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REVIEW

Analysis of the aestheticization of presidential candidate Javier Milei on TikTok during the 2023 election campaign in Argentina

Análisis de la estetización del candidato presidencial Javier Milei en TikTok durante la campaña electoral de 2023 en Argentina

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ABSTRACT

This research describes the aestheticization of political communication by then-presidential candidate Javier Milei on the digital social network TikTok during the August–November period of the 2023 election campaign in Argentina. The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach from an aesthetic perspective to address the phenomenon. Through a comparative analysis of the aesthetic resources used in the content of the official account @javiermileii and the most influential support account, among the many linked to the candidate, @elpelucamilei, to understand how the aesthetic elements expressed in the audiovisual discourse contributed to the consolidation of his political image. Documentary literature review and unstructured interview techniques, as well as historical-logical, analytical-synthetic, comparative, and dialectical methods, complete the methodological structure of this study. The results reflect the strategic use of aestheticization and personalization in the communication of then-candidate Javier Milei, allowing him to effectively channel popular frustration and anger in an Argentina characterized by multiple crises. The constant break with the codes of the Argentine political establishment, young voters as the target audience, and the sensitive mobilization of his content are some of the characteristics that distinguished the libertarian, whose electoral victory joins those of Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, in a trend toward conservative and radical positions in the hemisphere that requires urgent and comprehensive analysis.

Keywords: Aestheticization; Political Communication; Tiktok; Argentina; Milei.

RESUMEN

La investigación presentada describe la estetización de la comunicación política del entonces candidato presidencial Javier Milei, en la red social digital TikTok, en el período agosto – noviembre de la campaña electoral de 2023 en Argentina. El estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo y de alcance descriptivo desde una perspectiva estética, para abordar el fenómeno. Mediante un análisis comparativo de los recursos estéticos utilizados en los contenidos de la cuenta oficial @javiermileii y la cuenta de apoyo de mayor alcance, entre las muchas vinculadas al candidato, @elpelucamilei, para comprender cómo los elementos de naturaleza estética expresados en el discurso audiovisual contribuyeron a la consolidación de su imagen política. Las técnicas de revisión bibliográfico documental y entrevista no estructurada, así como los métodos histórico-lógico, analítico-sintético, comparativo y dialéctico, completan la estructura metodológica de este estudio. Los resultados reflejan el uso estratégico de la estetización y la personalización en la comunicación del entonces candidato Javier Milei, permitiéndole canalizar eficazmente la frustración y el enojo popular en una Argentina caracterizada por la crisis múltiple. La ruptura constante con los códigos del establishment político argentino, los votantes jóvenes como público objetivo y la movilización sensible en sus contenidos son algunas de las características que distinguieron al libertario cuyo triunfo electoral se suma al del estadounidense Donald Trump y el brasileño Jair Bolsonaro, en una tendencia hacia las posturas conservadoras y radicales en el hemisferio cuya comprensión necesita de un análisis urgente e integral.

Palabras clave: Estetización; Comunicación Política; Tiktok; Argentina; Milei

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INTRODUCTION

On Sunday, December 10, 2023, economist Javier Gerardo Milei took office in the Pink House, the government palace of the Argentine Republic. According to official figures, 56 percent of the votes counted in the runoff election on November 19 of that year legitimately established his mandate.

Since August, the media had been warning of the advance of the self-proclaimed "libertarian" in the electoral race for the presidency of a country in the midst of an economic crisis. He competed—it should be noted—with the then Minister of Economy, Sergio Massa, after a four-year term of Alberto Fernández's presidency that did not exactly earn the gratitude of Argentines.[1,2]

Javier Milei, on the other hand, gained loyal followers during his years on television and presented himself as a third political force, distinct from Together for Change, the core of the traditional right, and Unión por la Patria, an alliance of progressive groups, including the Frente de Todos.

La Libertad Avanza was formed as a party to support the aspiring deputy when his radicalism found no place in the traditional spaces of the right. It won only two seats in the PASO (open, simultaneous, and mandatory primaries), but with its founder clearly positioned as the most voted candidate individually.[3]

At that stage, Milei's victory foreshadowed the breakdown of the traditional left-right confrontation. The media, in a context where monitoring the digital ecosystem was—and continues to be—almost permanently on its agenda, repeated the populist and anti-system messages of the figure.[4]

Whether for or against him, the novice in public administration proved to be an expert at attracting attention on television sets. At the same time, digital platforms multiplied the popularity of the then-candidate, backed by communicators and *influencers* with experience in generating and reproducing content, taking advantage of the algorithms and trends of these platforms.

This political communication strategy, in which the reach of posts and *likes* were rewritten as votes, had precedents in the United States, with Barack Obama (2008) and Donald Trump (2016); Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018), Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (2019), and Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine (2019), to name just a few.[5,6]

Election results and research in the field of campaign communication establish links between the rise of new right-wing movements around the world and the development of networked society, in which each candidate chooses their platform of opportunity, an arena in which they compete for the attention of voters.[7]

Information, including explicitly political information, follows the consumption parameters of the times and rhythms of social media, with characteristics closer to entertainment, digital skills that are best exploited by the disruptive discourse of peculiar characters who distance themselves from the so-called traditional or *mainstream* right.

Furthermore, during campaign periods, when the intention to influence the vote of specific audiences on platforms takes center stage in the digital activities of candidates and their campaign communication teams, audience segmentation and analysis are at the core of campaign strategies in the exercise of so-called political *marketing*.[8]

This strategic political communication tool focuses on building political products (parties, movements, candidates) capable of satisfying the needs or expectations of their audiences, whose success rests on the personal relationship that voters establish with the product.

Although it is not common in academia, aesthetics, which since the 20th century has formally dealt with reflection on the world of the senses, is a valid and necessary starting point for analyzing current political communication strategies, especially in electoral contexts.[9]

Connecting with audiences—which in campaign times is equivalent to connecting with the electorate—involved generating audiovisual content designed for specific segments of the public that one wishes to reach, through different channels and whose aesthetic codes managed not only to go viral but also to mobilize that " sensitive " that Rancière defines. The theoretical perspective of the aestheticization of politics and the use of aestheticized resources for electoral marketing constitute the main novelty of this research, which delves into the impact of the political figure Javier Milei on the electorate, especially younger voters, through the use of digital social networks.[10]

Although television studios remain the star stage for political spectacle, digital platforms are showing their potential to host this information and bring it to audiences that small screens no longer connect with, explaining why a considerable percentage of content comes from television appearances.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Argentina, *TikTok* was the platform that experienced substantial growth as a result of isolation. The use of this platform, which encourages the emergence of figures such as Javier Milei, in societies undergoing paradigm shifts in their forms of government and communication, for political purposes is one of the arguments that defend the relevance and timeliness of this scientific exercise.[11]

Given the current decline of the Argentine nation, in which the inequalities that divide its people are deepening with each new policy of the Milei government, even more attention must be paid to the causes of his rise to power.

The electoral success of the Peluca phenomenon, the man with the chainsaw, one of the most recent in a list of political figures with no end in sight, who have managed to remobilize a public that had been given up as lost electorally: the youth, should not be underestimated.

It was a 22-year-old Argentine political *influencer*, Iñaki Gutiérrez, who deduced that Javier Milei's opportunity in the South American nation could be *TikTok*. He was right.

DEVELOPMENT

Aesthetics and politics are two fields closely related to the power to reconfigure the sensitive frameworks of human experience

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and which interact both in the public and collective spheres and in the individual and personal spheres of human beings.

Of particular interest in the aesthetic-political arena, the semi-aesthetic categories proposed by Mandoki[12] constitute one of the main bases for analysis. In her octadic LASE-PCEF model, the Mexican author combines "dramatic modalities" (proxemics, kinetics, emphasis, and fluxion) with "rhetorical registers" (lexical, acoustic, somatic, and scopic).

During and outside of election campaigns, political communication cuts across the construction of power, and in an aestheticized society, elements of a sensitive nature influence voter behavior. Voters are seduced through political marketing strategies that tend to personalize politics and find an ideal space on digital platforms.[13]

In Argentina, the young electorate, abandoned by the traditional political class, is exposed to political information on digital platforms, where political actors seek to connect with them, as there is a decline in political and electoral participation among the general population.[14]

Javier Milei reached young people with the dream of freedom, of a better life economically, as well as with an approachable image as a rocker, soccer player, and rebel, with whom they could identify and feel represented. Above all, he broke with the traditional conceptions of a politician as they had been seen before in Argentina. The different and disruptive defeated the traditional and boring.[15]

The Argentine sociopolitical context was characterized by a multidimensional crisis. The inflationary economic situation, aggravated over the years and the inefficient management of progressive and conservative governments, generated popular disappointment in political representation of all kinds.

Isolation, as a health measure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed social inequality in an economically more unstable class: the informal labor sector, which led to a deterioration of the state's image. It also conditioned the increase in the use of social networks such as *TikTok*, which had entertainment value but soon became a platform for political figures and information.[16,17]

Javier Milei took advantage of Argentina's delicate social fabric, which allowed him to channel the tense social climate through his own image as a radical, outsider, and populist, with an anti-establishment discourse and a rejection of the collective, appropriating the symbol of freedom.[18]

Instead of traditional platforms where political information circulates, such as *X*, *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and even *Instagram*, where political conversation about him was greater, his strategy was directed at *TikTok*, an audiovisual consumption platform with a predominantly young audience.

The accounts analyzed, while sharing values and trends, emphasize different aspects of Javier Milei's political personality. The official account (*@javiermileii*) shows a candidate who is approachable, confident, and professional, although it has few posts during the campaign period. On the other hand, the unofficial or support account (*@elpelucamilei)* shows an aggressive, reckless, demanding, and challenging Milei, as well as a sensitive, human, and jovial one. This contrast in the political brand is a construct, further fueled by television.

The unofficial or support account is the one that best demonstrates the platform's features, but none of them exploit *TikTok's* main assets, such as *trends*, *challenges*, and audiovisual and sound templates. This is no coincidence, as this element of Milei's political communication on the platform is consistent with the strategy followed in his content: a break with tradition, which includes an image of the deprofessionalization of politics.[19,20]

Milei is not crazy, communicatively speaking; to describe him as such would be to excuse him and trivialize the strategic approach on which Javier Milei, the liberal candidate and Argentina's first libertarian president, built his campaign.

He is, in essence, the product not only of a sociopolitical context of discontent and popular frustration with the outcome of years of erosion of Argentina's political, social, and economic system, but also of the impact of the pandemic on specific sectors such as the informal labor sector and youth, of electoral opponents who failed to consolidate a valid alternative for Argentina, of a decline in mass participation in voting, and the influence of external destabilizing forces in favor of neoliberal expansion, such as the Atlas Network.

Understanding this landscape allows us to analyze the construction of the political figure, from the instrumentalization of sensitive elements in his communication. Milei, like his political counterparts Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, uses every aspect of his space and time to further his political ends.

This conclusion, however, does not detract from his genuine character. Milei is considered genuine because of the naturalness of his words and actions, even within his unstable or scandalous image. At the same time, he satisfies the expressions contained within the people.[21]

This sensitive connection with his followers—and even with those who do not follow him—is what ultimately explains why the figure of an extravagant candidate, with constant hate speech and physical and verbal expressions of threat and violence, has become established, normalizing conservative positions and discourses that undermine not only the social development of the Argentine people but also the nation's general political imagination.

Milei's entry onto the Argentine political scene caused his actions and those of other political actors, such as the media and his electoral opponents, to polarize the Argentine public debate. Consensus on issues such as women's rights, diversity, abortion, social security policies for retirees and the disabled, and other issues such as the sale of organs and the trade in white goods were called into question.[22]

In 2023, the libertarian candidate found the necessary conditions to profoundly influence the reality of the country. Internal tensions within the coalitions opposed to him, the failure of his opponents' political image, their rhetoric, and media coverage facilitated his rise.

Communication on *TikTok* was more balanced between user-generated content and content produced by the media than on

Instagram. The *mainstream* media contributed to the spread of symbolic constructs that gained strength until they became part of the candidate's image.

The Milei case on TikTok

The observation of the sample of 54 communication products formed the basis for the analysis in this research. The period covered corresponded to the election campaign in Argentina during the months of August, September, October, and November 2023. During that time, Javier Milei went from being a candidate for La Libertad Avanza (LLA), ratified in the Primary, Open, Simultaneous and Compulsory Elections (PASO) primaries, to winning the presidency of the Argentine Republic.

Of the total content, communication from the official account (*@javiermileii*) of the now president was modest—only eight audiovisual elements—compared to the output of the support account (*@elpelucamilei*), where 46 elements were identified. The output of the support account is greater than that of the official account.

According to the platform's characteristics, the average duration of the videos was 45 seconds, with only one of the items, belonging to the candidate's official account, exceeding one minute. In general, these are short pieces of content in which there is a change of image or screen every 4 seconds. Thus, the discursive fragmentation of the products is considerable.[23,24]

The total number of units was classified according to their aesthetic-discursive construction as a tool for analyzing the sample, relating the intention of the message to the researcher's interpretation. Appendix 1 shows the results of the representation of these categories in relation to the total number of audiovisual pieces. The data express the contrasting nature of Javier Milei's image, both conflictual and moving, as constructed from the accounts studied during the election campaign period.

The political image, as perceived by the public/voters based on symbolic construction through elements such as physical appearance, discourse, ideology, behavior, and everything the character represents, takes center stage in the campaign's communication strategy during the election period.

For this reason, various parameters were taken into account in the analysis of the content on the sensitive exchange relationship between producer and consumer, neither of whom are considered passive actors in the communication process.

It is important to clarify that these are not pure or hermetic categories, but rather that they are mixed and perceived in the content. Thus, it is possible to find videos in which the candidate sensitizes his presence through connection with voters. However, at the end of the analysis, the predominant aesthetic-discursive strategies are identified.

From this initial coding, the predominance of conflictive and sensitizing narratives surrounding the electoral drama stands out. Milei is explosive at almost every moment.[25]

Milei and Peluca facing each other

In the two profiles analyzed, converging and opposing aspects were found. The main characteristic of Javier Milei's political image and the use of sensibilities in his communication: the break with tradition in every sense. The libertarian found the ideal opportunity for his discourse in the separation of all possible ties with traditional references.

That is why economic references predominate in his lexicon. First, it is the main problem facing the country in the Argentine social imagination. Milei never loses his role as an economist, precisely because it separates him from those he wants to distance himself from: the political class.

In this way, the non-professional aspect of the audiovisual content of both accounts is used to bring him closer to the people through the distance from the productions that became increasingly common in the establishment. The team behind the libertarian's communication not only exists, but was also very aware of the need to declare themselves different at every opportunity, which for them translates into "moral superiority" and also makes them "aesthetically superior," as they stated in Santiago Oría's feature film *Pandenomics*.[26]

Personalization is characteristic of Milei. For this reason, digital platforms are such a profitable arena for the development of his figure and his narratives, especially those that, like *TikTok*, prioritize audiovisual content.

Javier Milei's profile on both accounts reflects a continuous presentation of covers featuring his face. In the case of the sample, there is only one audiovisual product, corresponding to El Peluca's account, in which Milei does not appear, dealing with the current president of the United States, Donald Trump, who is a political reference for Javier Milei, according to his own words.

Milei maintains the visual identity of his brand with his characteristic hairstyle. In a television interview in April 2018, he was asked if it was a wig, and that is how he became known to the public: "El Peluca" (The Wig). He took full advantage of this. He always sports long hair and sideburns (the latter similar to the style of the former president of Argentina in 1990, Carlos Saúl Menem).[27]

None of the accounts in question, during the period studied, abused symbols associated with the then-candidate, such as the lion and the chainsaw. The positioning of these symbols in the digital arena is a result of their use by the media on platforms such as *Instagram*, and they originate from the candidate's spectacularization in spaces such as television appearances, presidential debates, and in-person campaign events. The candidate's posts on other platforms and user-generated content complement this digital landscape.

CONCLUSIONS

The study confirms that the aestheticization of political communication provides a valid perspective for addressing the construction of a candidate's political image, allowing us to understand how sensitive elements drive voter behavior.

Milei capitalized on a serious socioeconomic and political crisis in Argentina, positioning himself as a radical figure and the only

alternative to a "caste" blamed for the country's problems. His disruptive image resonated with a frustrated population, especially young people, who are disconnected from traditional politics.

TikTok, with its short, emotionally resonant, algorithm-driven content, was instrumental in Milei's campaign. The platform allowed him to connect directly with young voters and cultivate an image of authenticity, even though it is perceived as a highly sophisticated digital operation with multiple accounts and resources.

Milei's strategy focused on personalizing his communication. He channeled the public's anger and frustration, presenting himself as a rebellious figure (rocker, soccer player), while simultaneously projecting a sensitive and human side (love for his dogs and sister). This emotional mobilization was more effective than rational debates about policies for his target audience.

The impressive volume and aggressive nature of communication from unofficial accounts, such as *@elpelucamilei*, complemented the more "professional" official accounts, creating a comprehensive and seemingly organic digital ecosystem that amplified Milei's message and attracted a wider and younger audience.

The deliberate choice not to fully exploit *TikTok's* advanced features or adopt polished, traditional styles of political communication was a conscious strategy to distinguish Milei from the establishment and reinforce his anti-establishment image.

The success of Milei and other far-right figures on digital platforms highlights a disadvantage for progressive political parties and their candidates, who often rely on rational connections with political subjects and fail to effectively engage in the aesthetic relationship and sensory appeal necessary in the fast-paced, entertainment-oriented digital sphere. This requires a reassessment of communication strategies for progressive and decolonial movements in Latin America.

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: María Karla Acosta Toledo, Roxana Romero Rodríguez, Ernesto Teuma Taureaux.
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Writing – review and editing: María Karla Acosta Toledo, Roxana Romero Rodríguez, Ernesto Teuma Taureaux.

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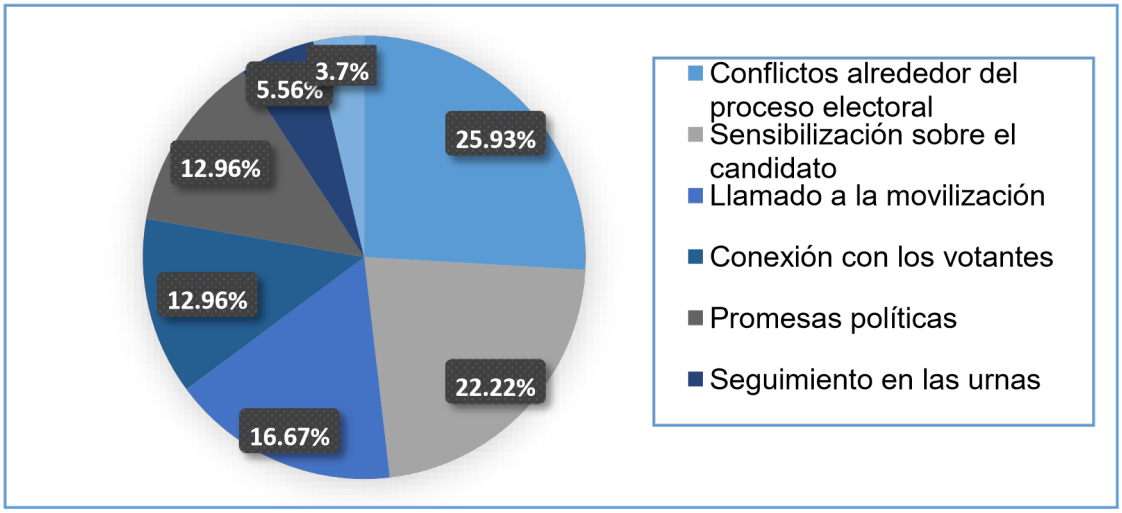
APPENDICES



Appendix 1. Categorization of all audiovisual content in the sample according to its sensitive nature

Appendix 2. Comparative table of the official and supporting accounts analyzed according to aesthetic parameters

Parameter	Official account Official @javiermileii	Satellite account @elpelucamilei
Number of posts	8 pieces of content published during the campaign.	46 posts during the campaign. Average of 6 posts per week.
Content source	Original. The entire sample is original.	Mixed. 54,35 % of the sample consists of clips taken from television.
Fragmentation of sensitive discourse	Low. Long sequences with continuous discourse. The longest video in the sample is 1 minute and 36 seconds long.	High. A cut frequency of 1 every 4 seconds. Television clips abound, so the full context of the dialogue is not known and only what Milei wants to show from them is seen.
Lexical	Explanatory, justifying, confident. He usually explains issues such as the economy or the possibility of winning in the first round from a rational perspective.	Emotional, aggressive, rebellious, challenging, hateful. Attacks on his political opponents, the system, and the elite are common. This also occurs in dramatic moments, such as when he reacts to accusations of being a Nazi.
Relationship with the user	Interrogated, identified. The camera is positioned in front of and at the same level as Milei, who answers questions directed at him by the person behind the camera, as if it were the user himself asking the questions and receiving the answers.	Included, spectator. The angles vary, but the user occupies a place among Milei's followers. Shots are usually close-ups of him, as if the user were accompanying him very closely. In the case of spaces with crowds, the then-candidate is seen from the masses, from below. The camera subordinates the users.
Proxemics	Short, familiar. He calls himself "Javi." He speaks directly to the camera, without bombastic expressions.	Representative, defender, leader. He refers to people as decision-makers, "good Argentines," those who can change.
Somatic	Facial expressions reduced by the enlargement of the shots. Presence of gestures reminiscent of the movements of gunmen in Hollywood westerns when expressing "Long live freedom, damn it!"	Facial expression is everything here. A practice nourished by expressiveness in his television appearances. Fixed gaze, wide-open sky-blue eyes, eyebrows and the area around the eyes that go with emotions; they express indignation, annoyance. Some smiles appear on occasion, such as when he says, "I am willing to give my life for the ideas of freedom."
Kinetics	Reduced. Static postures, legs and hands together, peculiar head position when standing. When seated, he does not move much, hands on the table, rigid posture.	More casual. He gestures with his arms and hands. In campaign ads and a video showing him at the Movie Star event, he is seen jumping around, agitated.
Acoustics	No identification. Only in one of the videos, when celebrating victory in the PASO, are the cheers of "La casta tiene miedo" (The caste is afraid) and another cheering Milei on as he kicks a soccer ball: "Peluca, peluca, peluca" (Wig, wig, wig) represented.	Some contributions are made from monitoring the characteristics of the platforms, such as fragments of trending songs with highly emotional content, with the aim of evoking emotional reactions in the user. They tend towards melancholy, sympathy for the candidate, tenderness, and nostalgia. Some chants are represented, such as "La casta tiene miedo" and one that simply cheers Milei on by his surname.

Sensitive representation of the opposition	Less representation, although they do appear when he talks about Massa and his fear campaign, which is smoke and mirrors. More institutional treatment of state figures or Kirchnerism.	Openly personal and violent attacks. Towards Bullrich, whom he describes as a "bomb-throwing Peronist Montonero"; Massa, "the king of the caste"; "the battle against leftism."
Sensitive representation of the candidate	Winner, confident. "The hope for change."	Human, explosive, fragile. The bond with his dogs and his sister.

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