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Does TikTok allow quality debate? A case study on poverty

Abstract

This study analyses temporary employees' perceptions and this article analyzes whether the features of TikTok allow for meaningful debates and how they are conducted. To do so, we used a case study approach: user conversations about socially excluded individuals in a context marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis, which have exacerbated hardships in developing countries. A total of 100 videos published in Spain since 2020 on this topic, along with 38,462 comments, are examined. We performed a content analysis of the videos, considering their thematic, technical, and stylistic characteristics. Additionally, we conducted a textual analysis of the comments taking into account the authorial and conversational dimensions. The study concludes that the structure of TikTok does not enable high-quality debates in this case study. The videos provide an episodic view of the topics, and on average users participate only once expressing opinions based on personal experiences or existing biases. Moreover, the debate is muddled in this specific topic due to intergenerational conflicts. Judgmental attitudes lead to messages that are both cruel in the form of advice and expressions of humor. The analysis reveals a strong sentiment of aporophobia in the opinions expressed on this platform. Therefore, it is advisable to recommend the inclusion of this marginalized group among the protected groups in the community guidelines.

Keywords

TikTok, user comments, social media, video platforms, poverty, aporophobia, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1. Introduction

The growth of TikTok has been rapid and continuous since 2018, particularly among young people (Omnicores, 2022), the age group that most extensively uses this video platform (Basch *et al.*, 2021a). Within this group, women stand out as users (Hootsuite, 2022). Part of its success can be attributed to being the first platform to offer short-duration videos tailored for vertical mobile screens. However, the videos' characteristics and the content they offer are not currently unique, as they are also available on other social media platforms (Scherr & Wang, 2021).

Its most notable aspect is its ability to respond to the demands and preferences of Generation Z through songs, dances, lip-synching, imitation, viral sounds, or facial expressions

(Chen *et al.*, 2021). For this reason, these videos spread quickly and widely and facilitate inter-activity (Xiao *et al.*, 2019). The option of duets (or stitches) is also a fundamental experience on this platform, as it allows users to respond to a video by modifying it (with scenes, choreography, effects). Some of these duets carry specific connotations for TikTok users and create trends.

The videos strive to be featured on the “For You” page, where a selection is recommended. Videos are based on the algorithm’s predictions analyzing the most popular content, shared posts, followed accounts, posted comments, and created videos. This facilitates a personalized user experience. Additionally, these videos are made available for looped playback by default. Therefore, the potential of TikTok lies within its formal structure (Schellewald, 2021).

In essence, the relevance of TikTok is not solely based on its broad international expansion, content offerings, or videos but primarily on its impact on younger generations and how it captures their attention. Young people use social media as their primary source of political and social information (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). TikTok is currently one of their favorites (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). For this reason, it is essential to study how this digital platform enables meaningful debates and how they unfold.

Specifically, this research examines the handling of poverty on this social network. Although its eradication is the first of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the impact of Covid-19, rising inflation, and the war in Ukraine have led to an increase in people experiencing extreme poverty. As a result, approximately 1.3 billion people live in acute multidimensional poverty. Within the European Union, 96.5 million inhabitants are at risk of social exclusion (Living Conditions in Europe, 2021). Among this percentage, women (22.9%), individuals with low educational attainment (34.7%), the unemployed (66.2%), and young people aged 18 to 24 (27.8%) stand out.

The case of Spain is significant as all poverty variables are above the EU average (EAPN-ES, 2021). It is estimated that at the outbreak of the pandemic, there were 4.5 million people in Spain living in severe poverty. Along with poverty, derogatory comments towards this group have also increased, blaming them for their own condition while ignoring society’s responsibility (Cortina, 2017). In other words, it is a matter used for marginalization. This trend is associated with neoliberal thinking that relies on individual talent and effort while undervaluing other circumstances, such as parents’ social, economic, and cultural capital and country of origin (Cortina, 2017). Therefore, it is important to assess the opinions expressed by TikTok users because, as it will be explained further “non-experts, including adolescents and early adults, leverage TikTok’s affordances to express their concern, frustrations, and personal stake in what they perceive to be salient issues of their time” (Hautea *et al.*, 2021).

1.1. Motives for participation and reflection of public opinion

As explained earlier, the uniqueness of TikTok lies in its immersive design (likes, personalized and available content). The Uses and Gratifications Theory points out different motivations for explaining user engagement (Yaqi, Lee & Liu, 2021). These include the opportunity to view all videos a user has liked, those saved as favorites, self-expression, social interaction, and escapism (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Based on the Self-Determination Theory, TikTok usage allows users to feel autonomous, competent, and connected with others (Montag *et al.*, 2021). The Social Impact Theory highlights factors such as strength, immediacy, and the number of sources as inducers of behavior. Scherr and Wang (2021) indicate escapism as the fundamental motive for using this social platform among women and younger individuals in China. This important finding helps to understand the reality in other countries. Considering that young people are the primary users of TikTok and are among the groups most affected by poverty, along with women, this motivation shapes both the videos and the resulting conversations.

These motivations are not only linked to the dissemination of superficial videos; they are also used to share opinions on controversial topics. For this reason, TikTok’s content can be

considered “a representation of reality as documented through the lens of its specific communicative forms” (Schellewald, 2021), which also spreads to other social media platforms. Consequently, its influence transcends the boundaries of its ecosystem and integrates into everyday life (Schellewald, 2021). Therefore, analyzing TikTok can serve as an additional indicator of understanding public opinion. Moreover, in these online debates, one can grasp the emotions behind the messages, which facilitates their circulation and interaction (Papacharissi, 2015), and even increase the possibility of their virality (Dobele *et al.*, 2007).

Furthermore, the higher level of interactivity on TikTok compared to platforms like YouTube or Instagram (mainly due to the ease of the duet or stitch feature) allows for genuine online debates, according to some researchers (Medina *et al.*, 2020). Thus, its potential is demonstrated in transmitting messages about public health (Zhu *et al.*, 2019), COVID-19-related content (Basch *et al.*, 2021b), climate change (Hautea *et al.*, 2021; Basch *et al.*, 2021a), as well as facilitating youth political activism (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2019) and providing political parties with an additional platform to disseminate their activities (Cervi *et al.*, 2021; Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022). However, activities promoting hate speech (Weimann & Masri, 2020) and cyberbullying (Anderson, 2020) are also detected on the platform.

1.2. Poverty and degrading content on TikTok

Although aporophobia is not one of the most common hate crimes registered by the Security Forces in Spain (Ministry of Interior, 2021), it is essential to note that it is a crime that is often not reported due to the situation of the affected individuals. Furthermore, these crimes are often intertwined and confused with those related to racism/xenophobia and antigypsyism (Foessa Report, 2019). In addition to actual crimes, it is important to consider that hate speech and expressions impact the victims as they humiliate and denigrate them.

TikTok has implemented measures on its Community Guidelines page (2022) to detect and remove expressions of hate. However, it has proven ineffective in enforcing these measures (O'Connor, 2021). This is due, in part, to the limited number of keywords provided by the creators of the videos, which makes automatic detection difficult (Weimann & Masri, 2020). Furthermore, there is an increasingly prominent presence of extremist groups that exploit the dissemination advantages offered by TikTok's algorithm to spread their ideologies. It is important to note that these messages are not only generated by organized groups such as white supremacists (Ganesh, 2020) but also by isolated individuals (Oksanen *et al.*, 2014).

TikTok has published six reports on removing content that violated its rules. The third-quarter report of 2021 (TikTok, 2022) indicates that the removal of videos due to hate behavior amounted to 1,424,880 videos (2.3% of the total removed). This rate represented an increase from the previous period (2% in the second half of 2020), which the platform attributes to an improvement in detecting such content. Regarding comments, it is the creators themselves or the users who report messages with inappropriate content, and there are no available data on them. Additionally, it is worth noting that among the protected attributes (race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender, among others), individuals living in poverty are not included.

This analysis has two objectives: first, to establish the characteristics of the discussions on this platform through videos, comments, and the connections between them. The second objective focuses on the case study: assessing the opinions and attitudes of users regarding the situation of socially excluded individuals, a topic of profound social significance without geopolitical boundaries. Ultimately, the aim is to determine whether these vulnerable groups should be included as a protected category in the community guidelines.

2. Research questions and hypotheses

Based on these objectives, we formulated two research questions:

RQ1. What are the characteristics of conversations on this platform? Do they allow for quality debates on relevant topics? Given that conversations are based on two elements, we consider the videos: their characteristics (theme, framing, style) and editing options available on this platform (duets, choreographies, memes). We also consider the comments: the quality and level of reflection in the messages, and their relationship with the style of the videos.

RQ2. Can public opinion be assessed through the analysis of this platform? Specifically, what is the attitude and position of users towards poverty?

The hypotheses for these research questions are as follows:

H1a. TikTok does not allow for the development of quality debates due to the episodic nature of videos and limited user participation focused on expressing opinions rather than engaging in dialogue.

H1b. Significant topics do not include interactive features and options to engage young users.

H2a. The gathering of individual opinions allows for capturing the general sentiment toward individuals in situations of poverty.

H2b. The manifestation of aporophobia (discrimination against impoverished people) is cruel, and the experiences of individuals living without resources presented in testimonial videos are not always understood.

3. Method

We analyzed 100 videos related to this topic, published in Spain, following a similar approach by other authors (Hautea *et al.*, 2021; Basch *et al.*, 2021, among others). We conducted the searches from January 1st to January 12th, 2022, and included videos from 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started. Since generic terms (such as “poor,” “poverty,” “unemployment,” and “shantytown”) yielded minimal results (10% of the sample), as the platform controls and restricts certain keywords, a library of specific and local adjectives and nouns was constructed based on the criteria of the AROPE indicator (At-Risk-Of Poverty and Exclusion). Eurostat and the European Network Against Poverty and Social Exclusion use this indicator. It assesses available resources (social assistance, housing), employment, and various consumption concepts (food), as individuals experience poverty in diverse ways. For example, terms like “Cañada Real” were used in the search, among others (Table 1). The first 100 videos from the searches accumulated 14 million views, over 900,000 likes, and nearly 39,000 comments and were shared 33,000 times.

Table 1. Meaning of local terms used in the sample search.

Term	Meaning
Cañada Real	illegal housing settlement in Madrid
Las 3000 viviendas	Seville slum area
Manteros	people selling imitation goods on the street, usually placed on a blanket ('manta' in Spanish).
Menas	unaccompanied foreign minors
Okupa	a person who illegally squats in a dwelling or uninhabited space
Paguita	pejorative way of referring to monetary benefits granted by the State
Colas del hambre	people who found it necessary to queue at churches and food banks to request food during the pandemic

Source: Own elaboration.

We conducted a content analysis of the videos and a textual analysis of the comments using a codebook. The coders were the authors of this research. In the content analysis, the selected videos were the unit of analysis. We included the following categories after an experimental process and a pretest: central theme, year of production, duration, views, likes, comments, and shares. The videos were categorized as: testimonial (people sharing their experiences), informative (providing data or reproducing news segments or reports), political propaganda (openly supporting a political party), opinion-based, and humorous. Among these categories, humorous videos are the most common on this social media platform (Wang, 2020). To understand the users' perspectives on poverty, the content frame of the videos was classified as: neutral (providing data and figures related to poverty), positive (defending and showing solidarity with the people living in poverty and proposing solutions), or negative (blaming or attacking people experiencing poverty or poverty-related situations). Finally, specific characteristics and techniques of TikTok were considered, such as response videos, challenges, choreography, duets/stitches, and memes. Regarding techniques, elements such as music, photographs, captions, subtitles, and the effects or filters offered by the platform were evaluated.

We applied the textual analysis to the 38,462 comments in the corpus and assessed two dimensions: authorial and conversational. The authorial dimension, unlike other authors (Kaye *et al.*, 2020), includes the username. This allows for examining the number of participants (not just interventions) in the comments and the degree of participation. In the conversational dimension, reciprocity between users was evaluated, along with the types of comments posted (to establish a typology that is quantified to determine a presence percentage in the total) and the expressed opinions about groups linked to poverty. In addition, we considered sources cited in the comments and whether the conversation is conducted with respect and civility. The function of emojis is also analyzed. Finally, all these indicators were correlated, including those derived from the content analysis of the videos and those resulting from the qualitative analysis of the comments. The latter form a notably larger corpus in terms of volume, which corresponds to a greater variety as well. This has required a more detailed treatment. However, since it is not possible to establish a clear typology, the approach chosen is to present dominant trends.

In summary, the method described combines quantitative and qualitative content analysis, allowing for an examination of how conversations unfold on TikTok and how the meaning of poverty is contextualized, its scope, and its impact. This is an example of a debate on a significant issue within this platform, arguably one of the most popular social media platforms today. By utilizing this combined approach, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the discussions and perspectives expressed regarding poverty, providing valuable insights into the dynamics and significance of such debates on TikTok.

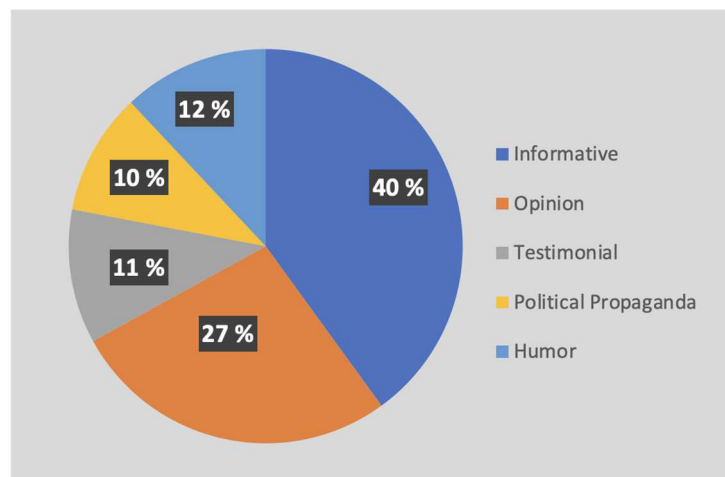
4. Results

4.1. *The videos about poverty*

Most analyzed videos were published on the platform in 2021 and did not exceed 60 seconds in duration, with only 2% surpassing 2 minutes. This indicates that users prefer short productions, although TikTok extended its maximum duration to 3 minutes in April 2021. Over half (55%) offer negative approaches that openly criticize socially excluded groups. The authors (67%) were users with less than 10,000 followers. This is one of the peculiarities of the TikTok algorithm: it allows content to go viral without requiring a specific number of followers. In this sense, we can speak of more equal participation compared to other social media platforms due to the ease of message dissemination it offers.

In these videos, we identified 12 themes related to poverty. Among these, the occupation of housing, immigration, and homelessness represent almost half of the sample. Thus, poverty is predominantly associated with a lack of resources for living, difficulties in having a home, and being a foreigner. Regarding style, poverty is primarily addressed through Informative videos, followed by Opinion (Figure 1). The remaining styles (Humor, Testimonial, and Political propaganda) have a limited presence. In Testimonial videos, users convey a generally moderate and neutral discourse, while Political propaganda videos present radical viewpoints. Humorous and Opinion-based content tends to have a negative approach, often aimed at denigrating these groups.

Figure 1. Percentage of each video style in the analyzed sample.



Source: Own elaboration.

The videos are overall simple productions with little presence of the distinctive elements of this social media platform. For example, memes only appear in 15% of them. We observed the same disparity in response videos, choreography videos, or duets/stitch videos. We only found one challenge that incites passersby to throw water from a bottle onto a homeless person sleeping on the street. However, captions stand out: they are used in 72% of the videos to clarify ideas, provide information, or as headers. Music, present in 42% of the creations, serves to connect with the viewer rather than adding emotion or drama to the image. Among the most used effects, green screens and GIFs emphasize the content. As a video platform, photographs are a minority resource (9%). Subtitles are also scarce (5%) because automatic incorporation for Spanish-speaking audiences was made available in December 2021.

Finally, it is important to note that the viralization data indicates that videos with a negative approach obtained the highest number of views, likes, comments, and shares. Regarding the theme, productions about the Roma community accumulated the highest number of views. “Las 3.000 viviendas” and “La Cañada Real” were the most shared. In comparison, “Las 3.000 viviendas” and “okupación” gathered nearly 50% of the total likes in the sample. Among the most commented topics, the occupation of housing stands out.

4.2. *Authorial and conversational dimension*

The data regarding the authorial dimension indicates that users commented an average of 1.53 times, and no users participated in different videos. In other words, there is volatile participation; a user only comments more than once if there is a response to their comment. The videos that exceeded the average number of comments are related to migration themes. When there are sarcastic and comical expressions, user participation decreases significantly.

In general, there is no dialogue. Usually, the opinions expressed do not consider other participants' observations. This means derogatory and humiliating comments are not typically responded to, except in specific cases (Example 1).

Example 1: "Calling them rats is unnecessary, handsome."

Dialogues only appear when there are threads. There are 19 threads per video on average, but the distribution is uneven. Some videos have up to 174 threads, while others have none. These threads are usually brief and develop with the average participation of two or three users, sometimes including the creator. These threads start on the first or second day, but due to the functioning of TikTok's algorithm, they can appear weeks or months later.

The origin of these threads is challenging to determine. A comment with many likes can lead to a thread (as it happened in 53.7% of the analyzed chats). However, they can also start with a provocative comment (Example 2). The threads mainly contain political comments (Example 3), humorous ones (Example 4), or simply responses. In some cases, they raise interesting topics –for instance, a heated debate between two users about the presence of Spain in Latin America.

Example 2: "Wow, they say Latinos even beat up old people. Well, my grandmother tells me she knows people."

Example 3: "You don't even know what socialism is... you're not very smart voting for the right-wing."

Example 4: "Hahaha, a Porsche for 6000, it's not even that cheap on AliExpress."

In TikTok conversations, explicit insults or vulgar expressions have not been found. However, derogatory terms are not uncommon: "Garrulo" (redneck), "Descerebrado" (braindead), or "Panda de buitres" (gang of vultures). In some comments, users address each other with a certain familiarity because they have participated in other debates with the same creator. However, the most notable aspect is the generational clash. Older users typically discredit younger ones based on age (Example 5). They accuse them of not understanding reality due to their lack of experience (Example 6) and education (Example 7) and encourage them to put themselves in the shoes of others (Example 7). The younger generation confronts and counterattacks by arguing that age is not necessarily related to wisdom and life experience.

Example 5: "Says a kid from 2008 who plays Fortnite 😏"

Example 6: "You're 14 years old, what do you know about life???"

Example 7: "You haven't even finished elementary school."

Example 8: "Of course champ, why don't you go sell panties for a euro at the flea market."

Regardless of the topic being discussed, we observe a certain tone of irony, mockery, and lack of respect. Thus, expressions like "you judge without knowing," "inform yourself, please" or "study it" are repeated. However, there are also sensible interventions (Example 9) that are polite because they express gratitude for corrections and criticism (Example 10), although they are in the minority.

Example 9: "Enough with divisions based on religion, skin color, sexual orientation, ethnicities, etc."

Example 10: "They're deceiving you," "fake video, all made up."

4.3. Sources and trends in the relationship between videos and comments

The lack of information is compensated with personal experiences. Sometimes, this knowledge comes from belonging to the group being discussed: it is relatively common. It serves to distinguish oneself from others who are blamed for unethical or criminal actions

(Example 11). Other times, it comes from professional expertise (Example 12). Sometimes, it is based on personal experiences of a social situation or where they live. References to the experiences of family members, especially grandparents, are included, which indicates the participants' age and references to parents (Example 13).

Example 11: "I am a Roma person, these individuals do not represent me."

Example 12: "I started my own business two years ago, and I have 22 employees and growing, but I had to put in a lot of hours."

Example 13: "My mother is Peruvian and hasn't received any assistance."

The second most utilized source is History, but it is adjusted to each case, used to conceal expressions of hatred. For example, phrases like "Fernando VI could have executed his plan" to allude to the extermination of Roma people or "Apply the vagrancy and delinquency law" to call for the repression of people without resources. In other cases, History emerges in a debate to relate aspects of the past to the present. For example, the current immigration is linked to the Spanish migration of the 60s.

A few movie recommendations have been found but it is not prominent reference nor are the media sources, which are not trusted much (Example 14). The more informed participants include links to reports on poverty situations (Eurostat and Oxfam) or legislative codes to support their observations, demonstrate that law in Spain is outdated, or denounce false data.

Example 14: "Media is cancer in Spain," "This doesn't come up on mainstream TV."

In relation to the video style and the type of comments, certain trends can be identified (Table 2).

Table 2. Predominant comments in a chat in relation to video style.

Video style	Type of comment
Informative	Judgemental
Opinion	Political and advisory
Propaganda	Political and derogatory
Statement	Judgemental and advisory
Humour	Humorous and judgemental

Source: Own elaboration.

The variable of video frames is not included because user interventions from the referred community weigh more in the comments. Additionally, as explained, most videos have a negative focus. However, we observed that the presence of creators in the conversations does not influence their development. Instead, authors participate in promoting themselves (such as announcing a new video), and like other participants, they express gratitude for praises, provide clarifications about the video, or share personal experiences in some of the threads. As mentioned before, the use of captions is significant as they succinctly summarize the video's central message. For instance, a montage of three photographs of slums with the caption "It's not Cuba, it's Madrid" sparked a polarized political debate.

4.4. Judgement on the poverty

The main intention behind these comments is to pass judgment. This occurs in 34.04% of the analyzed comments and is prevalent in Informational, Testimonial, and Humorous videos. Through these comments, participants predominantly take a critical and disrespectful stance (Example 15), sometimes even cruel (Example 16). In general, they blame disadvantaged groups for their situation, regardless of the specific issue they are facing (such as drug addiction, immigration, or lack of resources to feed their families). Only a few individuals consider the impact of social, economic, and cultural context on the circumstances faced by these people.

Example 15: “Fabulist and lazy” (referring to a woman receiving assistance to feed her daughter).

Example 16: “If you don’t have money, why did you have a child?”

In general expressions, we observed a certain pessimism (Example 17) and aporophobia (Example 18). The most despised groups are unaccompanied foreign minors, immigrants, and inhabitants of marginalized neighborhoods, who are identified as criminals and perceived as a threat to public safety. The occupation of houses is strongly condemned as it is considered a crime. In this regard there is an agreement with the comments in the videos, but this is not the case with street vendors and gypsies. They are denigrated in the videos but not predominantly in the comments. The dissemination of testimonial images influences both groups. In the case of the latter, the fact that they are Spanish plays a role since poverty is inherent to undocumented foreigners.

Example 17: “We have what we deserve, the worst part is that it’s going to get much, much worse.”

Example 18: “Yeah, sure, give them jobs and see if they actually work. I can assure you they won’t.”

The reproach towards the aid they receive, the mention of laws that protect them, and the actions of security forces lead to political comments in 16.44%. Admittedly, it is not a high proportion. However, it is common to find negative mentions of the government and the former king in all comment sections (Example 19). These messages prevail in Political propaganda and Opinion videos. The most active in this regard are far-right followers who urge to vote for Vox. These comments demonstrate the existing political radicalization in Spain on this platform and the lack of reasoning or arguments, which are replaced by humor and irony (Example 20).

Example 19: “We have corrupt politicians and kings stealing money, and nobody complains...”

Example 20: “😏😏😏 Every time this person speaks, the price of bread goes up 😏😏😏.”

Humor (present in 15.12% of the sample) is used to discredit other participants. However, it mainly targets the groups mentioned in the video (Example 21). However, the situations of individuals are also the subject of jokes (Example 22). If someone shows some understanding, they are encouraged to solve the problem individually (Example 23).

Example 21: “The junkies can see in the dark” (referring to the lack of light in a suburb).

Example 22: “We give them welfare payments in Serrano ham.”

Example 23: “The next 50 people who come on the mother ships, we’ll send them to your house.”

What is concerning is that 5.8% of the analyzed comments present, in a joking tone, hate speech loaded with physical threats, even suggesting extermination and annihilation

(Example 24). In addition, aporophobia and blaming people experiencing poverty are reiterated (Example 25). However, there is also misogyny and above all racism as immigration is, as mentioned earlier, associated with poverty and seen as a threat (Example 26).

Example 24: “Dynamite that cesspool.”

Example 25: “Well, they shouldn’t have spent it on drugs and alcohol; they should have gotten a job.”

Example 26: “The Moors are taking everything from us.”

This attitude leads to proposing solutions, especially in testimonial and opinion videos, to address these perceived problematic situations. The advice given (13.55% of the comments) focuses on the idea that the disadvantaged person should find a solution, primarily by ceasing to be lazy, working, and seeking opportunities. Others suggest that immigrants should return to their countries (Example 27) or encourage radical political changes (Example 28). In the case of videos with a positive and neutral focus (23% and 22%, respectively), conversations oppose evictions and support the regularization of undocumented individuals.

Example 27: “Go back to your paradise.” “Don’t come here.”

Example 28: “Change the government.” “Take it to the streets.”

Lastly, we found other comments (13.7%) where the video’s message or the creator is applauded, questions are raised, or exclamations mentions, or emojis are added. Emojis have a prominent presence (appearing in 66.9% of the comments). For example, when applauding an action shown in the video, their usage can be even higher. These emoticons primarily serve three functions. First, they emphasize the message and make it more visually appealing. In this case, flags of countries (Spain, Morocco, and some Latin American countries), hearts, clovers, dancers, or angry faces stand out. Secondly, they tone down the message with smiling faces to make it less violent (Example 29). Lastly, they are used as substitutes for words such as sheep, rats, surprise, anger, thumbs up, and applause emoticons.

Example 29: “They should drop a bomb on the 3000 houses 🤔🤔.”

5. Discussion and conclusions

The structure of TikTok influences user behavior (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) as well as the characteristics of the debates. These debates extend over time thanks to the algorithm’s recommendations, which allow a video to be commented on beyond its immediate posting. Therefore, the difficulty in developing reflective debates cannot be attributed to the limited time available for participation. The main obstacle lies in videos that fragment information and offer an episodic view of a topic (in this case, poverty), preventing users from having a complete perspective to substantiate their opinions and allow for quality debate. The authorship dimension also plays a role, particularly in the involvement of many users who participate only once on average. This demonstrates a lack of continuity, thus nullifying the possibility of argumentation and, consequently, meaningful debate. Thus, H1a is confirmed. The result is the simple expression of an opinion based on personal or immediate experiences, in some cases, regarding issues that directly affect them (such as housing occupation). Young people do not exclusively use these forums (even though they are the age group that most frequently utilizes TikTok (Zeng & Abidin, 2021), perhaps because the chosen topic as a case study does not constitute a pressing issue for Generation Z. However, this diversity, which has not shown a predominant presence of women in video creation or comments, as noted by Kennedy (2020), is not favorable. On the contrary, it highlights a generational confrontation that further hinders the possibility of constructive dialogue.

Users participate freely and are not reluctant to express opinions on controversial topics. However, it is important to note that comments have secondary importance in engagement:

they represent 0.3% of the total corpus and approximately 4% of the likes received by the videos. The only engagement feature surpassed by comments (17%) is sharing videos outside the platform. Debates through videos (duets) and the platform's video creation options cannot be considered relevant. These resources are not applied to socially important topics, at least not in the case analyzed. Thus, TikTok functions similarly to other digital platforms (H1b).

The conversational dimension reveals that the self-expression function is fundamental (Omar & Dequan, 2020). The expression of opinions is carried out from the role of judges who pass judgment. Negative judgment and negative framing are prioritized in the videos, reinforced by captions. This sense of superiority, both over and within the images, occasionally promotes cruel and derogatory expressions, not so much towards other users as seen in reader comments on digital press (Paz-Rebollo, Cáceres-Zapatero & Martín-Sánchez, 2021) but primarily towards the most disadvantaged groups.

This stance towards reality also leads to advice on what the judged individuals should do, say, or how they should behave. Radicalized political mentions, similar to other social networks (Paz-Rebollo, Mayagoitia-Soria & González-Aguilar, 2021), blur these pieces of advice with emotionally charged and ideologically irreconcilable perspectives. The use of humor resembles that of other forums as well. Sometimes, it focuses on trivial matters unrelated to the topic (such as a thread discussing the color yellow of a car belonging to a person detained in a marginalized neighborhood). Still, other times it is ironic and occasionally even violent. In a general sense, humor contributes to the recognized need for escapism by other authors (Roig & Martorell, 2021; Gal, 2019), but it also serves as an incentive to increase engagement through likes or messages. It trivializes the addressed topic and softens the most aggressive threats. Ultimately, humor and entertainment constitute a new social influence (Iodice & Papapicco, 2021).

These circumstances severely condition the quality of the conversation, but they do not prevent its analysis from being relevant (H2a). This mosaic of individual, immediate, and emotional expressions can facilitate the assessment of opinions about political, social, and economic reality (Hautea *et al.*, 2021; Olivares-García & Méndez-Majuelosa, 2020). It allows for the perception of popular opinion regarding the government, the monarchy, specific laws, media outlets, police actions, and poverty. In general, negative feelings prevail, particularly fear and anger, with the latter generating the most user interaction.

This analysis shows that aporophobic discourse on TikTok reproduces existing social prejudices, similar to other social media platforms (Dobson & Knezevic, 2017), but in a more uninhibited and violent manner. The stigmatization of the poor is constructed through expressions such as lazy, shameless, criminals, and scoundrels, among others. Structural reasons are not considered, and the focus of responsibility is shifted to the individual level (Cortina, 2017). The opposition revolves around economic motives: they oppose the aid received by people experiencing poverty, criticize them for not paying taxes, and reproach them for the advantages they sometimes receive. Furthermore, it is believed that each person is responsible for their situation: people experiencing poverty do not work because they do not want to. They are attributed to criminal and dangerous behaviors in society (H2b). This stance towards poverty worsens when it comes to immigrants. The rejection of people experiencing poverty is even more decisive if they are foreigners because they are seen as a threat (Gómez *et al.*, 2021).

Some of these harmful and marginalizing messages are characteristic of the far right. What is concerning is that they resonate beyond their circle of supporters. This permeability is evident in the repetition of their arguments (Example 30) and their desensitization to specific, particularly violent expressions (Example 31) that go unanswered. In some cases, the intervention of individuals in these opposing groups counteracts aporophobic observations because they present other, more humanized perspectives and values. However, there is not always understanding shown towards these experiences. These conversations on social media

do not promote the objectives of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, mainly because they not only involve humiliation and contempt, but also propose solutions ranging from expulsion to physical violence and extermination. It does not seem that the users of this platform are aware of the impact they are causing with their videos and comments.

Example 30: "Deportation now."

Example 31: "Nonsense, shotgun in hand and a shot to the back of the head."

Among the limitations, it should be noted that the sample of videos on poverty was selected based on specific terms, which may have influenced the results, although efforts were made to ensure they corresponded to international indicators of poverty risk. It was also not possible to conduct an in-depth analysis of the sociodemographic variables of the comment authors, except for some hints regarding age, as pseudonyms are used. The texts, in general, do not provide specific user characteristics.

Future research should conduct a linguistic analysis of these statements to uncover the underlying emotions that promote them. Additionally, it is important to examine whether the characteristics observed in conversations about poverty are repeated in other topics and in different geopolitical contexts outside of the Spanish language, specifically regarding the episodic worldview through which TikTok users interpret the world.

Regardless, the presented results recommend including vulnerable groups in TikTok's Community Guidelines and exercising more thorough supervision over threatening and violent expressions. It is not only a matter of TikTok's inability to prevent hate speech (O'Connor, 2021), but also the responsibility of video creators and comment participants to take action against it. While including vulnerable groups in TikTok's guidelines does not guarantee compliance, it can establish governance mechanisms that structure participation in the community, facilitate cooperation, and prevent abuse (Grimmelmann, 2015). It can also contribute to a more excellent perception of incivility among users (Kenski *et al.*, 2020), encouraging online interventions to reduce and challenge these expressions of hate.

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