

## Tiktok as a new paradigm for information in the Ukrainian War. A study from the West of the initial coverage of the conflict through this platform

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**Abstract.** Since social networks emerged as sources of information from the first moment when Russia decided to invade Ukraine in February 2022, this research aims to analyze, in an exploratory way, the type of profiles that initially spread the Ukrainian war through TikTok, a trending social network based on entertainment with a narrative characterized by satire, challenges, and viral dances. For this purpose, a qualitative analysis of the publications made on this social network with the hashtags #Ukraine and #Ukraine is used taking into account that both civilians and journalists or military made use of the platform. The results show that influencers' profiles are the ones that publish more information and testimonial content and have a greater impact than the media themselves.

**Keywords:** TikTok; Ukrainian War; Journalism; Digital Communication; Information

[es] Tiktok como nuevo paradigma para la información sobre la guerra de Ucrania. Un estudio desde Occidente sobre la cobertura inicial del conflicto a través de esta plataforma.

**Resumen.** En virtud de que las redes sociales se perfilaron como fuentes de información desde el primer momento en que Rusi tomó la decisión de invadir Ucrania en febrero de 2022, la presente investigación pretende analizar, de forma exploratoria el tipo de perfiles que difundieron en una primera instancia la guerra ucraniana a través de TikTok, una red social trending basada en el entretenimiento con una narrativa caracterizada por la sátira, los retos y los bailes virales. Para ello, se utiliza un análisis cualitativo de las publicaciones realizadas en esta red social con los hashtags #Ucrania y #Ukraine teniendo en cuenta que tanto civiles como periodistas o militares hicieron uso de la plataforma. Los resultados muestran que los perfiles de los influencers son los que publican más contenido informativo y testimonial y tienen un mayor impacto que los propios medios de comunicación.

**Palabras clave:** TikTok; Guerra de Ucrania; Periodismo; Comunicación Digital; Información

**Summary:** 1. Introducción 2. New platforms for new audiences: The case of TikTok 3. TikTok's impact on the media 4. Methodology 5. Results 6. Discussion 7. Conclusions 8. References

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### 1. Introduction

The media ecosystem is constantly changing and evolving because of the innovations brought about by digital technologies (Pavlik, 2019). Among the changes driven by digitization is the incorporation of social networks into the media's normal routines to reach out to the younger population (Pérez-Escoda & Pedrero, 2021). Constant updating and immediate transmission are the main assets of these platforms that have transformed journalistic work today, where information flows bidirectionally between journalists

and citizens (Castillo, 2021). This has meant a whole adaptation process, not only for the search and verification of news by information professionals but also when it comes to posting their content on social networks and thus reaching new audiences (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey & López-García, 2020).

At the same time, a significant change has been taking place in the relationships between producers and receivers of content, in such a way that it is possible to find audiences with roles as producers of information, especially when social networks are involved (Anguí-Sánchez, Cabezuolo-Lorenzo &

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Sotelo-González, 2019; Cardoso, 2014). All of this means the loss of the monopoly of information that has traditionally been held by media exclusively (Zago, 2016).

Among the news professionals that have been affected by these changes are war correspondents, who travel to cover what is happening on the battlefield in harsh conditions where they put their own lives at risk; a job that has not been exempt from the economic crisis that has affected the communication field (Sánchez, 2019). History has proved the influence of the media in war conflicts from an informative and propagandistic point of view (Wolfsfeld, 2018). With the arrival of the digital age, important changes have taken place in political communication and in how the media report on this type of confrontation.

This is largely due to the irruption of citizens who, taking advantage of social networks, have begun to tell the world what is happening in the conflicts they are experiencing firsthand, in many cases in areas that cannot be reached by journalists reporting on the war (Sacco & Bossio, 2015). Anyone with internet access can create content and share it, reaching thousands of people around the world in an instant, breaking the monopoly of the media in the coverage of war conflicts (Moreno, 2017). This active role of the public facilitated by digital communication platforms is directly related to the so-called “citizen journalism” (Raza et al., 2021). In this regard, it is getting more and more usual to find images in the media that have been captured by private individuals rather than journalists on the scene, making use of this new informative role of the citizen (Christensen & Khalil, 2021).

Examples of the importance of social networks for monitoring international conflicts and of their use as a tool for activism and social mobilization can be mentioned. This is the case of the Arab Spring in 2011, where Facebook and Twitter played an important role (Howard & Hussain, 2011); The Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2018); the Syrian war (Herrero-Jiménez, Carratalá & Berganza, 2018); or the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Alonso & Sidorenko, 2022). However, while the channels through which citizens can access the news have increased, disinformation has also increased (Buchanan, 2021; Hajli et al., 2021). Saturation in the face of the large amount of information collected on social networks and the danger of fake news is the main problem presented by these platforms (Herrero & González, 2022). This poses a challenge when covering and reporting on armed conflicts to identify reliable content and discard the “garbage information”—as Gómez (2013) names fabricated, inaccurate or falsified content circulating on the Web—.

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are already familiar platforms for journalists, recently joined by TikTok as a booming social network. Its rapid expansion, mainly among generation Z or *centennials* (Martín & Micalotto, 2021), has opened a new way for communication professionals to convey their

news content in a more attractive way (Sidorenko, Herranz & Cantero, 2020); but at the same time, this has posed a challenge for communicators to be able to adapt their content to this new medium.

Social media are increasingly becoming the main source of news for the public. In the case of international conflicts, these tools become even more important, as they accelerate the flow of information (Christensen & Khalil, 2021; Evans, 2016). This is precisely what has happened following the military offensive launched by Russia in Ukraine in the early hours of February 24, 2022, with coverage that has been transferred to social networks where official information coexists with that of citizens who retransmit in real time the Russian attacks in various parts of the country (Alonso & Sidorenko, 2022; Olivares, Román & Méndez, 2022). In this sense, it is necessary to reflect on how a social platform in full growth, such as TikTok, is transforming the practice of journalism and how this type of platform is acquiring a new dimension that goes beyond the usual leisure and leisure entertainment in this type of network.

## 2. New platforms for new audiences: The case of TikTok

TikTok’s origins date back to 2016, with the launch in China of a mobile application called Douyin by the company Byte Dance. A year later, the company acquired [Musica.ly](https://www.music.ly/), -a platform specializing in the creation of short videos and live broadcasts that allowed for the inclusion of effects and sounds- and in 2018, TikTok began its expansion (Espinoza-Beltrán et al., 2021). COVID-19 and mandatory confinement contributed greatly to the rapid growth of TikTok (Suárez-Álvarez; García-Jiménez, 2021). So much so that, in the last few years, it has become one of the most popular social networks, reaching, in January 2023, 1.051 billion active users worldwide (Statista, 2023), with teenagers and young adults standing out among them (Ankuas-Kaekat, Peralta-Herrera & Suquilanda, 2021).

One of the keys to its expansion is the ease of use of the application, as it allows you to create, edit and share short video content (between 15 seconds and 1 minute) directly from your Smartphone and, at the same time interact with other users (Conde, 2021, Yang, Zhao & Ma, 2019). But if there is something TikTok is known for is its Artificial Intelligence algorithm (AI), which considers the user’s preferences based on views, comments, and “likes”, to offer personalized recommendations. The format of the application facilitates a quick consumption of the contents hosted in it since the videos begin to play from the moment you access the app and you can proceed by simply sliding the screen upward (Anderson, 2020).

Trends that include challenges are this social network’s main attraction, and much of the popularity that TikTok has acquired today is based on them. The *videoselfies*, the interpretation of musical fragments,

and the performance of choreographies are the basis of the “challenges” that spread rapidly during the confinement in 2020 as a formula of distraction to cope with the social isolation (Vintimilla-León & Torres-Toukoumidis, 2020). As Ahlse, Nilson, and Sandström (2020) maintain, they can arise spontaneously among users (organic challenges) or they can be sponsored by a brand, which would be related to digital marketing and the viralization of campaigns (Kwon, 2019; Wang et al., 2021). In the rapid expansion of these challenges, the use of hashtags, -an aspect shared with other social networks that allow users to search for content, follow other accounts, and share information on this or other platforms- is a determining factor (Izotova, Polishchuk & Taranik-Tkachuk, 2021). It is also a way to strategically position themselves and attract other users (Krutrök, 2021), although in the case of TikTok they acquire a special relevance when these challenges achieve a greater reach and become viral.

Apart from the entertainment and musical content created by *TikTokers*, it is also possible to find in this social network, publications posted by other types of creators, in this case for information purposes. In fact, nowadays, far from being limited to content based on quick entertainment, the changes introduced on the platform that allows the publication of longer videos and live broadcasts make TikTok an attractive tool for the media as well (Newman, 2022). In this sense, once again the pandemic produced by COVID-19 has been a determining factor in observing a change that has led institutions and mass media to seek new formulas to offer reliable health information to combat disinformation (Afrieda, Azizah & Susanti, 2021; Becerra-Chauca & Taype-Rondan, 2020; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2020; Sidorenko-Bautista, Alonso-López & Giacomelli, 2021). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also marked a turning point and has led to an increase in content on this topic on the platform, where civilians share videos of what is happening in real time (Rodríguez, 2022); an event that has also led to some media outlets joining TikTok for the first time (Newman, 2022).

### 3. TikTok's impact on the media

As mentioned in previous lines, TikTok has some very defined characteristics that differentiate it from other social networks. Precisely, the knowledge of the internal logic of this platform is decisive to position oneself within it (Feng, Chen & Wu, 2019). Different international media have been attracted by the possibilities of this tool and they have a profile where they publish content that has aroused research interest in recent years (Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero & López-García, 2022; Sidorenko, Herranz & Cantero, 2020; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey & Rodríguez-Vázquez, 2021). In this regard, different journalistic companies have even hired specialists capable of transferring information to users using the

logic of TikTok, with the aim of adapting news content effectively (Peña-Fernández, Larrondo-Ureta & Morales-i-Gras, 2022). However, the different particularities offered by this platform pose a challenge for the media and journalists to adapt their content to this medium. In this sense, different authors point out that some media are committed to being present on the platform and creating a community of followers, although this implies a use based on the mere incorporation of edited fragments of their own programming that do not respond to the logic of TikTok (Peña-Fernández, Larrondo-Ureta & Morales-i-Gras, 2022; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey & Rodríguez-Vázquez, 2021).

According to a Reuters Institute report in 2022, 49% of the top news publishers in 44 countries regularly publish content on TikTok (Newman, 2022); although the truth is that, at least for the time being, there is no widespread presence of media outlets generating news content on this social network (Peña-Fernández, Larrondo-Ureta & Morales-i-Gras, 2022). Even so, some media have gained certain popularity among TikTok users and accumulated thousands, and even millions, of followers in February 2023. This is the case of *The Daily Mail* (@daily-mail), with 4,4 million followers; *The Washington Post* (@washingtonpost) and *USA Today* (@usato-day), with 1,5 million each; *HuffPost* (@huffpost), with 144.000; *The Telegraph* (@thetelegraph), with 314.200; or *BBC* (@bbc), with 4 million followers, just to mention some examples.

These examples highlight the interest that TikTok has aroused in journalism and the media, which are gradually taking the leap toward this platform to avoid the progressive loss of young audiences (Larrondo-Ureta, Peña-Fernández & Agirrezkuena-Onaindia, 2020).

### 4. Methodology

TikTok has emerged as one of the main windows to make visible the events surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; its character as a trending social network, the ease and simplicity of its interface when it comes to recording content, and its vertical layout in accordance with the natural layout of today's smartphones, have made this happen.

Perhaps the most striking thing is that a very important flow of content comes from interlocutors “*in situ*” both on Ukraine and Russian territory, in addition to the testimonies and evidence from other neighboring borders, such as the Polish one, for example.

The main point of this research is to identify the types of profiles that have given visibility and have addressed the issue of the war in Ukraine through such a particular platform as TikTok. The following specific objectives have been set in this regard:

- O1. Delimit the characteristics and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of the contents indicated in this pro-

cess to determine the eventual level of outreach or popularity.

O2. Evidencing the eventual magnitude and diversity of types of profiles that can talk about this war conflict through this channel.

O3. Categorize the content viewed to determine whether it is of an informative, entertaining, uninformative, or other nature.

Some research questions that arise as a result are

RQ1. As TikTok is a platform with a strong centennial presence (in consumption and production), is there a possibility that the content about the war will eventually have a satirical character?

RQ2. As the community of users is such an important variable in this platform, is it possible that many contents about the war acquire a sensationalist (or uninformative) character in order to capture higher levels of engagement and therefore, greater exposure and reach?

RQ3. Do media outlets achieve high levels of visibility and prominence with their coverage of the war as individual users do on this platform?

To undertake the research, we carried out a qualitative analysis of publications made on this social network from February 24, 2022, when the military offensive begins, until March 7, 2022, when TikTok suspends its service in Russia due to the “fake news law” imposed by Putin after carrying out the invasion of Ukraine. The content review was done until March 15, 2022. The latter date is chosen as representative because in some cases people inside Russia were broadcasting content in English, with labels in the same language.

This is a study on how the war in Ukraine is portrayed in its early stages, based on the popular content at the time of the observation.

The criteria for the content search were based on the hashtags #Ucrania and #Ukraine. The search process was limited to the first 15 results for each of the tags in question, as it is an exploratory study of the behavior of the platform recommendation algorithm that could recommend an unmanageable amount of information. It should be noted that in the second week of March 2022, the hashtag #Ucrania exceeded 4 billion views and #Ukraine exceeded 29 billion.

According to TikTok’s algorithm, the most popular contents are those with high engagement records. In the internal search process on the platform, these contents will appear from the one with the highest engagement record to the one with the lowest (concerning the required topic) in decreasing order.

We have studied hashtags in these two languages (English and Spanish) because they are the most spoken in the western world -according to Berlitz (2020)- which is where this observation is made. This inevitably narrows the observation to the Western.

For each content, engagement indicators such as the number of followers of the profile that created it as well as the number of likes of the video itself have been taken into consideration. This information will be compiled in Table 1

The contents available in this search process are those that the social network’s algorithm determines to be the most interesting due to the high level of *engage-*

*ment* they report. This is a criterion applied by the platform for all content presentation processes. (TikTok, 2022b). Once the evidence was obtained, a classification was made by user typology and the narrative of their publications corresponding to the war in question.

It should be noted that the main limitation of this study is the “popular character” of the contents, which is not constant and in this case is due to the current sample, which could certainly have changed later. Hence, we have opted for a reduced sample, which will try to show the scenario described above.

No content from Russia or other Eastern nations was excluded at any time, as long as the content was indexed with hashtags in English or Spanish according to the above criteria. Of the rest, any other content was not taken into consideration in the sample.

Profiles have been classified as follows: private user not involved in the conflict (PU), media (M), influencer (IF), military in the front line (MF), military not involved in the conflict (MNC), person in Ukraine (UP), person in Russia (RP), various content account (VCA), Ukrainians outside Ukraine (UOU), fake account (FK).

All private profiles with more than 10,000 followers have been identified as influencers (Gil-Quintana, 2021) since due to the dynamics of the algorithm concerning the content, such a follower base is quite decisive in order to achieve a significant reach for any publication.

Contents have been classified as follows: informative (INF), entertaining (ENT), satire or mockery (SM), educational (EDU), misinformative (DIS), speculative (SP), opinion (OP), testimonial (TSM), propaganda (P).

Despite the importance of live broadcasts through this social network to cover various situations, not only in Ukraine itself as a result of the invasion, but also in Russia with the protests against it or the flow of displaced people across various borders, these have not been considered for the sample because through the established search methodology there is no way to access a record of this type of broadcasts.

The main narrative aspects that make up TikTok videos about the context in question have also been delimited: voice-over (VO), music (M), alternative texts (AT), stickers and GIFs (S&G), sequence of photographs (SP), native TikTok vertical video (VV) or horizontal video imported from another platform (HV).

As an additional limitation, it is worth noting that the small sample size is due to a hot observation process during the first days of the invasion. Despite the fact that, on the platform, the referential contents had scaled up very quickly, the censorship and cessation of the platform in Russia, for example, made it impossible to access some contents again.

## 5. Results

When searching for content on TikTok through *hashtags*, the results correspond to the videos with the

highest engagement index, i.e. more views, more likes, more comments, and more times shared, all together and on average.

Thus, established the criteria for data collection, as set out in Table 1, under the hashtag #Ucrania has

been recovered as the 15 most popular content until the second week of March 2022, coming from a variety of interlocutors ranging from influencers, media, and various content accounts.

**Table 1.** Typology of profiles and content on the Ukrainian war under the hashtag #Ucrania until March 15, 2022

No	User	Type of user	Followers	Type of content	Content likes	Narrative elements
1	@ac2alitiespanol	M	3,4 million	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/36m2LHX">https://bit.ly/36m2LHX</a>	2,4 million	VV, AT, M, VO
2	@alertaroja1	VCA	272.600	SPC / DIS <a href="https://bit.ly/3q6Jz7T">https://bit.ly/3q6Jz7T</a>	2,4 million	AT, VO, M
3	@vita_vita2020	IF	197.700	OP <a href="https://bit.ly/34FKqoy">https://bit.ly/34FKqoy</a>	2 million	VV, M
4	@vladk.ruso	IF	9,6 million	EDU / INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3q5zIPD">https://bit.ly/3q5zIPD</a>	1,8 million	VV, AT, M
5	@tory_laboratory	IF/UOU	274.100	TSM <a href="https://bit.ly/3w5cwF6">https://bit.ly/3w5cwF6</a>	1,8 million	VV, AT, M
6	@rebiuxis_tv	IF	259.300	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/36izi1B">https://bit.ly/36izi1B</a>	1,7 million	HV
7	@ana.s.t.7	IF	70.000	ENT <a href="https://bit.ly/3t9bm9z">https://bit.ly/3t9bm9z</a>	3,2 million	VV, M, AT
8	@nwyeli1	VCA	293.600	SPC <a href="https://bit.ly/35YfhNV">https://bit.ly/35YfhNV</a>	1,5 million	VV, M, AT
9	@ac2alitiespanol	M	3,4 million	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3I7TA7">https://bit.ly/3I7TA7</a>	1,5 million	VV, AT, M, VO
10	@paixao_exercito_06	VCA	160.900	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3Iczix2">https://bit.ly/3Iczix2</a>	1,5 million	HV, AT
11	@danielnoveloo	IF	477.500	EDU / INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3MMWxS7">https://bit.ly/3MMWxS7</a>	1,2 million	VV, AT, M
12	@xynub_Icb512	IF	107.800	SPC / DIS <a href="https://bit.ly/3i8Aas4">https://bit.ly/3i8Aas4</a>	1,1 million	VV, AT, M
13	@fantasma0.0	VCA	210.700	TSM <a href="https://bit.ly/3td6Xmm">https://bit.ly/3td6Xmm</a>	1,1 million	SP, HV, M
14	@extradeportivo	VCA	54.200	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3ia0i5Q">https://bit.ly/3ia0i5Q</a>	1 million	HV, AT, M
15	@novaxs	IF	4,4 million	SM <a href="https://bit.ly/3JeBnKu">https://bit.ly/3JeBnKu</a>	1 million	VV

Source: self-elaboration.

The evidence is repeated when searching under the hashtag #Ukraine, although there seems to be a greater breadth in the typology of profiles (Table 2) where

some influencers are creating content directly from inside Ukraine, and even from the battlefield, which allows us to refine the identification of their category.

**Table 2.** Typology of profiles and content on the Ukrainian war under the hashtag #UKraine until March 15, 2022

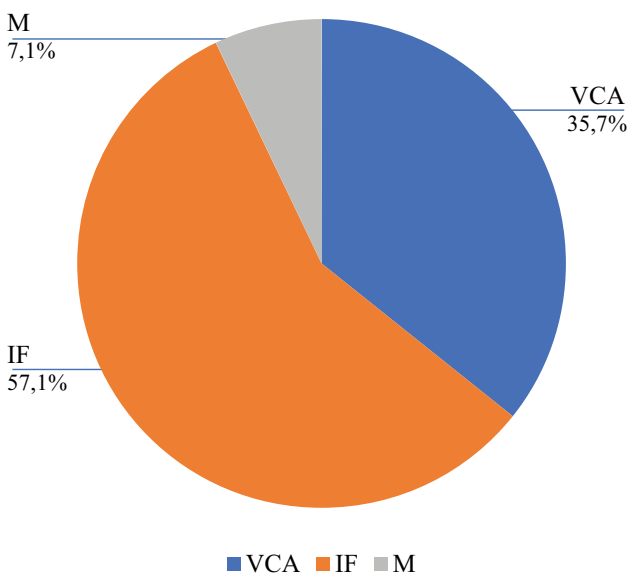
No	User	Type of user	Followers	Type of content	Content likes	Narrative elements
1	@martavasyuta	IF / UP	259.700	TSM / INF <a href="https://bit.ly/37kmmZm">https://bit.ly/37kmmZm</a>	9,3 million	VV, AT, M
2	@cheddygrace	IF	107.500	SPC <a href="https://bit.ly/3w5Ipxi">https://bit.ly/3w5Ipxi</a>	7,5 million	VV, AT, M
3	@dylanpage.ning	IF	2,5 million	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3Jpboji">https://bit.ly/3Jpboji</a>	6,2 million	VV, AT, M

No	User	Type of user	Followers	Type of content	Content likes	Narrative elements
4	@valerisssh	IF / UP	719.900	TSM / SM <a href="https://bit.ly/3MNbN1f">https://bit.ly/3MNbN1f</a>	5,7 million	VV, AT, M
5	@ukraine_.saveukraine	FK	308.200	TSM <a href="https://bit.ly/3Ji5ZL1">https://bit.ly/3Ji5ZL1</a>	4,8 million	HV, AT M
6	@martavasyuta	IF /UP	259.700	TSM / INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3CLNqfY">https://bit.ly/3CLNqfY</a>	4,7 million	HV, AT, M
7	@best_left_to_dee_profess	VCA	51.200	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3g0hgIn">https://bit.ly/3g0hgIn</a>	4,6 million	HV, AT
8	@lukalp1	IF	105.100	SP <a href="https://bit.ly/36fSmgL">https://bit.ly/36fSmgL</a>	4,1 million	VV, M
9	@skynews	M	932.700	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3MRJ8YQ">https://bit.ly/3MRJ8YQ</a>	3,8 million	VV, AT
10	@expose_news	VCA	273.700	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/36fSmgL">https://bit.ly/36fSmgL</a>	3,6 million	HV, M
11	@yutsyartis	IF / MF(*)	180.700	TSM <a href="https://bit.ly/3q1etyn">https://bit.ly/3q1etyn</a>	3,3 million	VV, M
12	@thetiktokdrummer	IF	10,6 million	ENT <a href="https://bit.ly/3Jd71YN">https://bit.ly/3Jd71YN</a>	3,4 million	VV, M
13	@saveukraine__	VCA	368.600	ENT_ <a href="https://bit.ly/3N0O3aa">https://bit.ly/3N0O3aa</a>	3,2 million	VV, M
14	@misstatiz	IF	113.600	INF <a href="https://bit.ly/3KJY61f">https://bit.ly/3KJY61f</a>	3 million	VV, M
15	@thedailyshow	M	3,5 million	SM <a href="https://bit.ly/3KFGAew">https://bit.ly/3KFGAew</a>	2,8 million	VV, VO

Source: self-elaboration

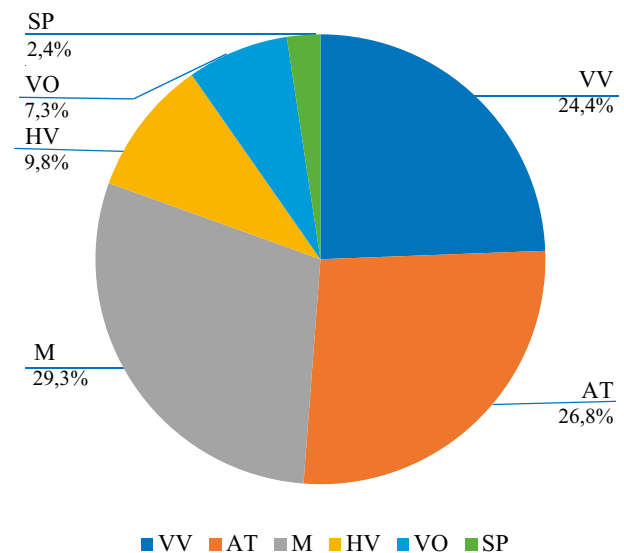
It can be seen from figures 1 and 3 that the profiles that are addressing the issue of the war in Ukraine most often fall into the category of influencers, followed by various content accounts. In the last place, and with a lot of differences, are the media, according to the established research criteria.

**Figure 1.** Predominant profile typology in videos about the Ukrainian war under the hashtag #Ucrania until March 15, 2022



Source: self-elaboration.

**Figure 2.** Predominant narrative elements in TikTok videos on the war in Ukraine under the hashtag #Ucrania until March 15, 2022



Source: self-elaboration.

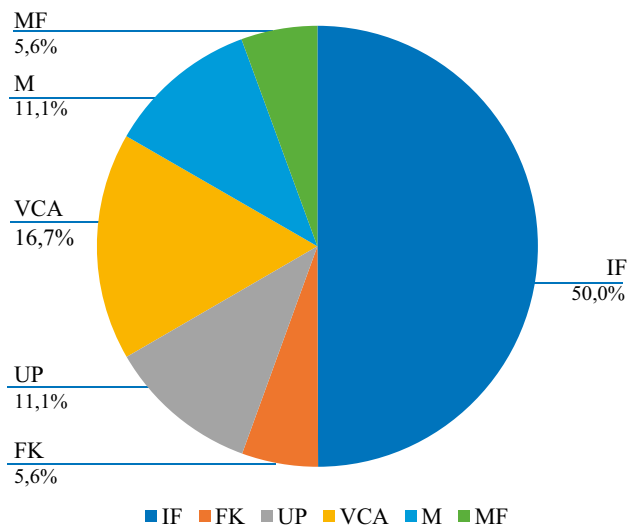
It is also evident from figures 2 and 4 that the most repeated narrative elements in the content found, are vertical video with additional text embedded in post-production and background music.

In summary, from the sample obtained in Tables 1 and 2, it is evident that particular profiles with high engagement rates and greater interest from the audi-

ence are the main interlocutors of the conflict through TikTok during the initial moments of the conflict. However, the contents with the hashtag in English (Table 2) have a notably higher reach or at least are susceptible to it by the community agglutinated in each of the actors that created content about it.

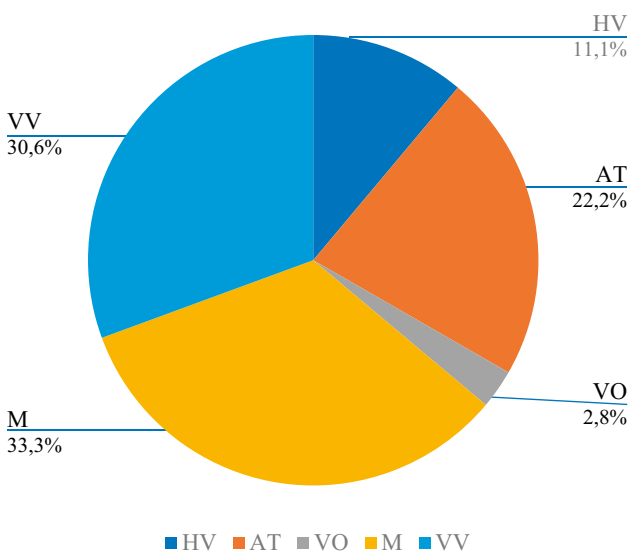
However, although at a much lower percentage, there are still cases of videos imported from other platforms in horizontal format, breaking with TikTok's predefined aesthetics.

**Figure 3.** Predominant profile typology in videos about the war in Ukraine under the hashtag #Ukraine until March 15, 2022



Source: self-elaboration.

**Figure 4.** Predominant narrative elements on TikTok videos on the war in Ukraine under the hashtag #Ukraine until March 15, 2022



Source: self-elaboration.

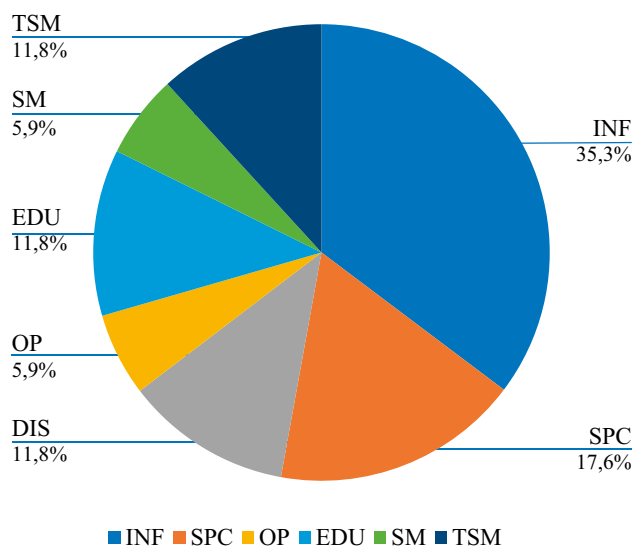
As for the type of content dealing with the war in Ukraine, it has been observed, as illustrated in figures 5 and 6, that those of an informative nature prevail.

The testimonies are recorded more often under the label in English than in Spanish

Also interesting, although representing a considerably smaller percentage overall between the two hashtags, is the popularity of speculative and even misinformative content.

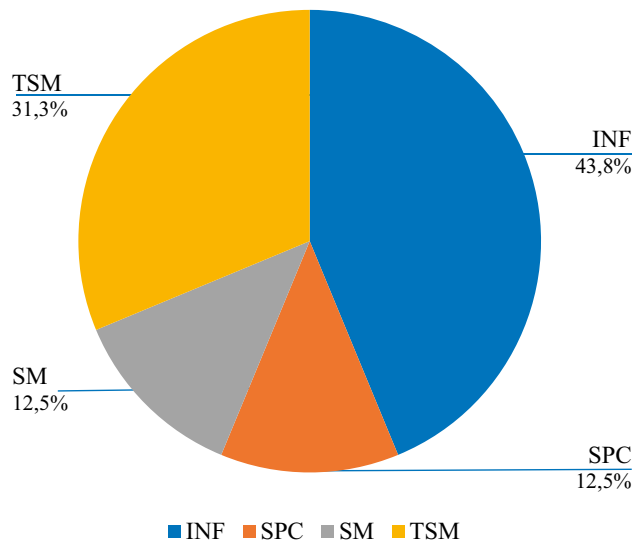
And although humorous or educational content is seeing a significant increase in the audiovisual production of various creators in TikTok, these categories are not the most developed with the specific theme of the war in question.

**Figure 5.** Typology of TikTok contents on the war in Ukraine under the hashtag #Ucrania until March 15, 2022



Source: self-elaboration.

**Figure 6.** Typology of TikTok contents on the Ukrainian war under the hashtag #Ukraine until March 15, 2022



Source: self-elaboration.

## 6. Discussion

Perhaps because it is a platform born from the foundations of [Music.ly](#), many have been surprised that the initial and ongoing coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was provided by TikTok. However, as highlighted above, it is a trendy platform that facilitates the publication of audiovisual content through a simple and practical interface. In other words, it avoids the dispersion of formats, focusing on the most important one currently in the field of social networks: video (Hutchinson, 2021; We are Social & Hootsuite, 2022).

In other social networks, users have expressed their bewilderment at seeing a video with explosions and military vehicles with a musical background added in post-production, while others have simply posted and shared TikTok content on other platforms, with the message “War on TikTok” or “War in TikTok times”. It is worth noting that music is an important variable in this platform to assign visibility to the content, so resorting to popular audio allows us to ensure a greater reach of the content.

However, as it happens in today’s Internet, there are cases in which users do not approach the subject in the most convenient way due to ignorance or omission. Specifically, in video 11 (Table 1) @daniel-noveloo omits several determining contextual elements, so its content can generate bias or confusion about the facts.

Thus, with regard to the aforementioned “TikToker” and despite the fact that RQ1 was based on the argument that, since TikTok is a social network mostly associated with millennials, there would be a greater flow of fatuous and frivolous content about the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its various consequences, the evidence obtained from Tables 1 and 2 yields a negative response.

On the contrary, as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6, the most popular contents on this topic on TikTok correspond to the informative and testimonial categories, constituting important audiovisual documents for the understanding of the different scenarios framing the tragedy, although not all contents in these categories are original, as some of them correspond to other broadcasters on other social networks and digital platforms. TikTok stands out for a lot of plagiarism and memetic content (videos 6, 7, 10, and 14 in Table 1).

In all these cases, it seems that the motivation is notoriety, reach, and engagement. However, although it generates rejection, especially by journalists and the media, many users consider these profiles as a source of information, regardless of whether it is properly contextualized or contrasted. This is supported by the “likes” and comments.

Regarding RQ2 -that the strength of TikTok lies in the community of users, so the contents try to be more spectacular, sensationalist, and even false-based on the data reflected in Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 5 and 6, the uninformative or speculative

contents obtained according to the sample represent a minimum percentage.

This is not to say that there are not a large number of publications that fall into these categories, but the trend reflected in this sample based on popularity criteria suggests that it is a smaller proportion. The community of users through comments often act as filters and verifiers and report back if they detect any anomaly or inaccuracy in the content. There are usually more comments on TikTok posts than on other social networks.

On the other hand, the evidence collected from Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 3, point out that the media have a lower impact on the informative work through TikTok, which response to RQ3. This does not mean that there is no growing and active journalism through this platform, in fact, previous studies such as Sidorenko, Herranz, and Cantero (2020), Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero and López-García (2022), Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey and López-García (2020) attest to this. However, these media are not among the most popular for the purposes of the specific search on Ukraine, although it is worth highlighting in Table 1 contents 1 and 9 that correspond to Ac2ality, a media that was born in TikTok and that has focused not only on developing its work with the specific narrative elements of this social network but has directed its work, especially, to those segments of users who do not consume information through conventional media, as is the case of “Generation Z”.

Most of them are individuals who approach and present the information with significant contextual deficiencies, as is the case of video 11 in Table 1, or 11 in Table 2, which makes it impossible to determine the category of the person taking the shots, as well as to understand the time and place where the video was taken.

However, it has also been journalists themselves, such as James Clayton of the BBC and Jasmin Dyer of the BBC (Clayton & Dyer, 2022) who have recognized the documentary work of the very young Ukrainian influencer Marta Vasyuta (videos 1 and 6 Table 2), who managed to position her content as very popular in TikTok’s internal search system, as well as a significant reach and exposure in the main feed of the social network.

Another similar case is number 4 (Table 2), which corresponds to a very young girl showing her day-to-day life in a bunker with her family. What is remarkable in this case is the way she approaches it, with humor and even a bit of satire, turning her testimony into a curious document, and at the same time very interesting and illustrative.

In this way, the research allowed revealing during its development that the prevailing content categories are of an informative and testimonial nature, which implies a considerable and radical departure from the platform’s iconic dances and performances. Likewise, in terms of narrative, the evidence in Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 2 and 4, indicate that vertical videos with alternative texts and music included in



post-production are the most characteristic publications in this process.

However, horizontal video posts from other social networks and digital platforms persist, although to a much lesser extent, although they tend to be largely associated with the type of profile that posts videos on any topic (those delineated as VCA in Tables 1 and 2).

Another important feature of TikTok is how it has become an important source of entertainment, so it was impossible not to think that, even if the situation in Ukraine is not complex and dramatic, there would be no content outside of mere information or testimony. Thus, it is worth mentioning numbers 12 and 15 in Table 2. In the first case, a very young boy pours paint in the colors of the Ukrainian flag on a drum kit and then plays it and gives a “wet performance”. In another case, the host of the popular TV show *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central) resorts to satire to address the issue. Both examples are evidence of the different narrative strategies that allow connecting with audiences on this platform.

## 7. Conclusions

The war between Russia and Ukraine has meant a turning point in the way in which those who are not there can access what is happening in the place where the events are taking place. Information reaches society through different channels, with social media being one of the main sources of information, abandoning the conventional media (López & Gómez, 2021). Moreover, in this case, it is the first armed conflict in Europe since TikTok emerged as a trending social network, after the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. At first, the social network’s narrative, based on challenges, dances, and parodies, might seem far from the possibility of publishing war-related content. But it hasn’t been the case.

As this research shows, many TikTok posts have been found in the hashtags #Ucrania and #Ukraine, with the most popular ones corresponding to profiles of influencers that address the conflict in Ukraine using the vertical video with an informative and testimonial purpose. However, elements such as the post-production of these contents with music or the inclusion of gifs, are not lost -which is surprising for the users when it comes to images of tanks or explosions- but it means maintaining, and even increasing engagement.

In this scenario, it has been proved that the media have a lower impact on TikTok than the users that

show the war scenes through their profiles. Actuality -a TikTok native Spanish medium with a remarkable following from Generation Z audiences, according to their statistics- would be an exception to this. Therefore, it can be said that we are witnessing a paradigm shift in which TikTok ceases to be a social network only for humor and viral dances, to become the window through which the war is retransmitted and through which users can obtain information about what is going on in Ukraine. The same happened with the social network Twitter in previous conflicts (Tenenboim, 2017; Siapera, Hunt & Lynn, 2015).

This opens new opportunities for journalism and the media; they can take advantage of the coverage of the war in Ukraine through TikTok to become a reference point for information on this social network, both on corporative profiles and those of the journalists themselves, whether they have been displaced to the conflict zone or not. As well as considering that the younger generations consume information through this channel and are the future audiences.

As limitations to the present research, it should be pointed out many publications found and the impossibility of accessing the live broadcasts record made on the Ukrainian conflict in the period studied. The other limitation already highlighted in the methodological section responds to the huge amount of content in the internal search, not always related to the topic but alluded to by the use of the hashtags studied (many people try to increase the reach of their publications using popular tags without being related to them), however, this research opens the door to future studies on the evolution of publications on the Ukrainian conflict in TikTok, and a specific study on how journalists and the media approach it.

This has not been correlated to western observation, but it would be worthwhile to study the content made by Ukrainian and Russian users in more depth. In this sense, the rise of the platform culture and the content creators enable to spread of content freely and reach a large number of people, even from false profiles, as TikTok reported related to Russian false TikTok accounts. It could be a limit because it is difficult to detect them but also a very interesting field of study.

It should be noted that this type of research is of great importance in a context where misinformation or lack of knowledge about certain events prevails. A report by TikTok (2022a) and an article in the *New York Times* (Hsu, 2023) specifically warn about a disinformation strategy directed from Russia to Europe about the war episode under review in the present study.

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