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TikTok and active audiences in processes for political and structural change.

An exploratory study based on the Scottish referendum

Abstract

Plebiscites, secession consultations, and referendums are electoral processes that are different from conventional voting. Conversations before these types of elections tend to focus on very different aspects than those generated during the election of an authority or public office, with a focus on the future impacts that each decision may have on a country, generally taking one side or the other. In the current media ecosystem, this conversation takes place largely on social platforms and networks, where users consume content and interact with it, becoming active prosumer audiences. The aim of this research is to determine what elements determine this type of discourse on TikTok –as a social network that is trending among digital communities–, what type of profiles promote them, and what narrative code is used. To this end, based on the case of the referendum planned in Scotland for 2023, an exploratory quantitative and qualitative study is proposed based on the publications discriminated by hashtags related to the topic through an analysis carried out in an application called PyCharm (Python) TikTok Research. The results suggest that on TikTok this type of content has a large reach, but it is not possible to determine precisely whether it has a specific effect or impact. However, the rate of user engagement and interaction with this content opens the possibility of eventually greater influence than on other platforms.

Keywords

TikTok, political change, active audiences, referendum, Scotland.

1. Introduction

Social networks have changed how we relate to each other and even how we see the world. These “unbeatable tools of mass communication” (*The Economist*, 2010, p. 2) have allowed us to generate content with global reach. This whole scenario is not alien to areas such as political communication.

In the quest of those in power, or those who aspire to power, to get closer to both their potential voters and their respective interest groups, it is possible to find a generation of

content through profiles on different social platforms that go far beyond the mere production through official profiles of political parties and public authorities; this activity –in addition– is especially increased during electoral processes (Baviera, Sánchez-Junqueras & Rosso, 2022).

However, this participation is not neutral. The opening of new profiles on trendy social networks is a way in which political leaders –and those who aspire to seek to communicate directly with their potential audiences–, bypass the intermediary role historically played by social media, especially those of a generalist nature, which, under the premise of plurality, aspire to offer a neutral and critical view of these processes, as opposed to what can happen with partisan media whose main purpose is to reinforce the beliefs of their militants (Marozzo & Bessi, 2018).

Among the scenarios that can be distinguished in different electoral processes, one of them corresponds to secession consultations. Cartes-Barroso (2018) carried out a content analysis of the Instagram accounts of political parties before the Referendum on Self-Determination called by regional government of Catalonia on the 1st of October 2017, detecting that it was the parties with a pro-independence ideology that made the best use of this social network, achieving higher levels of participation and interaction with their followers and various audiences than those parties that questioned the legality of the consultation.

In this way, some studies have been able to detect a series of divergent uses on platforms that have to do with online political actions whose prior organization is carried out in offline environments (Cernison, 2014). Situations of this type allow us to understand, for example, how new parties –with ideological visions that are more radical than conventional ideologies– continually seek to generate conversations on social networks to become a trend and obtain the desired visibility in the media space (Riquelme, Rivera & Serrano, 2022).

Other electoral processes with high social participation are plebiscites. Given that they are events of high interest to citizens, many conversations on social networks about them can be associated with the media, given that they offer different multiplatform content for adequate monitoring of the process. One of these types corresponds to live video from social networks. Therefore, we can find cyber-journalistic social media Live Streaming broadcasts for the journalistic coverage of plebiscite voting, as addressed by Apablaza-Campos *et al.* (2021), understanding that their results can be characterized according to the production of content on election days using a specific analysis matrix for these purposes called MACSMLS (p. 14).

Plebiscites, secession consultations, and referenda are not conventional electoral processes. Unlike the election of an authority or public office, these types of votes tend to be dominated by a series of prior conversations about the future and the impacts that each decision may generate. An example of this was what happened in Greece in 2015 when a referendum was held to find out whether citizens agreed with the economic bailout conditions established by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund in the Eurogroup. Despite the tight dates (the announcement was made on June 27 and the voting took place on July 5), it was possible to make an immediate projection of the stance of social media users in a snap vote by establishing a direct relationship between people's behavior on Twitter and their voting intentions (Tsakalidis *et al.*, 2018).

Similar phenomena can be detected in research related to the Brexit election of 23 June 2016. While Grčar *et al.* (2017) address the need for social media conversations to be considered in polls and opinion studies that seek to predict outcomes, Agarwal, Singh, and Toshniwal (2018) analyzed the sentiments of Twitter users who made posts related to the election process.

1.1. *Beyond being voters. Active digital audiences*

A study by the University of Glasgow found social media conversations with higher quantity and quality in favor of the Yes option over the No option weeks before Scotland's Independence Referendum vote on 18 September 2014 (Policy Scotland, 2014).

Something similar happened during the voting day of Chile's constitutional plebiscite 2022 on 4 September of the year. The country's press highlighted how in social media conversations the 'I approve' option won with more than 30,000 mentions over the "I reject" option during the first four hours of voting (*El Mostrador*, 2022).

The coincidences between the Scottish referendum process and the Chilean plebiscite are diverse, starting with the election results and their differences with previous studies of conversations on social networks: the No option won in Scotland with 55.30% of the votes (BBC, n.d.) and the Rejection option won in Chile with 61.89% of the preferences (Serval, n.d.). It is also possible to see that, despite the defeats, neither Scottish nor Chilean politicians have slowed down in their aspirations: while in Scotland the SNP (ruling party) is seeking formulas for a referendum following the refusal of the UK Supreme Court to allow a new vote on 19 October 2023 (Carrell & Brooks, 2023), in Chile, there will be a new constitutional process, a plebiscite, on 17 December 2023 (Sanhueza, 2023).

Additionally, and beyond the dichotomy between expectations and realities, both cases expose concrete examples of the relevance acquired by active digital audiences and how the reach of their social conversations is disseminated beyond the platforms on which they are generated (Manfredi, Herranz & Seoane, 2016). In this way, we find ourselves with a public construction that allows for the reconstruction of the traditional concept of public opinion through a model of participatory democracy (Gozálvez, Romero-Rodríguez & Larrea-Oña, 2019).

This whole scenario is understood under the concept of prosumer audiences, with users who not only consume but also produce content (Toffler, 1980). This is why conversations on social networks acquire social relevance: "What happens in social media becomes news and from there, then, it goes to the linear news, which follows in the wake of what is currently happening on our telephone terminals" (Blanco, 2021, p. 11).

The role of the prosumer, then, brings with it active social participation with multiple opportunities, especially in young audiences or those who have a better understanding of the opportunities offered by each platform, which is why organizations invite their citizens to demonstrate on social networks as a form of pressure for the achievement of objectives, especially at the level of justice and social needs (García-Galera, del Hoyo-Hurtado & Fernández-Muñoz, 2014; Islas, 2008).

However, the initial optimism generated by this scenario –especially at the level of academic literature– has changed in the face of changes in consumption. Masip, Ruiz-Caballero and Suau (2019) speak of zombie concepts, referring to all the analyses of the public sphere, deliberation, audiences, and the public that have not been able to understand user behavior in the face of the irruption of the internet.

One of these changes is related to people's emotional responses to the content they consume from social networks, phenomena such as disinformation –especially associated with politics– bring with them populist slogans, especially in countries where the reputation of political and media systems is weakened (Manfredi, Amado & Gómez-Iniesta, 2022), although nowadays it seems that any democracy is permeable to these scourges, which can lead to complex mediatized disputes that translate into scenarios of ideological polarization (Moragas-Fernández, Grau-Masot & Capdevila-Gómez, 2019).

1.2. TikTok and its Rise in today's media ecosystem

TikTok exceeds one billion users worldwide and as was already the case in 2020, in 2021 it was the most downloaded mobile application (Ditrendia, 2021; Statista, 2022a). Authors such as Guinaudeau, Munger and Votta (2022) highlight that the rise and popularity of the platform are so massive due to three major trends such as its eminently visual nature, an algorithm that bases recommendations on the user's own experience, and its interface designed exclusively for mobiles.

In this sense, TikTok is characterized by ephemeral, short, and highly visual content, the production of which has increased significantly in recent years. The posts are dominated by challenges, dances, humor, and playbacks, with production and consumption based on speed and creativity (Li, Xiaohui & Zhegwu, 2019; Shuai, Yuzhen & Yifang, 2019). In fact, TikTok is primarily used as a source of entertainment and is the platform where users spend the most time (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2022).

Users who produce and consume content in a similar proportion and whose profile has evolved from belonging mostly to Generation Z to more than 67% being over 25 years of age (Kantar, 2022).

In this context of globalization and technological advances in which audiovisual consumption is imposed through mobile devices, TikTok has emerged as a digital channel in which, through its own narrative, it addresses different issues that have been the subject of many investigations in recent years, which is also an indicator of the relevance of this platform in the current media ecosystem. This has to do with TikTok's capacity to expand the content and virtualize it, as it also allows for the videos to be referred to other Internet channels (Cervi, 2021; Vijay & Gekker, 2021).

This issue has implications for factors such as the ease of spreading uninformative content and verified content through the platform's own videos (García-Marín & Salvat-Martinrey, 2022; Sidorenko, Alonso & Giacomelli, 2021). In this sense, the rapid virtualization of content on TikTok can have a positive or negative impact depending on different elements, such as the type of content or the intentionality of the message.

In the field of political communication, moreover, social networks have a high component that appeals to emotion (Amado & Tarullo, 2015), which is why social and ideological content generates high engagement (Zeng, Abidin & Schäfer, 2021), as well as political content that is approached through entertainment (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). Thus, concepts such as 'pop politics' arise, which are related to those characteristics that give relevance to these social platforms for the participation of politicians in search of emerging spaces in the digital public sphere (Manfredi, Amado & Waisbord, 2021; Tryon, 2008).

In this sense, TikTok plays a relevant role from the point of view of the user, who transmits in the videos their personal opinions regarding politics in an active way, appealing in many cases to interaction (Medina, Papakyriakopoulos & Hegelich, 2020).

They tend to be individual users, beyond political formations, which have not yet managed to take advantage of all the possibilities of the platform, mainly in terms of interaction (Cervi, Tejedor & Marín-Lladó, 2021).

In this way, four categories of profiles can be defined that deal with political communication on TikTok:

- The profiles of the political parties themselves still incipient use of the platform (Cervi *et al.*, 2021).
- The profiles of people involved in politics, adapt their messages to the platform's own narrative, seeking interaction with users and reaching young audiences (Ariza, March & Torres, 2022; Gómez-Iniesta & Cantero de Julián, 2021).

- Profiles of content creators give their opinion on political issues, especially on topics that can generate controversy in society, such as the case of Historical Memory in Spain (Alonso & Sidorenko, 2022).

- Profiles of associations or links to certain social or political movements.

Likewise, the ideological orientation of the publications on TikTok is predominant in videos with political content (Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022), and this capacity for ideological influence on the platform's users (Gray, 2021), the interaction of users with this content and the application of the recommendation algorithm reinforces certain discourses that can be decisive (Wang, 2022).

In this way, TikTok users will access content that is increasingly biased toward their personal interests (Castro & Díaz, 2021). This issue is highly relevant when it comes to processes that can change the political course of a country.

2. Method

TikTok stands out as a platform that especially attracts young audiences, more identified with globalization and with an activist and vindictive character. Likewise, the platform itself encourages the involvement of the user community about the content and issues addressed on the platform, as well as the memetic effect.

Consequently, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1. Is it possible to instill a political opinion matrix through TikTok?

RQ2. What is the level of interaction of the TikTok user community with pro-independence political content?

RQ3. What are the narrative and profile characteristics of the interlocutors that are revealed in this process through TikTok?

The importance of this study stems not only from the interest in determining the new channels of dialogue and digital propaganda, with special emphasis on emerging audiences, while understanding whether there are dangers or substantial changes in political communication through new digital platforms, but also because in the particular case of TikTok engagement is 15% stronger than in other networks (Macready, 2022; TikTok for Business, 2021), that is, there is greater participation and involvement on the part of the user community, although it should be noted that the return of attention in the form of 'likes', comments, etc., is not always the same, nor indicative of influence, but it does increase the likelihood of greater exposure to the content.

Therefore, the main objective of this research is to determine which elements determine the profiles that promote political discourses of a pro-independence or secessionist nature (in many cases for populist motivations). Secondary objectives are:

- To check whether these discourses have a reach on TikTok.
- To define which profiles, carry out these discourses.
- To determine the narrative codes of the content.

The review of cases has corresponded to the first half of 2022, leaving as evidence the Scottish independence movement as the most active in the European press and public opinion and the web, especially after the death of Elizabeth II of England, although in November 2022 the British Supreme Court ruled that a new consultation on the matter could not be held.

We propose an exploratory study, quantitative and qualitative in nature, based on the publications discriminated by hashtags related to the subject. In the first instance, a manual review was carried out using the platform's internal search engine to determine the number of related identifiers.

To access all the records by hashtag, an application was created in PyCharm (Python) from the open access code library 'pyktok' available on GitHub (see <https://github.com/dfreelon/pyktok>) with BSD 3 license, authored by "dfreelon."

The application, which has been named “TikTok Research” for the purposes of this work, aims to rescue the data and metadata of all the videos identified with each hashtag studied, creating independent databases: identifying elements of indexation (identifying text, tags, etc.), engagement (likes, comments, times shared), geographical origin of the publishing profile, among many other data on the reach and positioning of the profiles and the content itself (see Figure 1).

We proceeded to work with 50% of the sample, on the understanding that an initial survey using the TikTok platform provided evidence of 6 hashtags: #scottishreferendum, #scottishindependence, #scottishindependencecommunity, #thetimeisnowscotland, #uniteforscotland, #FreeScotland. The selection process ultimately focused on the hashtags #FreeScotland, #scottishindependence and #scottishreferendum, because of their direct link to a specific political action and because of the repetition of content and users who do not tend to use a single hashtag but use several of the hashtags mentioned above. These were ultimately the reasons for filtering the cases for observation and analysis.

The sample was collected on 15 November 2022, and the total number of videos recorded was 872 contents among the 3 hashtags.

The engagement rate proposed by Hannah Macready (2022), from Hootsuite, was calculated for the profiles indicated as most active within each hashtag to determine whether their message influences this platform. Any result obtained between 4.5% and 18% (Macready, 2022; Statista, 2022b) will be taken as an optimal record through the formula:

$$[(\text{Number of likes} + \text{number of comments} + \text{number of shared content}) / \text{number of views}] * 100$$

3. Results

The first hashtag taken into consideration was #FreeScotland due to many videos with this identifier (830). Through this hashtag, 146 users could be located posting, of which two stand out notably, both pro-independence:

- @jiemck21 (3166 followers, 658 videos, and 125,100 ‘likes’): 372 (56.5%) videos with the study hashtag, of which 3 have by far the highest viewing and interaction records (see Table 1).
- @wearesctoland (351,800 followers, 873 videos, and 5,200,000 likes): 151 (17.29%) videos with the study hashtag, of which 4 have by far the highest viewing and engagement records (see Table 1).

Table 1. Videos with the hashtag #FreeScotland with the highest engagement rate.

Nr.	User	Title/description	Date	KPIs	Engagement rate
1	@jiemck21	Ignore that 🇪🇺👉	16-08-2022	318,900 views 734 comments 990 times shared 41.400 'likes'	13.52%
2	@jiemck21	No title	29-10-2021	62,000 views 374 comments 26 times shared 2.526 'likes'	4.71%
3	@jiemck21	It's time for independence 🇪🇺	11-06-2022	39,800 views 453 comments 27 times shared 2.223 'likes'	6.79%
4	@wearescotland	No title	27-10-2020	584,200 views 1,961 comments 2,836 times shared 58.100 'likes'	10.76%
5	@wearescotland	No title	27-04-2022	547,700 views 2,082 comments 960 times shared 21,500 'likes'	4.48%
6	@wearescotland	No title	26-10-2020	444,300 views 996 comments 740 times shared 53,800 'likes'	12.49%
7	@wearescotland	No title	31-01-2022	337,400 views 983 comments 953 times shared 11,700 'likes'	4.04%

Source: Own elaboration.

The next hashtag obtained from the sample was #ScottishReferendum, which in comparison to the previous case reports far fewer posts (41). With less posting activity, the number of related users is also considerably lower (33) and there is virtually no overlap with the previous hashtag. It is noteworthy that in most cases each profile only reports one publication with this tag.

As this is a particularly small sample, in contrast, those with two or more videos related to the hashtag in question are listed below:

- @darkangel5176 (4,620 followers, 154 videos, and 45,500 'likes'): 2 videos under the study name (1.2%) (see Table 2).
- @news_bubble (22,000 followers, 545 videos, and 635,000 'likes'): 5 videos identified with the tag in question (0.91%) of which 2 have a prominent display indicator based on their degree of influence (see Table 2).
- @nypeacelove (13,400 followers, 103 videos, and 18,700 'likes'): 2 videos under the study tag (1.94%) (see Table 2).
- @wadingfifer (1589 followers, 460 videos, and 22,600 likes): 2 videos under the study name (0.43%) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Hashtag #ScottishReferendum videos with the highest engagement rate.

Nr.	User	Title/description	Date	KPIs	Engagement rate
1	@darkangel5176	No title	15-04-2021	15,700 views 493 comments 22 times shared 540 'likes'	6.71%
2	@darkangel5176	No title	15-04-2021	2,722 views 41 comments 6 times shared 71 'likes'	4.33%
3	@news_bubble	No title	04-01-2021	12,400 views 120 comments 12 times shared 211 'likes'	2.76%
4	@news_bubble	No title	04-01-2021	7,081 views 128 comments 3 times shared 64 'likes'	2.75%
5	@nypeacelove	No title	05-08-2022	1,618 views 7 comments 0 times shared 236 'likes'	15.01%
6	@nypeacelove	No title	21-03-2022	293 views 0 comments 0 times shared 7 'likes'	2.38%
7	@wanderingfifer	Always yes	17-08-2022	1,747 views 246 comments 0 times shared 240 'likes'	27.81%
8	@wanderingfifer	Democracy stands above all else	18-08-2022	642 views 32 comments 0 times shared 117 'likes'	23.20%

Source: Own elaboration.

The last hashtag in the random sample is #scottishindependencecommunity which has only one related video (see table 3):

- @wanderingfifer (1589 followers, 460 videos, and 22,600 'likes'): only 1 video under the study name (0.21%).

Table 3. Videos with the hashtag #ScottishIndependenceCommunity with the highest engagement rate.

Nr.	User	Title/Description	Date	KPIs	Engagement rate
1	@wanderingfifer	Always yes	17-08-2022	1.747 views 246 comments 0 times shared 240 'likes'	27.81%

Source: Own elaboration.

All the data obtained through the computerized procedure can be accessed using the code shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. QR code for access to metadata of TikTok content of a pro-independence nature in Scotland obtained by hashtag.



Source: Own elaboration.

4. Discussion

The data produced by the study show that TikTok can be used to create a matrix of political opinion on issues of great relevance for a country, in this case, the Scottish independence referendum. This is in line with other research carried out in the context of electoral processes in other social networks such as Instagram, which are used with an increasingly mobilizing intentionality (Gamir-Ríos, Cano-Orón & Lava-Santos, 2022).

Likewise, the results suggest that it is the users themselves who create and disseminate these contents, beyond the political formations themselves or the people involved in politics, which is considered a relevant finding of the research and is in line with other studies such as those of Robinson (2022) and Alonso and Sidorenko (2022) about the processes of formation of a country's memory and its repercussions on social networks.

Thus, in the hashtags studied in this research, we did not find explicit profiles of politicians or parties dealing with the referendum and Scottish independence, issues which, a priori, could be controversial and lead to social and citizen polarization. Thus, it is the users themselves who set themselves up as content creators, reinforcing the idea of active audiences and prosumers who, moreover, get involved and interact with these contents by both 'liking' them and making comments in support of the discourse transmitted or expressing their disagreement with it.

This involvement of users in content related to politics on TikTok is reflected by Medina *et al.* (2020), who state that the user experience on these issues is more interactive on TikTok than on other platforms such as YouTube or Instagram. In this sense, the content corresponding to the user @jiemck21¹ stands out, showing a video of Lizz Truss, at that time British Prime Minister, on a visit to Scotland, followed by a poster that offended the leader; this content exceeded 700 comments, mostly criticizing the figure of Truss and in favor of Scottish independence. This situation is similar in the videos of the same user shown in Table

¹ See Table 1 <https://bit.ly/3henRoA>.

r: a high number of ‘likes’ coupled with a majority interaction in line with the message in favor of Scottish independence.

Likewise, on the @wearescotland profile, the comments are mostly supportive of independence, including from users who identify themselves as British. And while the username of this account may hint at an organized pro-independence movement, there is no evidence on the internet other than TikTok.

However, in the videos shown in Table 2 corresponding to the hashtag #ScottishReferendum, despite also having high engagement and comments that reinforce the pro-independence message, there are more anti-independence comments, especially from a social and political perspective. This is important evidence that allows us to begin to understand that a higher rate of interaction by the community of users of the platform does not necessarily translate into a greater influence of the original message (an aspect that is developed in greater detail below).

This is similarly the case in the post by the @wanderingfifer profile shown in Table 3 with the hashtag #ScottishIndependenceCommunity. In this video, with a high engagement rate of 27.81%, the user himself is shown looking at the camera showing his support for the Scottish independence referendum. As an exception, the content published from the profile @nypeacelove (Table 2, video 5) stands out, in which the user herself can be seen wearing a dress with a typical Scottish print and listening to a fragment of the original soundtrack of the film *Braveheart*, directed, produced, and starring Mel Gibson in 1995, who performed William Wallace, an emblematic figure in Scottish independence. In this publication, the comments are directed at the girl’s physique, with no allusion to the referendum and/or Scottish independence.

Another relevant issue in line with the objectives set out is the type of profiles from which this content is published. As mentioned, these are users who are not related to politics but who, in some cases, define themselves as activists in favor of Scottish independence. This is the case of @jiemck21 (Table 1) and @wearescotland (Table 1). In fact, the publications of both profiles are dedicated to Scotland and to claiming its independence. This is not the case in the same way for the profiles listed in Table 2. @darkangel5176 is the profile of a person whose posts are mostly not related to political issues, while @news_bubble is a profile dedicated to “news of diverse topics,” or what amounts to a pseudo-media as it is only present on this platform.

In the case of @nypeacelove, they define themselves as a digital creator, while @wanderingfifer showcases Scottish places and traditions in its profile content. Therefore, another of the findings of this research is that the profiles that refer to these issues do not necessarily have to be politicized, but that they are users who use the platform with a vindicative character in specific publications. However, we do find profiles clearly oriented towards dealing with issues related to politics in Scotland, both as an individual user and as a generic name such as @wearescotland, which in its description states “Follow if you support Scottish Independence.”

In these profiles, the intensity of publication is very high, with an average of one publication per day. In addition, in the case of #freescotland, all the profiles with a high frequency of posts are in the United Kingdom, according to the geolocation metadata obtained. However, this is not the only place from which content is published, as content from France has been identified. In the case of #scottisreferendum and #ScottishIndependenceCommunity, all the profiles studied also correspond to the United Kingdom.

One of the significant issues when addressing this research is the use of the platform’s narrative codes by users who address these issues, with TikTok’s native content having the greatest reach, making the platform a space that favors the treatment of political information from the perspective of entertainment (Cervi *et al.*, 2021). Apparently more informal content, often recorded in the first person, including audio that provides coherence with the message,

as in the example of Gibson's film already mentioned. In other words, we are talking about a multimedia composition that draws on pop culture references and everyday multimedia aesthetics to convey authenticity and emotionality.

Thus, the videos posted by the user @wanderingfifer (videos 7 and 8, Table 2 and video 1, Table 3), which are the ones with the greatest reach in the sample studied, are native videos of the platform whose message reinforces the matrix of political opinion in favor of the country's independence. One of them uses the metaphor of 'seeing the light at the end of the tunnel' as the path to Scottish independence. The image is supported by a voiceover and a text overlay that corroborates this message. In the video with the highest engagement rate (Table 2, video 7 and Table 3, video 1, see <https://bit.ly/3W8BNlr>), the platform's own labels, filters, and resources are used to encourage people to vote 'Yes' in the referendum. This does not happen in all content.

The @wearescotland profile focuses on the dissemination of pre-existing videos, which in the cases studied are fragments of speeches by political leaders in the British Parliament, which are given the same video format and a text to reinforce the idea shown in the image. Meanwhile, the content of the @jiemck21 profile with the highest engagement is the one where, in a satirical register, images from a previous video of Lizz Truss are edited with a banner offensive to her, with music used for humor videos on the platform. The @darkangel5176 and @news_bubble profiles follow a similar line to @wearescotland, with pre-existing videos with editing, using the resource of superimposed text to emphasize the message.

Again, special mention should be made of the @nypeacelove profile, whose videos are native to the platform, but do not use the platform's own codes. This can be seen in video 6 of Table 2, in which a horizontal video shows images of Tomhannock Reservoir in New York, with music from the original soundtrack of the film Braveheart and #ScottishReferendum as one of the hashtags used in the publication.

As noted above, the fact that certain content reports very high engagement rates are not indicative of influence. TikTok is a platform that takes the participation of the user community as an important variable for the reach of the content and various profiles. That said, it is also necessary to point out that a high engagement rate translates into greater reach and visibility of content organically, through the "for you" feed, in which 80% of TikTok users currently consume content (TikTok for Business, 2022). In other words, a higher engagement rate can translate into a higher likelihood of influence through increased reach.

5. Conclusions

Through an exploratory study, this paper has attempted to analyze the role of TikTok as a platform in processes that imply structural and social change for a country. Specifically, based on the referendum planned in Scotland for the year 2023, we have analyzed the scope of the content related to the referendum through the delimitation of hashtags and the elements that determine the profiles that establish this type of discourse. It has been found that this type of content has a high reach on TikTok, mainly the platform's native videos.

However, despite these high engagement rates, it cannot be precisely determined whether political content via TikTok has a specific effect or influence, thus answering RQ1. But the rate of user engagement and interaction with this content opens the possibility of potentially greater influence than on other platforms. In addition to this, we have the increased relevance of the short video format for political communication, as is already happening on other platforms such as Instagram (Gamir-Ríos *et al.*, 2022), which specifies the reach of content primarily among young audiences.

In this sense, we may be facing a paradigm shift and phenomenon like what happened with Facebook and Twitter when they burst into the media ecosystem as social networks for conversation and political opinion (Gozálvez *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, the expansion of content

related to a country's political and structural future reaches through TikTok young audiences that no longer use the platform only as a source of entertainment.

In fact, we can speak of an evolution in users' consumption habits who now use TikTok as a search engine even more than Google (Rebollo, 2022). And all of this with the platform's own narrative codes, very visual and with ephemeral content. Therefore, it is also a positive response to RQ2, given that a message related to politics can go viral on a platform fundamentally based on entertainment.

Concerning RQ3, the interlocutors in these contents are usually private users who are not political formations, nor people involved in politics, or the media, but they do show an interest in these issues, as well as extolling the qualities of their country. Moreover, election periods tend to be the peak of political communication (Mazzoleni, 2010), so users who do not usually talk about politics in their profiles refer to the referendum and Scottish independence in these months when this issue is in the news. In fact, almost all the posts are made from the United Kingdom.

As limits of the research, we can highlight the reduced sample with which this study has been carried out, considering the methodologies applied. However, it is always possible to try to explore the universe of publications and hashtags much more through this procedure, increasing the number of results to obtain a broader view of this type of political process through the TikTok platform.

It is also considered that this study can be equally extended to other plebiscite processes in other countries given the common scenarios between those who hope for social-political changes –opting to approve– and those who are either content with the current scenario or fear profound reforms –opting to reject. This means that the ideological motivations for generating digital conversations in favor of one position or another take on common elements already tested in other campaigns, regardless of their geographical location.

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