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David Divita
Pomona College

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Abstract: Perhaps more than any other online social-networking platform, Instagram facilitates the construction and management of public image, serving as a potentially effective tool for political actors; nevertheless, it remains relatively understudied among digital communication strategies. In this article, I investigate the platform's use by far-right populist politicians, turning to Santiago Abascal of Spain as a case study. Performing detailed analysis on a corpus of Abascal's most popular posts determined by their 'engagement rate', I expose the gendered mode of self-presentation that resonates with Abascal's public. In the second part of the article, I consider an equivalent corpus from President Pedro Sánchez, one of Abascal's main political rivals at the time of writing. This comparative juxtaposition illustrates stark differences in approaches to social media and underscores how effective particular performances of masculinity can be for populist politicians. Ultimately, I aim to shed insight on the specific ways that Instagram serves far-right political projects, both in Spain and beyond.

Introduction

By all measures, Santiago Abascal, the leader of Spain's populist radical-right party Vox, is beating his opponents at Instagram. As of April 15, 2022, he had more than 2.5 times the number of followers than one of his main adversaries, Pedro Sánchez, the president of the governing social-democratic PSOE. A quick scroll through Abascal's account reveals his effective use of the platform. Alongside the many images of Abascal doing politics—in front of microphones or before enthusiastic crowds—he has interspersed photos of his life behind such public scenes: running in shorts across the peaks of the Sierra mountains (July 4, 2021), leading a caravan of motorcycles on the outskirts of Madrid (June 26, 2021), and straddling a white horse with his son, while his daughter, back to the camera, looks on (August 30, 2021). President Sánchez, in his account, betrays no such interest in extracurricular activities.

Instagram, perhaps more than any other online social-networking platform, facilitates the construction and management of public image—something that Abascal clearly understands. Since its creation in 2010, the photo- and video-sharing service has provided ordinary folks and public figures alike a means to circulate visual representations of their lives to widely dispersed audiences. For political actors in particular, the platform has enabled them to 'circumvent traditional media intermediaries and reach out directly to publics', engaging in politics through an immediate and popular form of communication (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019: 889). Instagram has thus personalized politicians on a vast scale, feeding the confusion of politics with celebrity in what has been called a 'global political entertainment marketplace' (Marland, 2018: 141; see also Street, 2004; Lalancette & Cormack, 2020). Blurring the distinction between the political and the personal, Instagram dissolves the distance between citizens and their leaders, creating an unprecedented sense of intimacy among its consumers and the figures whom they follow.

Since Barack Obama's successful use of social media in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, scholarly interest in the digital communication strategies of political campaigns has surged, focusing largely on Twitter and Facebook (see Filimonov et al., 2016). Instagram has received less attention, although a spate of publications beginning around 2016 has investigated its use by a range of politicians and parties across national settings: Justin Trudeau, who was elected Canada's prime minister in 2015 (Lalancette & Cormack, 2020; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Marland, 2018); Alexander Van der Bellen, elected the president of Austria in 2016 (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017); political parties during general elections in Canada (Boulianne & Larsson, 2021), Sweden (Filimonov et al., 2016), Norway (Larsson, 2017), Spain (Turnbull-

Dugarte, 2019), and Bahrain (Eldin, 2016); and the U.S. presidential election in 2016

(Dobkiewicz, 2019; Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Towner & Muñoz, 2018).

To date, few studies have considered the use of Instagram by far-right populist actors,

despite their widespread prevalence in western democracies (and elsewhere) since the early

2000s (cf. Larsson, 2022 and Nai, 2021). Bast (2021) compares use of the platform among right-

wing populist politicians in Europe and observes its resemblance to that of politicians with other

ideological affiliations. That is, 'the professional context dominates but is complemented by

insights into their private lives' (p. 18). Nevertheless, the author remarks that the politicians in

her study use Instagram (as opposed to other social media networks) to solidify their image as

accessible statesmen rather than to disseminate 'typical right-wing messages'—a strategy likely

to increase their popularity among the public and to soften the force of their political

commitments (p. 20). Examining the visual and textual content of Instagram posts by Santiago

Abascal, the focus of this paper, Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo (2019) depart from quantitative

content analysis to underscore the leader's use of unedited photos and strategic disclosure of

personal content to explain in part the success of his account in comparison to other Spanish

politicians. More recently, Oñate & López-López (2022) analyze large-scale quantitative data to

delineate a general profile of Vox voters and to shed insight on their prevalent use of social

media.

In this article, I complement this growing body of research by performing qualitative,

multi-modal analysis on Abascal's twenty most popular Instagram posts since he established his

account in 2014. Determined by their 'engagement rate', a formula commonly used by social-

media marketers to measure the popularity of content, these posts comprise a small but rich set

of data that illuminates Abascal's effectiveness online. By containing my corpus, I am able to

conduct fine-grained analysis on both image and text, exposing Abascal's pervasive deployment of gendered semiotics across modes of meaning-making, as well online-offline realms. Through strategic concatenations of signs, Abascal repeatedly indexes a conservative and cosmopolitan masculinity, thereby evidencing his possession of its associated characteristics—strength, confidence, impassivity—and, by extension, his competence as a leader. This tactic both aligns Abascal with far-right populist actors abroad and differentiates him from political rivals within Spain, most notably Pedro Sánchez, one of Abascal's greatest foils at the time I am writing this in early 2022. Considering an equivalent corpus of Instagram posts by Sánchez, I illustrate the stark differences in social-media use by the two leaders and underscore Abascal's highly effective conflation of his party's political values with a form of populist masculinity. Ultimately, I aim to shed insight on the particular ways that Instagram serves far-right political projects, both in Spain and beyond.

Populism and gender

Although it may be considered an 'elusive phenomenon', right-wing populism generally references a political sensibility based on a fundamental opposition between ordinary people and the so-called establishment (Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2017: 474; see also Mudde, 2019). Right-wing populist parties tend to construe racial, religious, and/or linguistic minorities as a threat to the nation's well-being, while their leaders position themselves as 'saviors'—that is, representatives of the 'true' people, who harbor the power to protect them (Wodak, 2021: 6). Far-right populist politicians often rely on 'media and the effects of mediatization', displaying their charisma and constructing crises to stir the emotions of their adherents (Rheindorf, 2020:

624). Trading in divisiveness and exclusion, they brand their virulent opposition to the 'mainstream' as a common-sense reaction to its tireless exploitation of regular folk.

Political power, no matter its ideological investments, is often associated with dominant notions of masculinity (see Connell, 1995). This may be particularly pertinent to populist actors, for whom the lifeblood of opposition demands unwavering strength to defend the people whom they purport to represent. As Wodak (2021) writes, 'strong and charismatic *male* leadership is… a salient characteristic of far-right populist parties' (p. 196, italics mine). Donald Trump, the former US president, for example, embodied what Gökariksel & Smith (2016) term 'fascist masculinity' by making 'aggression, hardened borders, and violence central to the defense of the nation' (p. 80; see also Spackman, 1996). For her part, Wiedlack (2020) has investigated how leftist online news media in the US have represented the 'populist masculinity' of Vladimir Putin in order to critique the Russian president and illuminate his country's threat to liberal American values (p. 59). Such a conflation of masculinity and populist ideology becomes especially evident when considering the discursive practices of populist women. Bast et al. (2021) analyze the use of Instagram by female far-right politicians to illustrate the double bind that they face: they must project the leadership qualities associated with populist men while exuding enough warmth and compassion to embody stereotypical notions of femininity. Nevertheless, as Geva (2020) concludes from her analysis of Marine Le Pen's failed presidential bid in 2017, for populist politicians 'the ultimate political power is represented by hegemonic masculinity'— something that the French candidate attempted to conjure in mundane decisions such as the donning of dark suits (p. 17).

To be sure, multiple masculinities operate in any sociocultural realm, and one (or more) of them might garner authority given the durative pattern of gender norms and relations that

comprise it (Connell, 2005). Lalancette & Cormack (2020) offer a comparative analysis of the campaigning strategies of Justin Trudeau and Stephen Harper in Canada's 2015 federal election, pointing to the ways that each embodied different but similarly legitimate forms of masculinity. Whereas Trudeau established himself as a modern 'metrosexual'—that is, young, urban, and refined—Harper enacted a more traditional form of masculinity through his stoic, controlled demeanor. Nevertheless, for both candidates, performing their roles as husbands and fathers in the media was essential to their campaign strategies. In similar ways, Smith (2021) compares the use of masculine imagery in campaign materials in the United Kingdom's general election in 2019, showing how Boris Johnson tended to project signs of hypermasculinity while Jeremy Corbyn relied on assured displays of agency (see also Ralph-Morrow, Shorrocks & de Geus (2021) and de Geus & Ralph-Morrow (2021)).

In this article, I stage a similar comparison between Santiago Abascal and Pedro Sánchez to illustrate the variety of masculinity most effectively facilitated by Instagram, a highly visual social-media platform. Focusing on the politicians' most popular posts side by side reveals not just a stark difference in self-presentational strategies, but also the extent to which the persistent performance of a traditional, *machista* form of masculinity elicits positive reactions from followers. In the case of Abascal, this expression of gender is deeply entangled with his oppositional politics. Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo (2020) observe that he often highlights political activity rather than discloses information about his private life. My consideration of engagement rate, however, shows that this is precisely what his most popular posts do, conjuring an intimate and gendered portrait of the leader through highly orchestrated revelations of personal detail.

Engaged publics

The contained corpora of Instagram data that I feature in this article were generated according to the posts' engagement rate, a figure produced through an overall tally of likes, shares, and comments, divided by the number of followers. Popsters, the online social-media content analytics tool that I used for this paper, offers a simplified explanation of this term on its website: engagement rate is a metric that reveals the 'efficiency of posts and… how interesting they are' to consumers. By factoring in the number of followers, the rate is thought to provide an accurate assessment of the quality of online content; it is also understood to reflect much more than immediate user interaction with a post. As Bouliane & Larsson (2021) write, higher levels of engagement often 'extend the reach of messages beyond followers/fans to secondary networks, to media coverage, and to the coveted position of the trending section on various social media platforms' (p. 15). Turnbull-Dugarte (2019) concurs. Writing specifically about Spain in his focus on Instagram use in the general elections of 2015 and 2016, the author states that user engagement provided an important performance indicator, signaling to parties 'how they are received' and promoting their material 'beyond [their] core block' of followers (p. 11). A study of Instagram use by the top seven candidates in the US presidential election of 2016 showed that the posts generating the highest engagement rates across the board demonstrated some form of statesmanship through displays of 'patriotic symbols… identifiable entourage, campaign paraphernalia, [and] political hoopla' (Muñoz & Towner, 2017: 297). Populist values in particular were conveyed through evidence of the candidates' mass appeal, such as large crowds, and their ordinariness in the form of casual attire or physical activity. Although it may seem unconventional to incorporate marketing metrics into the realm of academic scholarship, political image-making, as Lalancette & Raynauld (2019) have argued, has come to borrow

broadly from commercial branding, marketing, and public relations (p. 890). The visual affordances of Instagram make it an ideal platform to mediate such practices of representation, enabling its users to deploy 'symbolic devices… that provide a shorthand cue to audiences for the identification' and amplification of iconic attributes of an individual, party, or cause (Strachan & Kendall, 2004: 135). Incorporating measures of engagement into the analysis of populist rhetoric, I aim to illuminate how it resonates most effectively among online publics.

Methodology

To begin my research for this article, I used Popsters, the online social-media analytics tool mentioned above, to determine the top twenty Instagram posts of all time with respect to engagement rate for leaders of four of Spain's main political parties on August 1, 2021: Santiago Abascal (Vox); Pedro Sánchez (Partido Socialista Obrero Español); Pablo Casado (Partido Popular); Pablo Iglesias (Unidas Podemos).[1] I then performed detailed content analysis on each post, which consisted in almost every case of a main image and a textual element, to determine patterns in self-presentation and communication strategies both within and across the corpora. This entailed combining methodological principles from different but related paradigms, namely visual semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; van Leeuwen 2008) and the discourse-historical approach to political communication (Wodak 2001).[2] As Dobkiewicz (2019) astutely points out, 'traditionally logocentric approaches' to Instagram data 'may offer insufficient analytical tools if the full impact of a multimodal text is to be grasped' (p. 831).

Although my initial analysis included data from four political leaders, enabling me to compare and contextualize posts across accounts, I focus in this article on the social-media activity of Santiago Abascal and Pedro Sánchez. To illuminate the visual grammar underlying

their photographic content, I draw on Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) concise framework for analyzing the representation of social actors (see also van Leeuwen, 2008). When deciphering the visual semiotics of a given image, the authors ask the following questions: how is the subject represented? how is this subject meant to relate to the viewer? Because of my interest in understanding what provokes engagement in an audience, I focused on the three concepts entailed in the second of these questions: social distance, social relation, and social interaction. Distance, van Leeuwen (2008) writes, 'indicates the closeness, literally and figuratively, of our relationships' (p. 138); in pictures, such distance is represented symbolically by way of the camera shot: wide, medium, and close-up. According to van Leeuwen, people far away in a wide shot are generally 'shown as if they are strangers', while people in close-up are 'shown as if they are one of us' (p. 138). Social relation is articulated in the angles, both vertical and horizontal, from which a viewer looks upon the subject. Whether the subject is seen from above, from below, or at eye level—the vertical angle—establishes differences of power between them and the viewer. Whether the subject is seen frontally or from the side—the horizontal angle— 'realizes symbolic involvement or detachment' (p. 139). Lastly, the degree of social interaction is gauged by 'the crucial factor' of whether the represented subject is looking directly at the viewer (or rather, the camera). If they do not look at the viewer, they are offered 'as a spectacle for our dispassionate scrutiny' (p. 140). However, if they do look at the viewer, 'address[ing] us directly with their look', they 'want something from us—and what that something is, is then signified by other elements of the picture', such as facial expression, gestures, and, in the case of Instagram, text (p. 141).

Thus, in my analysis, I extend my approach to context beyond the frame of the picture itself to consider any accompanying words, whether overlaid on the image or posted in a caption,

mining my extensive and ongoing data collection on contemporary Spanish politics to shed

insight on each post as part of web of signification. Since 2018, I have studied a daily Spanish-

language Google alert on the following search terms: 'Vox and España'. This has enabled me to

access, read, and annotate journalistic publications that have discussed Vox and pertinent current

events, charting the party's burgeoning visibility over the past three years. During this period, I

have also followed the Instagram accounts of Santiago Abascal (@santi_abascal) and Vox itself

(@vox_es), along with those of other political leaders and parties in Spain (the PSOE, the

Partido Popular, Unidas Podemos, and Ciudadanos), logging descriptions of images, videos, and

thematic content. Including such data from parties' accounts was instrumental for

contextualizing the construction of charismatic individual images that often conflate the personal

and the political—or that make any such a distinction irrelevant. In addition, I have

supplemented this growing archive of data with a regular survey of relevant Twitter accounts, as

well as the recording of interviews with political figures, especially from the populist radical

right, on national TV. In my analysis, I draw on this heterogeneous corpus of research to account

for Instagram's various affordances, instantiating the methodological principle of triangulation at

the heart of the discourse-historical approach to the use of political language (see Wodak 2001

and Reisigl 2017, among several others). I am thus able to forge interpretive claims about

Abascal's use of social media, spotlighting the cultural and historical references that render his

gendered semiotics intelligible. Ultimately, I hope to show that his posts are not isolated

examples of populist stagecraft but rather mechanisms of a larger, and effective, political project.

(See Table 1 for an overview of the textual elements that I considered when conducting holistic,

multi-modal analysis of my corpora of data.)

Resources	Questions to consider
Visual	
• social distance	Is the subject shot in a wide, medium, or close-up frame?
• social relation	From which angle does the viewer look at the subject—above, below, or at eye level?
• social interaction	Is the subject looking directly at, or away from, the viewer?
• gendered signifiers	How does the subject appear physically: clothing, accessories, facial expression, gesture, posture, etc.?
Linguistic and discursive	
• self-presentation	How are linguistic forms (pronouns, deictics, adjectives, citations, etc.) used to construct a persona and establish relationships with followers? Which if any hashtags are used, and how? Which if any emojis are used, and how? Is there text in, or overlaid on, the image? How does this text relate to the image?
• rhetorical style	How much language is used in the caption? What function(s) does this language serve—to appease, impress, scorn, etc.? What forms of figurative language are used? What particular languages are used, and what do they communicate in relation to one another?
• stance-taking	What political controversies, cultural practices or historical events are invoked, directly or indirectly? What evaluative language is used to stake positions on these phenomena? What evaluative language is used to create oppositional relationships between the subject and adversarial figures, ideas, or arguments with regard to these phenomena?

Table 1. Overview of elements to consider for the holistic, multi-modal analysis of individual political content on Instagram.

The influential Instagram of Santiago Abascal

In 2013, ongoing corruption scandals in the conservative Partido Popular caused a populist offshoot to break away. At first this new party, Vox, had difficulty 'playing the nativist card' essential to the formation of national-populist movements, given the strength of regional identity in Spain (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015: 40). In 2018, however, Vox won nearly 11% of the vote in a regional election in Andalusia, vanquishing any doubts about its viability.

Its campaign had highlighted corruption within the provincial PSOE along with its irritation over the movement for independence in Catalonia. Riding on its regional success in the south, Vox then performed increasingly well in subsequent national elections—first in April 2019, and then, after Pedro Sánchez failed to form a coalition in Congress, again in November. In that second round, Vox earned over 15% of the vote, becoming the third-largest party in the country. An article in El País, the country's leading newspaper, in December 2018, attributed the rapid rise of Vox to its concerted use of platforms such as Instagram, impressively outpacing its opponents and attracting younger voters between the ages of 16 and 30.[3] More than any other party in Spain, Vox used social media to avoid mainstream venues of communication, signaling its political investments both literally and symbolically.

As of August 1, 2021, Abascal's 20 most popular Instagram posts in terms of engagement rate span over two years of activity on the platform, from March 21, 2019, when Abascal posted a statesmanlike photo of his 'first day of the legislature in Congress' to April 13, 2021, when he posted a portrait of himself on the occasion of his 45th birthday (which I discuss below).[4] It is not surprising that Abascal's most successful posts are sandwiched during this timeframe, given the growth in his visibility after Vox's performance in the Andalusian election in 2018 and the party's surprising sweep in the subsequent general election. This window of time also encompasses the first surge of the coronavirus pandemic in the Iberian Peninsula in March 2020—a public event of such magnitude that it is enshrined in Abascal's most engaging post of all time. On March 12, 2020, the leader posted three paragraphs of text, without any image, to disclose that he had tested positive for coronavirus and that he was continuing to work from home despite his state of 'reasonably good' health. The post is strikingly void of any antagonism; instead Abascal writes that he and his party will 'continue demanding unity of national action

from the government'. Six days later, in his fourth most engaging post of all, Abascal shared a tweet on Instagram about his emergence from quarantine after receiving a negative test result, in which he underscored his intention to 'return immediately to contributing and helping in the emergency' (March 18, 2020).

Both of these posts lack the 'oppositional habitus' so often associated with populist politicians; indeed, Abascal is generally no exception (Wodak, 2021: 69). It stands to note, then, that the second and third most engaging posts, sandwiched between the leader's missives on the pandemic, are also explicitly apolitical, announcing Abascals' 45th and 44th birthdays. In fact, almost half (9 out of 20) of Abascal's most engaging posts do not include overtly political content; instead, they wish followers 'Happy New Year' (December 31, 2020) or 'Happy Day of Hispanicity' (*Día de la Hispanidad*) (October 12, 2020), or they feature Abascal in non-statesmanlike circumstances, such as working out in a gym (July 20, 2020). Despite claims about the leader's tendency to highlight political activity (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2019), calculated revelations of private, 'offline' moments—what Gaden & Dumitrica (2014) have referred to as 'strategic authenticity'—seem to generate more excitement. Abascal's followers respond avidly to personal revelations and glimpses of the private life *behind* the politician. This no doubt has to do with the platform itself, and what its users expect of the content that typically circulates there. It also reveals what it means for politicians to use Instagram successfully, generating engagement, disseminating their interests out into the mediasphere beyond Instagram, and attracting new, often young followers. Abascal accomplishes these aims most effectively by signaling his populist masculinity. In what follows, I focus on three realms of gendered semiotics that emerged in my analysis of his posts by drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) understanding of visual grammar and the political context provided by the discourse-historical

approach: self-presentation; rhetorical style; and political stance-taking (see, again, Table 1). I then consider the Instagram activity of President Pedro Sánchez, which offers a stark contrast in style, as well as lessons in the effective use of social media.

The gendered semiotics of self-presentation

The most striking material motif across Abascal's popular Instagram posts is without a doubt the cigar. (See Figures 1 through 5.) In five out of his 20 most popular images, the politician is smoking. In each of these shots, a plume of smoke (Figures 1, 2, and 3), an oil lighter (Figure 4), or a burning ember (Figure 5) suggest that Abascal has been captured in a candid moment of repose. Crucially, though, he remains active while his typically expressionless face reveals little. The captions of Figures 2 and 4, 'Relax' and 'Mission accomplished' respectively, lay claim to a state of calm after two successful campaigns by Abascal's party—the general election of November 2019, in which Vox won over 15% of the national vote, and a regional election in Catalonia in February 2021. The frames in Figures 1 through 4 fall somewhere between close-up, which 'shows head and shoulders of the subject', and medium close, which 'cuts off the subject approximately at the waist' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 124). Thus establishing a relatively close social distance, they create a kind of intimacy or collusion between the viewer and Abascal—an exciting prospect on the heels of his political victories. The cigar serves Abascal as a ripe index of various related meanings: it marks a moment of accomplishment and signals control; it also affirms the traditional masculinity that underlies his political activity as statesman. Abascal reveals himself to be *the type of man* who smokes cigars. What's more, he shows that he is the *type of politician* who smokes, thereby bolstering his relatability to followers.[5] (Recall former US President Barack Obama and his concerted effort to hide this habit while he held office (Obama, 2020).) An interesting tension

emerges here between the private and public nature of these images. It appears as though Abascal has been caught in a moment of introspection—in Figures 2, 3, and 4 he looks off into the distance, seemingly unaware of the camera—but the captions suggest a calculated effort to represent the politician as such at

Figure 1. '45'
13 April 2021

Figure 2. 'Relax'
16 November 2019

Figure 3. 'Very worried'
18 December 2020

Figure 4. 'Mission accomplished'
13 February 2021

Figure 5. 'Maintaining the balance'
4 December 2020

particular moments: after successful elections; on the occasion of his 45th birthday (Figure 1), or after a cantankerous week in parliament when he claims ironically to be 'very worried' about all of the insults he has received (Figure 3).

The images in Figures 1 through 5 are remarkable for the material clues that they provide for deciphering Abascal's performance of masculinity; the cigar is merely one gendered signifier among others. In almost every image he is wearing an unbuttoned collared shirt or jacket, revealing his approachable but stylish persona. Sartorial details fortify the illusion that Abascal has been photographed in a 'backstage' moment, beyond the scrutiny of the public eye. Moreover, in Figures 1, 3, and 4 he dons a shade of army green, thereby signaling alignment with the military and, by association, his ability to protect and defend the nation. And yet, in performing his masculinity Abascal does not rely on such conventional (if subtle) signifiers alone, but rather integrates other artifacts into his style that are likely to appeal to the younger followers whom he courts on Instagram. In each of these images, for example, Abascal sports his signature ducktail beard, a popular look among urban men that requires a high-level of maintenance. The politician also sports accessories that nuance his masculinity in calculated ways, modernizing his performance of conventional manliness and thus rendering it more palatable to a younger public. His chunky Garmin Fenix wristwatch (Figures 1 and 4), visible in many photos, as well as his leather bracelet (Figure 2), both work to construct this image. Finally, Abascal's facial expression, with narrowed eyes and penetrating gaze, reveals little emotion but conveys much confidence; he appears fearless, even dominating in Figures 3 and 5, in which the vertical angle of the shot positions him above the viewer. By inhabiting such masculinity, Absacal stirs up excitement among his followers, who engage with it through Instagram's various affordances. Interestingly, only one of these five posts makes an explicit

reference to a political issue—illegal immigration (Figure 5)—of great concern to Vox and, one presumes, its supporters. In this realm of Instagram, such issues seem secondary to ostensible revelations of the (manly) man behind the political persona.

Rhetorical style

The material signifiers that Abascal deploys to convey masculinity are fortified by the rhetorical style of the text in a number of his most engaging posts. Three of the figures above, for example, feature a minimal use of language, instantiating a form of terseness associated with authoritative masculinity. In predominately political posts (which, I reiterate, comprise most of the content of his account), Abascal and his counterparts do not shy away from including extensive captions that explain or contextualize the accompanying image. In his most popular posts, however, a *lack* of language points to qualities that construe the politician as a particular kind of man, careful and controlled, who uses language economically. Featuring single words or short phrases, these images (almost) speak for themselves (Figures 1, 2, and 4). Abascal's followers understand immediately that he is celebrating a birthday or relaxing after a successful bout of campaigning; the captions bear witness both to Abascal's accessible, 'offstage' life and his direct, rational stoicism. Moreover, his rare use of English in Figure 2 shores up his claims to a breezy, self-assured cosmopolitanism. A simple imperative, 'Relax' implores his followers to assume this demeanor while assuring them of his stewardship. If Abascal has nothing to worry about, then neither should they.

Abascal also uses irony to flesh out his masculinity, as exemplified by Figure 3 above: 'Very worried about the insults received during this week in parliament: Fascist, lunatic, xenophobe, Islamophobe, machista, repugnant…' Abascal then punctuates this litany with the partying face emoji and four hashtags: '#puro #puros #cigars #cigar' (*puro* means 'cigar' in

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Spanish). In the image, Abascal, who has just exhaled smoke, looks off into the distance; his

countenance betrays no concern. Instead, he is positioned vertically in the shot, towering slightly

over the viewer and thus creating a sense of domination. Similar to the use of English discussed

above, which Absascal does in this post as well ('#cigars #cigar'), his use of irony imbues his

otherwise traditional masculinity with a youthful insouciance. It also forges a kind of complicity

with his followers, who understand the meaning of his double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin, 1986).

They understand Abascal's joke and, as evidenced by the post's high engagement rate, they

appreciate feeling like insiders. Abascal both mocks his opponents and criticizes them for

lobbing 'insults', contrasting his resolute nationalism to theirs, signaling it by the small Spanish

flag on his shoulder.

A popular post from the previous year (Figure 6) also makes use of sarcastic humor:

Figure 6. 'I deal with bulls'
7 November 2019

Here, Abascal appears in profile, grasping the horn of a stuffed bull and wielding a *muleta*, the

red cloth used in bullfights. He is, one presumes, in a *plaza de toros*, play-acting at the

quintessential (and controversial) Spanish pastime of bullfighting, strategically positioned in

front of a painted *rojigualda,* the flag of Spain. Again, we see Abascal in an open-necked, button-down shirt; rolled up sleeves expose his wristwatch and leather bracelet. In the caption, Abascal takes direct aim at President Sánchez: 'I deal with bulls the way Sánchez deals with politics—he only stands up to dead people'. Abascal alludes to the exhumation of Francisco Franco's remains from the Valley of the Fallen, the Spanish dictator's mausoleum on the outskirts of Madrid—a political act that Sánchez spearheaded after much public debate a couple of weeks earlier. During the months leading up to the event, Abascal and members of his party dismissed the project as political spectacle. According to Abascal's logic, Sánchez is only capable of displaying resolve when there is little threat of retaliation. The politician's slightly downturned smile, along with the winking emoji that punctuates the post's caption, point to the humor that imbues the text, as does the whimsically tilted framing of the image. The post's concatenation of signs conflates Abascal's masculinity, his commitment to national traditions, and his party's political positions, generating overwhelming approval among his followers.

Political stance-taking

Vox's support of bullfighting, invoked in Figure 6, aligns with its staunchly conservative position on almost every political issue. As stated above, the performance of statesmanship and the explicit discussion of politics only appear in just over half of Abascal's posts with the highest engagement rates—a remarkable fact given the overwhelming presence of such content elsewhere on his account. He refers to Sánchez's administration as 'the government of death and ruin' (May 23, 2020) and 'the worst government of our history' (September 29, 2020); elsewhere he invokes the 'intolerant *progres*', an abbreviation for 'progressives' (October 10, 2019) and the 'coup-mongers (*golpistas*)… who trample the Constitution and national unity' (May 21, 2019). The following post (Figure 7) manifests the oblique politics that appear in Figure 6, suggesting a

recurrent and potent use of the platform, whereby followers might engage with content based on

personal interests rather than the political messages embedded therein. On December 24, 2020,

Absacal posted a domestic scene with his two children, as the three of them watched the annual

address of King Felipe VI:

Figure 7. 'Felipe VI'
24 December 2020

Along with Abascal and his two children, the viewer of the photo is interpellated by the royal

figure, whose gaze meets their eyes directly, and whose words comprise the caption included

beneath the image. Referring to the ongoing pandemic, the king animates rousing language that

echoes Abascal's: 'We are not a people who give up or resign themselves in bad times. It's not

going to be easy at all to overcome this situation, and in every house you understand. But I am

certain that we are going to move forward. With effort, unity, and solidarity, Spain will move

forward'. Included in this warmly lit domestic interior, the viewers are meant to celebrate the

annual occasion along with Abascal's family, by extension assuming the deeply pro-monarchist

stance of the populist party. With his sleeves rolled up, again exposing his wristwatch and

bracelet, Abascal supports his applauding son from behind, both inhabiting a paternal role and

showing deference for King Felipe, whom he faces away from the camera. Over the past few

years, in the face of a burgeoning movement to do away with the monarchy, Abascal has stood

firm on his party line: the Crown must be defended to honor and sustain Spanish tradition—and

to subdue progressives who lack respect for the institution.

While Abascal's political platform remains implicit in these photos of the *plaza de toros*

and King Felipe, it is undeniably explicit in two posts attacking regional nationalism. Since its

inception, Vox has advocated for a more centralized Spanish government by diminishing the

sovereignty of the 17 Autonomous Communities that have comprised the nation since the

Constitution of 1978. In these two photos, Abascal features main images with graffiti, showing

himself to be the target of blatant acts of vandalism in the Basque Country (Figure 8) and

Catalonia (Figure 9):

Figure 8. 'Three hooded rats'
7 November 2020

Figure 9. 'Catalonia today'
11 January 2019

In Figure 8, graffiti, which has been sprayed across the display window of Abascal's family's clothing store in Amurrio, a small town in the Basque Country, reads 'See if you like this, fascist' in Basque. The caption explains that 'three hooded rats' attacked the store by throwing rocks and spraying paint. Abascal goes on to write that such attacks are no longer made 'against the political adversary (himself) but rather against his family and their way of life', before he goes on to give the Instagram handle for the business: @modaabascal. In Figure 9, graffiti in Spanish reads 'Abascal, you deserve a shot in the back of the head'. The captain reveals that it happened in Catalonia that day: 'Death threats toward Vox were to be expected. Separatist hate, the demonization of media, and cordons sanitaires were the perfect breeding ground. They're playing with fire by stigmatizing dissidents'. In these two popular posts, the leader illustrates the pernicious manifestations of regional nationalism, positioning himself (as well as his family members) as its undeserving victims. To be sure, destruction of property and threats of physical violence represent extreme and concerning acts of political expression; they also work to drive the common populist strategy of 'victim-perpetrator reversal' that animates much of Vox's discourse (Wodak, 2021). Abascal claims to have been 'stigmatized' for 'dissenting' against movements in favor of regional autonomy. In many of his most engaging posts, he includes hashtags of cities around the country—#Gerona (Figure 4), #Fuerteventura and #Lanzarote (Figure 5), #Sevilla (Figure 6)—rather than names of Autonomous Communities, generating a sense of national belonging that supersedes regional identity. His language in these posts conjures the masculine bravado that appears elsewhere. Abascal identifies himself as a 'political adversary' and articulates a veiled threat to his opponents, whom he describes as 'playing with fire' by disgracing him.

The incongruous Instagram of Pedro Sánchez

The 20 most engaging posts from President Pedro Sánchez bear no resemblance to those of his opponent. Fourteen of them are video recordings, whereas all of Abascal's are photographic images. Most of these are clips of press conferences overlain with the official seal of the Government of Spain, and not one caption includes an emoji. (See Figures 10-14.) An extended scroll through Sánchez's Instagram account reveals that this corpus of posts reflects his overall social-media persona. There is not one image of him in any other capacity than professional statesman—no photo of him with his two children, no photo of him outdoors or at the gym, no photo of him betraying a sense of humor. Here is a man aiming to perform competence—an understandable objective considering the extraordinary circumstances in which much of this content was uploaded. Thirteen of his 20 posts concerned the pandemic in its initial stages from March to May 2020, showing the President videoconferencing, discussing ways to 'bend the curve', or providing rationale for the official state of alarm. During the most uncertain phase of the health crisis, Sánchez seemed primarily concerned with putting the public at ease by demonstrating his control of the situation through image and language—a multimodal performance constrained by his role as the leader of the nation, as the staid monotony of his posts suggests. It is perhaps not surprising that so many of the posts in his corpus comprise press conferences and speeches in April and May of 2020, given widespread anxiety about the crisis and the turn to public figures for assurance.

Figure 10. 'Extension'
4 April 2020

Figure 11. 'The president'
18 April 2020

Figure 12. 'New extension'
2 May 2020

Figure 13. 'A gradual de-escalation'
25 April 2020

Figure 14. 'Reactivation of tourism'
23 May 2020

Still, even in posts that do not address the pandemic, Sánchez's authority derives from displays of competent masculinity that include formal clothing and erect posture, along with material signs, such as flags and logos, that all together signify his commensurability with the establishment. In many of his posts such as Figures 10, 12, 13, and 14, he looks directly at his political subjects, thereby interpellating them as equal citizens.

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In three posts somewhat different to those discussed, Sánchez exhibits a modicum of range within the respectable politics of traditional statesmanship. His variety of masculinity is one of confidence and decorum; he thus demonstrates none of the 'political machismo' that drives Abascal's manner of doing politics (Smith & Higgins, 2020: 551). In Figures 15, 16, and 17, Sánchez reveals himself to be successful, compassionate, and responsible without ever challenging expectations of his role as national leader. Here, we see him in what seem to be candid shots, looking away from the camera as he is engaged in some activity:

Figure 15. 'Spain has voted'
28 April 2019

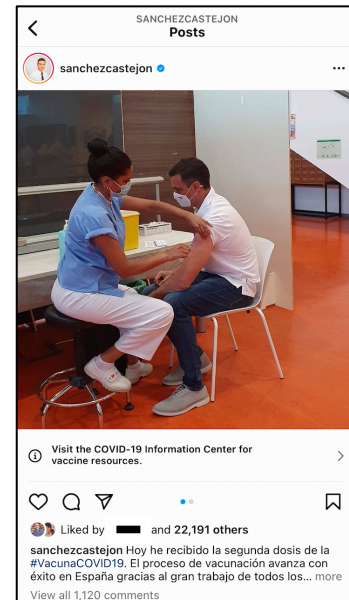Figure 16. 'Pérez Rubalcaba'
10 May 2019

Figure 17. 'The second dose'
9 July 2021

In Figure 15, posted on April 28, 2019 upon the occasion of the PSOE's success in a national election, Sánchez appears onstage with a hand across his heart and a fist raised in victory, while the three women at his sides applaud. It offers one of the few seemingly unstaged photos in the Sánchez corpus; the politician looks not at the camera, but at a crowd of flag-waving adherents, unable to suppress a smile. Viewers observe this active moment from the perspective of the people cheering on the politician. A caption of gratitude to those who voted for the party underscores the social-democrats' commitment to 'rights and freedom, equality and social

justice'. A couple of weeks later, Sánchez posted an intimate photo of him and Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, an active member of the PSOE and former vice president under Zapatero, who had died of stroke the previous day. The lengthy caption comprises a tribute to the politician and an expression of gratitude for his lengthy service to the nation. The photo, though, constitutes the only close-cropped image out of the 20 most popular from Sánchez's account, testifying to the camaraderie between the two politicians and inviting the viewer, for once, to experience intimacy along with the president. With his hands placed around the neck of his shorter, older colleague, Sánchez demonstrates the compassion associated with the 'ideal' political candidate (Muñoz & Towner 2017). Lastly, Sánchez, in a post from July 2021, models responsible citizenship for his followers by getting a second dose of vaccine against COVID-19. Interacting with a health worker in what appears to be a clinic, Sánchez wears blue jeans and a white polo shirt, the only informal attire in the corpus of his posts. The president looks away from the camera, giving viewers a sense that we have caught him in a private moment. We might not even recognize the politician except for the Spanish flag emblazoned on his mask.

Strategizing authenticity

This juxtaposition of Instagram corpora aims to illustrate the pronounced differences in use of the platform between two political rivals in contemporary Spain—one of whom, Santiago Abascal, has mastered its various affordances in ways that his counterpart, Pedro Sánchez, barely approximates. Although differences in their strategies are undeniable, there are certain circumstances to consider when comparing their approach to, and success with, Instagram as a political tool. The coronavirus pandemic, which first surged in Spain in March 2020, understandably dominates Sánchez's presence on social media and the corpus of his posts with

the highest engagement rate at the time that I calculated it on August 1, 2021. As the head of state, Sánchez's role required him to disseminate information and assuage the public's fears; Instagram, along with Twitter and Facebook, served him in these efforts. Nevertheless, the remainder of his account reveals a monotonous approach to the platform that does not differ all that much from his use of it during the most difficult stretch of the public health crisis. His followers see him occupying the role of president, communicating statesmanship through images of engaged leadership that contain other 'elected officials and influentials, patriotic symbols… identifiable entourage… campaign paraphernalia' and 'formal attire' (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297)—with an occasional depiction of compassion and warmth (as discussed above). A consummate professional, he reveals almost nothing personal. Turnbull-Dugarte (2019), who analyzed Instagram use during election campaigns in Spain in 2015 and 2016, observed that newer parties used the platform far more than established ones. The PSOE has existed since the late nineteenth century, while Vox was founded in 2013.

For his part, Abascal and his publicity team marshal the potential of Instagram as a tool for the creation and diffusion of public image, in part because they understand what its users expect of the platform: candid, easily digestible photos that trade in familiar semiotics. Some of his far-right counterparts elsewhere in Europe deploy social media in similar ways. For example, Geert Wilders, who leads the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, occasionally includes pictures of cats; Jimmie Akesson of the Swedish Democrats seems fond of selfies. In Abascal's case, as I have shown, material signs that index his 'political machismo' spark avid engagement among his followers (Smith & Higgins, 2020, p. 551). What's more, Abascal (and these other politicians) deploys Instagram just as its average user does—from a consistent, first-person perspective, as though he operated the account entirely himself, despite the evident intervention

of a publicity team and at least one photographer conversant in the grammar of image-making for social media. This, of course, is reflected in his persistent posting of single photos. As a result, Abascal appears as unscripted and spontaneous on Instagram as Sánchez does fabricated. The latter's most engaging posts betray a lack of consistent perspective: at times the text that accompanies Sánchez's images and videos refers to him in the third person as 'the president' (see Figure 11); at others, he writes in the first-personal singular or plural (see Figure 17, where Sánchez receives a vaccine shot). How are viewers to understand Sánchez's Instagram to be anything other than the product of campaign consultants? Such unabashed calculation, juxtaposed with Abascal's tactical authenticity, fits well with the reliable but generic masculinity that Sánchez displays throughout his account.

Concluding thoughts

As Rama et al. (2021) point out, the typical profile of Vox supporters is male, not necessarily educated, and—in contrast to those of many other populist radical-right parties in Europe—sometimes young. This bodes well for the party's future and goes some way toward explaining Abascal's use of Instagram in preference to other platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. The leader entices and appeases his public through his expert use of the platform, generating authority by demonstrating his social-media savvy as much if not more so than by advocating particular policies. Abascal trades in tropes of traditional machismo, constructing a consistently masculine persona that indexes his authority while engaging a growing coterie of followers. The relationship between politicians' online effectiveness and the voting practices of their followers remains to be studied. Nevertheless, this analysis reveals Instagram's unique power for facilitating the expression of gendered personae that reflect populist values, without

the burden of articulating a coherent policy or program. Similar to Vladimir Putin and Recep Erdogan, as Eksi & Wood (2019) describe them, Abascal does not have to prove his legitimacy "because his masculinity stands in for and demonstrates his dominance" (p. 746). As the popularity of his posts reveals, qualities of a leader's character become inextricable from perceptions of a party's constitution and commitments. Abascal's adversaries would do well to take note.

Notes

1 Pablo Iglesias decided to leave politics in March 2021, after his party, Unidas Podemos, performed poorly in a regional election in the Community of Madrid. I include him here because of his high visibility as Second Deputy Prime Minister from January 2020 until his resignation. In February 2022, Pablo Casado, who had served as the president of the Partido Popular for nearly four years, resigned after becoming embroiled in a scandal that involved a rival party member, Isabel Ayuso, currently the president of the Community of Madrid.

2 See Dobkiewicz, 2019; Bast et al., 2021; Lalancette & Raynaud, 2019; Russmann & Svensson, 2016; and Filimonov et al., 2016 for similar methodological approaches to Instagram data.

3 This article was last accessed on April 15, 2022, at the following address: https://elpais.com/politica/2018/12/12/actualidad/1544624671_005462.html.

4 Because Abascal is a public figure and his Instagram is easily accessible to the public, I did not seek permission from the politician to collect data from his account.

5 As one reviewer points out, the cigar might also be read as an index of middle-to-high social class—an aspiration for some, and the socioeconomic domain of many, Vox adherents (see Rama et al. 2021).

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