominent political leaders, excluding the activity of smaller parties or political figures with different communication strategies, which may not fully reflect the variety of approaches used by other political groups. Furthermore, by relying solely on publicly available social media content, the study does not account for factors such as the context of the messages, which could significantly influence the impact of the content. Most critically, the study did not measure public engagement metrics which are essential to assess the real-world impact of these strategies and to evaluate the bidirectional nature of

communication (i.e., whether politicians engaged in dialogue with citizens or merely broadcast messages). Without this data, claims about effectiveness or the existence of genuine two-way interaction remain speculative.

To address these limitations, future research could adopt a multi-dimensional approach. Analyzing multiple electoral campaigns across different years or political contexts, would provide a deeper understanding of how political communication evolves over time. Including smaller parties and political figures with diverse communication strategies would enrich the analysis and offer a more representative view of the range of approaches employed across the political spectrum. Finally, incorporating an analysis of public interactions with social media content, such as comments, shares, and likes, would help assess how audiences engage with political messages and influence their impact.

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