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REVIEW

Disinformation in presidential campaigns on TikTok: the case of the 2024 presidential elections in Mexico

Desinformación en campañas presidenciales en TikTok: el caso de las elecciones presidenciales en México en 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the misinformation spread on TikTok during the 2024 Mexican presidential campaign, with an emphasis on its possible influence on electoral behavior. The research is based on the context of the growing use of social media as a space for political communication, where TikTok has established itself as a key platform due to its capacity for virality and its reach among young audiences. The most relevant hoaxes debunked by the fact-checking sites Animal Político and Verificado between March and June 2024 are examined, categorizing their textual and visual narratives, as well as their discursive resources and manipulation strategies. The methodology combines content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and semiotic analysis, along with interviews with fact-checkers and specialists in political communication. The areas analyzed include political gender violence, the delegitimization of political actors, the use of deepfakes, and strategies to reconfigure the political agenda. This work seeks to contribute to the understanding of how false content can influence voting intentions, the perception of candidates, and the civic engagement of citizens, particularly young voters. The results aim to contribute to the academic debate on the challenges facing democracy in the digital age and the need to strengthen verification practices and media literacy.

Keywords: Disinformation; Tiktok; Election Campaign; Electoral Behavior; Social Media.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio analiza la desinformación difundida en TikTok durante la campaña presidencial de México en 2024, con énfasis en su posible influencia sobre el comportamiento electoral. La investigación parte del contexto de creciente uso de redes sociales como espacios de comunicación política, donde TikTok se ha consolidado como una plataforma clave por su capacidad de viralización y su alcance entre públicos jóvenes. Se examinan los bulos más relevantes desmentidos por los sitios de fact-checking Animal Político y Verificado entre marzo y junio de 2024, categorizando sus narrativas textuales y visuales, así como sus recursos discursivos y estrategias de manipulación. La metodología combina análisis de contenido, análisis crítico del discurso y análisis semiótico, junto con entrevistas a verificadores y especialistas en comunicación política. Entre los ejes analizados se incluyen la violencia política de género, la deslegitimación de actores políticos, el uso de deepfakes y las estrategias para reconfigurar la agenda política. Este trabajo busca aportar a la comprensión de cómo los contenidos falsos pueden incidir en la intención de voto, la percepción de candidatos y el compromiso cívico de la ciudadanía, particularmente de los jóvenes votantes. Los resultados pretenden contribuir al debate académico sobre los retos que enfrenta la democracia en la era digital y la necesidad de fortalecer prácticas de verificación y alfabetización mediática.

Palabras clave: Desinformación; Tiktok; Campaña Electoral; Comportamiento Electoral; Redes Sociales.

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INTRODUCTION

Weeks before the June 2, 2024, presidential elections in Mexico, Animal Político's fact-checking section, El Sabueso, warned of an increase in hoaxes on social media during the presidential campaign, which began in March of that year.

Meanwhile, the web platform Maldita.es, in its Maldito Bulo section, debunked one of the most viral pieces of content on TikTok during the election campaign, which focused on the alleged satanic tattoos of the then Morena candidate, Claudia Sheinbaum. The politician was also the victim of a deepfake video that falsely showed her promoting a pyramid scheme.

The context has changed. Social media is playing an increasingly important role in the dissemination of political content. Why? To what extent do globalization and new technologies affect modern democratic life? And if so, it is worth asking whether the emergence of the internet and the massification of social media have made audiences more apathetic or proactive around political processes.

What is interesting here is that social media, in addition to being platforms for interacting and consuming content, have contributed to users' ability to become active and productive audiences.[1]

According to Guerrero:[2] "This is a new type of media consumer—or rather, multimedia consumer—who represents the vanguard of urban and modern audiences, for whom the internet and social media are largely part of the environment in which they live. For authors such as Beck,[3] the impact of the internet on everyday life means that for individuals—especially for the most frequent users—the boundaries between politics, cultural values, and identity processes become blurred."

If in 2016, during the US elections, the protagonists of the digital political ecosystem were the social networks Facebook and Twitter (now X), in 2024, the Chinese social network TikTok has gained weight as the primary Internet medium for generating political communication during presidential campaigns. Mexico has not been immune to this trend. According to the newspaper Milenio,[4] the 2024 elections marked a milestone in the media exposure of presidential candidates on TikTok.

An example of this is that the exposure of Claudia Sheinbaum, Xóchitl Gálvez, and Jorge Álvarez Máynez registered more than 12 million hours between March 1 and May 29, 2024.[4]

Why is TikTok the new trendy social network for posting about politics? What makes it so addictive? The answer lies in the very design of the app, created in 2016, which is characterized by a constant flow of content, short videos, and personalized algorithms.

TikTok's virality is also a double-edged sword, allowing hoaxes and misleading content to circulate among large audiences. Given this scenario, coexisting with misinformation becomes challenging, to say the least. The results of this work may alert scholars of political communication and political science to the influence of hoaxes and misinformation on the beliefs and behavior of the electorate, especially young voters, who are the ones who most use and consume TikTok content.

The objective of this study is to systematize theoretical contributions on disinformation and political communication on social media to understand how hoaxes circulating on TikTok during election campaigns affect voter perception.

DEVELOPMENT

Political communication as a discipline for studying disinformation in electoral processes. Origin and evolution

Political communication as a field of study began to be understood in the second half of the 20th century, with studies on how the media influence public opinion and modern democracies. Although this is an old practice of human beings, as politics and communication have always gone hand in hand, with the development of research on the subject since 1950, political communication has evolved, integrating contributions from various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and communication, thus allowing for a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of political processes.

Political communication serves as a channel for transmitting messages between the rulers and the ruled, whose objective is to perpetuate political power through "discourses" or "symbols" that are established in the public sphere.[5]

In contrast, Gerstlé conceives of political communication as a multidimensional object of study. However, the author notes that in practice, an "instrumental and reductionist conception" has prevailed, focusing mainly on the influence of rulers on public opinion.[6]

To overcome these limitations, it is necessary to approach political communication from its main dimensions, which allows for the analysis of the interactions that occur between the political system, society, and the media.

The pragmatic dimension refers to the concrete practices of political communication and how the sender and receiver of the message relate to each other. More than the content itself, what matters is the way in which this interaction takes place.[6] In Gerstlé's words, "here it is proposed that political communication is used to interact in various ways, such as persuading, convincing, seducing, informing, ordering, negotiating, and inviting". From this perspective, communication can be oriented toward cooperation, but also toward conflict and manipulation, which connects with classical views of politics as a space of harmony or strategy.

Gerstlé[6] argues that the symbolic dimension is related to the power of language and signs within political life. It is not just about words, but about meanings that influence how people understand reality, identify themselves, or confront each other. Finally, the structural dimension refers to the channels and networks that allow political communication to circulate. This includes parliaments, parties, the media, but also more everyday interactions between social groups, and finally, social networks.

All three dimensions are relevant to this research. The symbolic and pragmatic dimensions allow us to understand how disinformation in election campaigns operates both at the level of meaning, through narratives, images, and representations that shape perceptions, and in the concrete practices of interaction through perceptions. Meanwhile, the structural dimension relates to the channel through which political content circulates; in this case, we are interested in social media.

In summary, political communication is a dynamic and multidimensional process that connects rulers and citizens and directly influences how people perceive and participate in political life. While it deals with the transmission of messages, it is also linked to communication channels. For this research, it is key because it explains how electoral disinformation affects people's perceptions

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and biases, relying on the words, images, and digital platforms that mediate the relationship between politics and society.

Election campaigns, their evolution

Over the years, electoral campaigns have adapted to social changes and technological advances, which have modified how candidates and citizens interact. Thus, rather than a static phenomenon, political campaigns reflect transformations in the way political messages are transmitted and contested.

Since Barack Obama's campaign in the United States in 2008, political communication in election campaigns has been changed by the use of new technologies. His campaign not only expanded the political arena to the Internet, but also created MyBO, the first social network around a political proposal, a strategy that President Donald Trump later continued with his Truth Social platform in 2024.

This innovation allowed Obama's campaign to mobilize voters in an unprecedented way, as well as to build their loyalty and sense of belonging, turning them into avid campaign volunteers, and to run a highly efficient fundraising operation.[7] Without a doubt, this campaign marked a turning point in the way political communication is conceived in the digital environment. Since then, social media has ceased to be merely a complementary tool and has become a central space for interaction between candidates and citizens. However, have election campaigns always followed the same trend? Authors Díaz et al.[8] and Díaz Jiménez[9] classify them into two types according to technological and social changes: modern and postmodern campaigns. The former was the result of the emergence of television, a medium that became the main channel for political socialization and communication with citizens. This type of campaign was characterized by "the replacement of party logic with media logic," requiring greater personalization and adaptation to television formats.[9]

Finally, postmodern campaigns are distinguished by the combination of traditional media and Internet platforms, mainly. Campaigns no longer focus solely on "party labels and ideologies, and focus on the personalized image of the candidates," which seeks to connect with the electorate not only through each candidate's usual programs, but also through emotional, symbolic, and narrative aspects that humanize the candidate and bring them closer to the public.[8]

In the case of Mexico, the transition to postmodern campaigns has been interpreted differently by various authors. For Esquivel et al.[10], the year 2000 marks the beginning of this stage, with the introduction of innovations that began to displace traditional models of political communication. However, Díaz et al.[8] consider that it was in the 2012 elections that these transformations reached their full development, with the intensive use of political marketing strategies, professional consultants, public opinion polls, and, above all, the incorporation of the Internet and social networks as fundamental axes in the electoral competition.

Díaz Jiménez[9] adds another idea to the debate on postmodern campaigns in Mexico, as the author considers that it is not possible to define them as postmodern in their entirety. The use of the Internet and social media, far from replacing traditional methods of mobilization, has served as a complement to them, with practices such as patronage and direct contact with voters remaining in place. As a result, current campaigns are configured as "hybrid processes," where intensive political marketing, consulting, and media strategies coexist with traditional dynamics specific to the Mexican political system.

However, although the conditions are in place for greater connection between the electorate and political leaders or candidates, the growing use of social media in campaigns has also opened the door to disinformation dynamics, which influence the way citizens perceive politics and engage with it.

In short, postmodern campaigns are characterized by the convergence of traditional and digital media, the prominence of the candidate's image over party ideology, and the growing importance of emotional and narrative factors in the construction of the political message. This transition, as shown by the cases of the United States and Mexico, has not entirely replaced traditional dynamics, but has instead created hybrid scenarios in which political marketing, professional consulting, clientelist mobilization, and digital interaction coexist.

Disinformation. Towards the conceptualization of the term

Before arriving at a definition of disinformation and hoaxes on the Internet, we must first start with the term "fake news," which was popularized mainly by former US President Donald Trump and quickly became internationalized.[11] Since then, although its use has become increasingly widespread, communication researchers and academics tend to avoid it today:

We refrain from using the term "fake news" for two reasons. First, it is unfortunately inadequate to describe the complex phenomenon of information pollution. The term has also begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organizations whose coverage they find disagreeable. In this way, it is becoming the mechanism by which the powerful can attack, restrict, undermine, and circumvent the free press.[12]

In this report, the authors differentiated between the term's misinformation (erroneous information), disinformation (manipulation of content), and malinformation (cyberbullying, hate speech, leaks that hurt other people).

The Royal Spanish Academy itself recommends using the term "bulo," understood as false news published with a specific objective. That said, although the term "fake news" is widely used, according to Magallón-Rosa[13], it is "a term partially avoided by academics and researchers". In this regard, several authors[14,15,16,17,18] prefer to use the term "misinformation" to take a holistic view of the dissemination of incorrect or unverified information that is not necessarily intended to deceive the target audience deliberately.

For the reasons outlined above—which reflect the evolution of this terminology—we believe that the term disinformation is appropriate for this research, as it encompasses a more complex and comprehensive phenomenon that includes all types of false, misleading, and incorrect information that has been created, presented, and promoted with the intention of causing public harm or obtaining some benefit.[19]

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So, what are hoaxes? According to Molina et al.[20], they are the intentional production and transmission of disinformation through online social platforms, broadcast media, or traditional print media. This can be done for economic reasons, tribalism, and to reinforce our prejudices, to attempt to change public opinion covertly, or to divide.[21]

That said, Molina et al.[20] propose four moments/processes, the development of which explains the consolidation of the new disinformation scenario: the role of social movements and activism in the early 2010s (Arab Spring, 15-M, or Occupy Wall Street); 2016 as the year of political polarization; disinformation related to the pandemic, its information tsunami, and the globalization of certain narratives (from 2020 to the present); and the hybridization of propaganda and disinformation that has begun to consolidate after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In short, disinformation is understood as a broader phenomenon that is not limited to fabricated news. However, it encompasses all false, manipulated, or misleading information that circulates with the aim of confusing, polarizing, or benefiting certain actors. Its influence lies in the fact that it appeals to emotions such as fear or anger and, in doing so, has a collective impact, especially in electoral contexts where it can damage the reputation of candidates, affect the level playing field, and weaken confidence in the political and media system.

To systematize these practices, Wardle[21] proposes one of the most influential classifications, which distinguishes disinformation into seven types.

- Satire or parody. Content with no explicit intention to cause harm, but with the potential to mislead.
- False connection. Discrepancy between headlines, images, or captions and the actual content. It is associated with *clickbait*, which generates short-term traffic on platforms, but, according to Wardle[21], its main purpose is to erode trust in the media in general.
- Misleading content. Partial or biased use of information to frame an issue or person. Includes reworded headlines, quotes taken out of context, or manipulated statistics, which makes it difficult to detect.
- False context. Dissemination of authentic content accompanied by false contextual information or information taken out of its original context.
- Impostor content. Impersonation of legitimate sources using logos, names, or recognized identities to lend credibility.
- Manipulated content. Alteration of authentic material to deceive.
- Fabricated content. Creation of completely false material for the purpose of deception.

The above classification allows us to understand how each of these formats operates in the digital sphere. Beyond listing categories, the usefulness of this proposal lies in showing that disinformation takes many forms that adapt to the conditions of the media ecosystem and the beliefs and reasoning of audiences.

At the same time, the authors argue that this phenomenon involves three key actors:

- Agent: Who were the "agents" who created, produced, and distributed the example, and what was their motivation?
- Message: What type of message was it? What format did it take? What were its characteristics?
- Interpreter. When the message was received by someone, how did they interpret it? What action, if any, did they take?[12]

By analyzing the systematizations of the authors cited, we can understand that behind every piece of disinformation there are actors, motivations, and audiences who ultimately interpret the content. This approach is key to analyzing how disinformation operates in election campaigns, where digital platforms not only transmit information but also shape perceptions.

In this context, studies related to disinformation have resurrected a concept that helps us understand the influence of hoaxes or misleading content on audiences and how they perceive it. This is precisely where the concept of the echo chamber comes in, revived by Atilano Morales[22], who explains that it is a "situation in which people only hear opinions or beliefs similar to their own. In addition, the analogy of an 'echo chamber' is used because it exemplifies a closed system that reinforces these beliefs, where other types of ideas can't permeate".

Disinformation on TikTok

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown accelerated multiple technological processes and transformed the dynamics of social media use. A paradigmatic case was that of TikTok, which, although already used in China mainly for the dissemination of challenges, rapidly expanded in the Western world as a space for socialization.[23,24,25] Initially, it also became popular thanks to viral challenges, but it soon diversified its content and even became a space where news and information related to the pandemic itself circulated.

To study misinformation on TikTok, it is necessary to note that, according to Ballesteros[26], the Chinese company is designed to be highly immersive and addictive, and the platform can be considered a second-generation social network, unlike first-generation ones such as Facebook or Twitter. However, what is the main difference between the two conceptualizations?

According to Gerbaudo[27], the main difference is the way in which users are exposed to content. While first-generation networks were organized around networked audiences built through explicit connections—such as friends and followers—TikTok introduces the logic of grouped audiences, meaning that the users' own decisions do not segment audiences, but by the metrics themselves, such as viewing time, *likes,* reach, or *hashtags,* which generates "statistical neighborhoodsof shared interests.

Called *"TikTokification*," this interaction shows that belonging to audiences is no longer defined by interpersonal interaction, but rather by previous behaviors and consumer affinities. The result is a social experience that is increasingly perceived as depersonalized,

opaque, and fragmented.

So, what is the company doing to combat false content? When consulting TikTok's Guide to Harmful Disinformation[28], we find that the social network prohibits "harmful misinformation about health, elections, climate change, etc.". "When content violates these rules, we remove it or prevent it from appearing in the 'For You' feed, as outlined in our policies [...]. We take action against misinformation regardless of its purpose. Our policies apply to both intentional 'misinformation' and harmful misinformation that has not been shared with the intent to deceive people".

TikTok also acknowledges the potential increase in hoaxes during certain events and, in the case of elections, states that before election processes, it works with "experts or local authorities to launch search banners and polling places in the app with information on when, where, and how to vote".[28]

In its 2024 Transparency Report, the company reaffirmed its commitment to continue combating misinformation and reported that it had removed "3 001 accounts identified as guilty of influencing the political discourse of their target audience in relation to the elections".[29]

Although TikTok maintains in its official policies that it prohibits harmful misinformation, other research shows that these measures are insufficient in practice. As documented by Tucker[30], a study by NewsGuard showed that the platform's search engine "constantly feeds millions of young people with misinformation about health, including potentially dangerous claims". The report refers to TikTok prioritizing content on abortion based on unverified arguments, such as consuming plants to induce an abortion.

On the other hand, in terms of politics, a notable study on TikTok by Ibrahim et al.[31] "*TikTok's recommendations skewed towards Republican content during the 2024 U.S. presidential race"*, in which more than 300 independent algorithmic audit experiments were conducted using "dummy" accounts created in the states of Texas, New York, and Georgia to analyze the behavior of political biases during the 2024 elections.

For the researchers, the results provided "insight into the inner workings of TikTok's recommendation algorithm during a critical election period, raising fundamental questions about the platform's neutrality", as accounts configured with Republican content received more than 10 percent of recommendations related to their party compared to accounts that posted content in support of Democrats.

Similarly, an study[32] show that TikTok's algorithm reinforces echo chambers or selective exposure. In their study on algorithmic amplification through automated accounts, they programmed profiles with specific interests and exposed them to the For You feed. The main finding was that the algorithm quickly amplified the initial topics of interest, in many cases from the first 200 videos. In addition, they identified a negative correlation between this amplification and thematic diversity, indicating that the more like-minded recommendations are amplified, the less new content appears.

In other words, the more recommendations aligned with user preferences are intensified, the fewer new topics appear. Examples such as the spread of false advice on mental health or bias in political recommendations during the 2024 elections in the United States reflect that the viralization of misleading content often exceeds that of verified information.

Together, they create an information environment that erodes trust in the media and democratic institutions, amplifies polarization, and weakens public deliberation. Post-truth appeals directly to the convictions of its recipients, promoting the dissemination of messages that, in a digital environment characterized by a multiplicity of channels and confusion between senders and receivers, end up fabricating alternative truths.[33]

Dual Process Theory of Cognition

To contextualize the study, it is necessary to define what we mean by perceptions, a term we have been mentioning throughout the chapter. The term itself is subjective and is understood as an individual's feeling or knowledge about something material or spiritual.

To understand how perceptions are influenced by disinformation, it is helpful to rely on theoretical frameworks that explain how people process the information they receive. In this sense, the Dual Process Theory of Cognition will help us demonstrate how individuals interpret the message.

According to the theory systematized and integrated by Smith et al.[34] there are two modes of dual processing—associative and rule-based—which are based on two underlying memory systems. The associative mode is known as schematic memory and works quickly, triggering automatic responses.

In contrast, the second mode, also known as the analytical processing system, uses symbolically represented knowledge and is more conscious and laborious.[35] Studies linking it to disinformation suggest that activating this analytical system (System 2) allows us to view social media content more carefully and critically, as thinking is deliberate and rational, thus counteracting the influence of System 1's affective and emotional processing.

When studying disinformation as a challenge for election campaigns, this theory takes on special relevance because it allows us to understand why social media users often accept or share false content. When the fast system predominates, emotions guide the interpretation of messages, and the capacity for scrutiny is reduced, facilitating the spread of hoaxes and misleading narratives. On the other hand, when the analytical system is activated, people tend to question sources, compare data, and evaluate the veracity of information more carefully.

However, let us look at TikTok's algorithm. We see that its design exploits the natural tendencies of the system linked to fast and emotional processing through recommendations that prioritize emotionally charged and viral content. In turn, this content reinforces users' cognitive biases, creating a feedback loop that amplifies misinformation. This creates an environment where quick, intuitive

thinking is constantly encouraged, while analytical and critical thinking is systematically discouraged by the platform's design.

In addition to its algorithm, TikTok's own architecture—based on ultra-short videos, viral sounds, and features such as duets and stitches—encourages the extreme simplification of complex messages and the decontextualization of statements or images, facilitating the creation and spread of hoaxes.

Various studies[3,36,37,38,39] agree that emotions, whether positive or negative, tend to favor heuristic information processing. In other words, they use cognitive resources and reduce the ability to devote greater effort to analytical tasks, which increases the likelihood of accepting information without critical examination and being guided by intuition.

This is based on Ellis' Resource Allocation Model, which is classified within dual processing models and helps us explore users' relationships with misinformation on social media.

However, a study[40] identified that negative beliefs about the political system amplified emotional responses to both true and false news, increasing perceptions of credibility, which in turn led to greater attributions of accuracy and a greater willingness to share news, regardless of its veracity. They also noted that the inclination to share hoaxes could not be fully explained by emotional reactions and perceptions of credibility, but also by factors such as partisan identification or institutional distrust.[41]

Finally, the Dual Process Theory of Cognition helps us understand why, as users, we sometimes believe and share false information without questioning it. Digital platforms, as we analyzed with TikTok, are not neutral; they are designed to capture our attention through emotional and viral content, which mainly activates our fast and intuitive thinking system.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis carried out shows that TikTok, rather than being a neutral space, functioned as a stage where multiple narratives circulated during the 2024 presidential campaign in Mexico. Some of these narratives were linked to disinformation, which raises the need to reflect on how this content affects the perception of the electorate, especially young voters who use the platform most frequently.

The findings show that the hoaxes identified did not operate in isolation, but through discursive and visual strategies that appeal to emotions. This coincides with the logic of TikTok: an environment characterized by immediacy, virality, and personalized algorithms. From this perspective, it is helpful to refer to Dual Process Theory, as it explains why users tend to accept and share misleading information when rapid and affective processing predominates over analytical processing.

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Daniella Pérez Muñoa.
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