



## Article

# Mapping Feminist Politics on Tik Tok during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Content Analysis of the Hashtags #Feminismo and #Antifeminismo

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, marked by the supposedly universal access to different types of social media, we have seen the emergence of forms of popular feminism embedded in complex dynamics. Often cohabiting in these dynamics are ambivalent ideas and imaginaries that both reject and express feminist issues. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of digital technologies increased exponentially to overcome mobility constraints, popularizing connective action around feminism and, at the same time, reinforcing normative views of society. This article explores these ambivalences by focusing on TikTok discourses, whose popularity grew intensely during the pandemic. Departing from a feminist constructionist perspective and using content analysis, we examine the 100 most prominent videos on the Portuguese hashtags #feminismo (#feminism) and #antifeminismo (#antifeminism) in the period corresponding to general containment measures in the second phase of the public health crisis. The results are less than encouraging. Over half of the analysed videos contain discursive dynamics conforming to social hierarchization (53%), often reaffirming gender stereotypes. By allowing forms of popular feminism and antifeminism to permeate the shared discourses, the results suggest that the platform gives rise to ideas and discourses that reify unbalanced power relations.

**Keywords:** TikTok; feminism; popular feminism; antifeminism; misogyny

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## 1. Introduction

With exponential growth since 2018, TikTok surpassed 2 billion downloads in April 2020, after experiencing the best quarter ever for any app (Chapple 2020). The acceleration in the popularization of the digital platform is partly due to the various confinements imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Joshi 2020). With the restrictions placed by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, over the world new forms of relationships contact and leisure were sought. Initially it was predominantly used by teenagers (Kennedy 2020), TikTok started to reach other audiences, such as parents with young children who were seeking the culture of fun provided by home videos (GlobalWebIndex 2020), resulting in the growth of user-generated content (Kale 2020).

Considered a safe digital public space to ease social distance through instant gratification, TikTok represents for its users an environment in which people can be authentic and real in the message they want to convey, not having to resort to the use of social masks as seen in social networks such as Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn (Joshi 2020). A global symbol of self-expression and democratic creativity, even if its origin and recent past are marked by authoritarian logic (Biddle et al. 2020), TikTok has received attention from researchers interested in understanding the role of the digital in youth culture, but also the dynamics of interactions between feminism and antifeminism (Kennedy 2020; Khattab 2019; Subramanian 2021; Weimann and Masri 2020). Indeed, democratic optimism

regarding the repeated recourse to forms of connectivity in so-called networked societies (Castells 2006, 2009) has faded, as new evidence reports that socio-economic, socio-cultural, and socio-political inequalities have followed people into the digital, where new forms of discrimination, violence and extremism have emerged (Amaral et al. 2022; Jane 2014, 2016; Simões et al. 2021).

Digital platforms have helped the branding of different spheres of life, including the self. Like everything else, authenticity can be trademarked (Banet-Weiser 2012). It is also thanks to the digital that, through the same logic, feminism has become popular (Banet-Weiser 2018) through content that appears to empower women while exploiting and commodifying a certain feminist sensibility, which some authors recognize as post-feminist (McRobbie 2009; Gill 2007, 2016). As a neoliberal ideology, post-feminism incorporates an individualist focus and emphasizes liberal feminist discourses of independence, choice and action, albeit without questioning structural gender inequalities (Simões and Amaral 2020). Often, forms of antifeminism and misogyny are articulated through post-feminism in a complex dynamic of interweaving old and new feminist sensibilities and old hatreds (Banet-Weiser 2018). This dynamic cuts across different types of online discursive practices (Ging and Siapera 2019), including comments on informational content (Simões and Silveirinha 2019), and is posted on social media profiles (Marwick 2014).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of digital technologies, namely mobile social media applications, was accentuated (Simões et al. 2021), offering the opportunity to study post-feminist sensibilities in the digital environment. This article aims precisely to understand the feminist politics embedded in TikTok's uses. While leading platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram continue to attract extensive attention from scholars, this study focuses on the cultural production of an increasingly popular platform among Generation Z, catering to light entertainment. Articulating a feminist constructivism perspective with a culturalist approach and drawing on contributions by Nancy Fraser (2009) on discursive constructions around feminism, Stuart Hall's (1998) notions of consent and resistance in popular culture, and George Gerbner's (1978) concept of resistance tactics to social change, this study analyses TikTok content production during a period of general confinement.

Specifically, this study turns to qualitative content analysis to map the hashtags #feminismo and #antifeminismo as rhetorical tools. At the same time, this study examines how users engage with these hashtags and how these uses can change hashtags' potential. Feminist research on hashtag activism has focused on how effective specific tags are, especially in response to sexism and gender-based violence (e.g., Mendes et al. 2018; Núñez Puente et al. 2021). Research has also explored hashtags' power to work for or against feminist politics, depending on their uses (e.g., Cole 2015). By articulating both approaches, the study contributes to deepening the understanding of tags' rhetorical agency and youth cultural politics on a critical social media platform.

Our findings bring the plasticity of the hashtags #feminismo and #antifeminismo to the surface; both are used to circulate messages about feminist issues through normative views of femininity and masculinity, and both reinforce and destabilize each other. By reproducing structural hierarchies through seemingly trivial videos, TikTokers' popular content reifies limited horizons of sociability, foregrounding the ways youth's social media practices support rather than defy dominant cultural politics.

## 2. Digital Environment

### 2.1. TikTok Dynamics

At the end of April 2020, the exceptionality of TikTok's popularity was announced: "TikTok crosses 2 billion downloads after the best quarter for any app of all time", corresponding to 315 million installations from the iOS App Store and Google Play (Chapple 2020). In the previous two years, the application had already experienced an exponential increase in users, with at least 110 million downloads per quarter (Chapple 2020).

On TikTok, the human experience is realized in short videos, usually between 15 s and 1 min, which combine short soundtracks and visual effects. This feature became effective when the Chinese digital conglomerate ByteDance, owner of the popular Chinese information content aggregation platform Toutiao, acquired Musical.ly in November 2017, a year after its launch. In August 2018, Musical.ly was merged with TikTok, to which all user accounts were transferred. This strategic move was significant, also because it allowed ByteDance to operate in the American market more quickly (Iqbal 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Creativity is one of the requirements of being able to combine the best idea, recording, editing and description. The app provides templates and visual effects to assist users, it allows live streaming and the exchange of virtual gifts with favourite content creators, bought with real money. The experience reaches each user essentially through “short bursts” and, until early 2021, without commercials, promising to distance itself from the other social networks on the market (Roose 2018). Its main feed, *For You Page*, does not consist of friends, similar to what happens on other platforms. The successive fragmentation of contexts of the content, as well as the disconnection between contents and the speed with which they appear, allow it to offer uninterrupted streams of videos chosen for each user, according to the information gathered by artificial intelligence algorithms (Haigney 2020). Like other platforms, TikTok depends on data metrics: followers, hashtags, shares, likes and other reactions, including in the form of video.

Despite its growth in the pre-pandemic period, the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic were a natural conduit for new users, attracted by the possibility of obtaining successive and endless instant gratifications without having to resort to the use of social masks (Joshi 2020). Confined at home for continuous periods of confinement, all over the world, users found in TikTok new forms of relationships, contact and leisure. If, on the one hand, attracted by the stimuli provided by mobile applications, the youngest users quickly began to download TikTok massively to combat boredom, fatigue and fear over the lack of information about the new SARS-CoV-2 virus; on the other hand, there was a growth in user-generated content. Jokes, dance choreographies, motivational videos, challenges and trends give the illusion that the app has no internal logic or guiding principle, and therefore, exists from a state of structural anarchy of the system (Kale 2020), potentially liberating.

Currently, TikTok is present in 150 markets, its content is expressed in 39 languages, and has more than 6 billion downloads over its lifetime. It corresponds to 689 million monthly active accounts and is, therefore, second only to Facebook and YouTube in terms of the number of users (Iqbal 2021). From a gender perspective, 53% of users are male and 47% are female (We Are Social & Hootsuite 2020).

TikTok’s worldwide user base that is aged between 16 and 64 is 18%. In terms of viewing and content creation, there is a trend towards short videos and live broadcasts. Popular among members of Generation Z, users aged 16–23, but also among other groups such as parents with young children (GlobalWebIndex 2020), it offers the fun provided by home videos.

TikTok presents itself today as a global symbol of self-expression and democratic creativity, but it has a known recent history of authoritarian behaviour involving the exclusion of users with undesirable ideological positions and algorithmic punishments for those deemed unattractive, disabled and people from lower and disadvantaged social classes (Biddle et al. 2020). According to internal documents obtained by The Intercept for the investigative report “Invisible Censorship”, TikTok’s moderators were instructed to block the posts of people according to certain physical, bodily and environmental characteristics, to “attract new users” and/or to “prevent bullying”. This means that certain videos were prevented from being posted on the *For You Page*, where they generally address a broad target audience (Biddle et al. 2020).

TikTok was often despised, and its users were harassed for supposed expressions and sentiments communicated in an exacerbated way. In the clear context of the digital culture war (Kennedy 2020), the memes and harassment of TikTok accounts occurred mostly on Instagram accounts and YouTube channels, which seemed to be favoured by Generation

Z, and which promoted misogynistic, ethnic, homophobic, and transphobic hate content (West 2019). On the other hand, “many of the TikTok videos aggregated on meme accounts follow the same split-screen structure: On the right side of the screen is one user acting out the setup; on the left, another user delivers the punch line. This is known as the “duet” feature” (West 2019). The duet tool has developed into a subgenre due to the fact that it is more used for trolling than constructively and cordially.

Data protection is another critical issue that was given weight to moments of political tension between several countries and China. The United Kingdom opened a judicial enquiry into the collection and use of children’s data, seeking to ascertain whether TikTok violated data protection laws and whether the interests of young users were a priority for the social network (Hern 2019). The Indian government temporarily banned the digital platform on the grounds that it was “detrimental to the sovereignty and integrity of India”, and “state security and public order”, following reports of theft and clandestine transmission of Indian users’ data (BBC News 2020). The US government executive ordered an investigation into ByteDance’s acquisition of Musical.ly (Reuters et al. 2019). In its first “Transparency Report”, released in 2020, TikTok sought to demonstrate that the Xi Jinping regime does not surveil users, does not request sensitive information and acts upon legal requests on accounts. Furthermore, TikTok does not operate within Chinese territory. ByteDance has developed a distinct but similar app, named Douyin, for use in China (King 2020).

## 2.2. Participation, Consent and Resistance in the Digital Environment

The 1990s mark the beginning of significant changes in contemporary society both concerning feminism and the digital environment. The growing participation of women in the labour market, initiated by the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, meant that women were perceived as consumers (Tasker and Negra 2007). A whole market around female empowerment was created, giving rise to the so-called “girl power” phenomenon, responsible for popularizing feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018) by stamping it on the most diverse cultural products. Female empowerment began to be a synonym for material consumption.

In this way, feminism came into the spotlight, which also changed its relationship with the media. It could be argued that until then, feminism was external to the media and acted as a critical voice, questioning the invisibility or the unreal and manipulative way in which women were represented, but from the 1990s onwards, feminism acquired a media dimension (Gill 2007). We have witnessed the manifestation of feminism on a new level: that of discursive constructions (Fraser 2009). The problem is that, as a discourse, expressed feminism does not always aim at gender justice and may even be articulated against its realization, as is often the case with post-feminism (Baeta 2021, 2022).

Post-feminism represents the most visible discursive formation in contemporary society. It predominates in the symbolic rhetoric of political, economic, and social institutions, especially in the media and in most cultural products. Although it appropriates feminist vocabularies and ideals, it acts to replace the political content and respective transformations of the movement with “a highly conservative mode of empowerment” (McRobbie 2009, p. 27), based on neoliberal precepts of individualism, choice, autonomy, and consumption to reaffirm traditional gender stereotypes and keep power structures unchanged.

The visibility achieved did not necessarily lead to the strengthening of the feminist cause and has even weakened it, given that the commodification of its values gave rise to a new manifestation of feminism. According to Nancy Fraser (2009), the manifestation of feminism in contemporary society occurs on two levels. The first level is that of social movements; the objective has always been and will always be the search for gender justice. The second level is that of discursive constructions, “as discourse becomes independent of the movement” (Fraser 2009, p. 29), manifest feminism may or may not have this purpose.

It means that the commodification of feminism, coupled with the development and proliferation of digital platforms—which “enabled visibility for feminisms that had long



struggled for a greater place in culture” (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 9)—has allowed a diversity of discursive constructions about feminism that dispute space in the public sphere, materializing popular culture as an arena of consent and resistance, as theorized by Stuart Hall (1998). Although discursive constructions are often overshadowed by post-feminist hegemony in diverse digital public spaces, diverse voices also attempt to position themselves as active voices of resistance to normative gender patterns (Henry and Powell 2014; Mendes et al. 2018).

In Hall’s (1998, p. 453) words, “popular culture is one of the places where the forces for and against the culture of the powerful are engaged”, “where hegemony emerges and where it is secure”. They are, therefore, public arenas often inhabited by discursive constructions of consent and resistance to the normative. In this way, it is not surprising that the most visible discursive construction around feminism in contemporary society is precisely the one that works to keep power structures unchanged: post-feminism. Post-feminism is today the discursive formation with the greatest penetrability in media products and is present in the rhetoric of practically all political, economic, and social institutions. Defined by Rosalind Gill (2007, pp. 147–48) as “a sensibility composed of several interrelated themes”, post-feminism appropriates feminist vocabulary and ideals, disarticulating them (McRobbie 2009). Structural oppressions are allowed to go unchallenged and so the status quo is curbed in the discursive constructions of individuals and established in the collective consciousness (Henry and Powell 2014).

Although post-feminism is prevalent in virtually all media and is the discursive formation that represents the interests of dominant structures, studies point to the importance of connective digital platforms for feminist activism (Harp and Bachmann 2018; Hines 2019). As Harp and Bachmann (2018, p. 188) emphasize, it is in the digital environment that “counter-hegemonic ideologies are being given space to present and articulate alternative views and perspectives” that constitute forces of resistance, as Hall (1998) referred to them. Thus, we can look at online social media as public spaces in which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discursive formations circulate and evolve.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The methodological strategy adopted articulates a feminist constructionist perspective with a culturalist approach. Drawing on contributions by Nancy Fraser (2009) on discursive constructions around feminism and Stuart Hall (1998) work on notions of consent and resistance in popular culture, we examined content published on TikTok, a platform that presents user-generated content in the form of videos of up to one minute in length, and which was one of the most used apps during the period of major pandemic constraints (Koetsier 2020). Particularly important to the study were also the insights from empirical studies on hashtag feminist activism (Mendes et al. 2018; Núñez Puente et al. 2021) and on generational politics on TikTok (Zeng and Abidin 2021). Under this lens, digital practices can be seen as empowering democratic self-expression and the expression of social justice, but equally, they can be seen as contingent and limited in their scope and potential for social transformation.

The question of to what extent the most popular TikTok videos shared during the COVID-19 pandemic incorporated feminist ideals guided this research. To answer this question, we built an analytical framework based on content analysis (Krippendorff [1980] 2004) that we applied to a corpus constituted by the 100 most prominent videos under the hashtags written in Portuguese #feminismo (#feminism) and #antifeminismo (#antifeminism)<sup>2</sup>. We collected the 50 videos under each hashtag with more the most engagement, which corresponded to a total of 2.4 billion and 25.9 million views, respectively, in the timeframe between 25 and 26 January 2021, corresponding to another phase of general confinement, particularly in Europe (Jornal de Negócios 2021).

The search, conducted manually, returned videos produced in Portuguese (45%), but also in Spanish (65%). Our search did not allow us to identify users’ geographical locations. The 100 videos were analysed to identify feminist and antifeminist content since

the hashtags are not necessarily used according to the apparent intent of the message. Therefore, on the first stage, we evaluated the motivation of the TikTok user responsible for each publication: supporting feminist causes or repudiating them. Thus, the publications tagged as feminist but containing the intent of antifeminist communication were classified as antifeminist and vice versa. The content coded as containing feminist contents are those whose interlocutors defend or position themselves in favour of feminist values and/or claims, such as the right to abortion, sorority, the defence of breaking traditional gender stereotypes, gender equality, as well as the combat against paedophilia, femicide, harassment, rape culture and the wider cycle of violence perpetrated against women. Regarding the antifeminist content, the positions that demonstrate rejection of the values and/or claims listed above were considered antifeminist.

The videos were also analysed as an arena in which a dynamic of consent but also of resistance towards the dominant culture occurs (Hall 1998). The coding of the corpus of TikToks in these terms aimed to assess whether the messages, regardless of the manifest intention of the creators, present arguments and positions that challenge (resistance) or reinforce (consent) traditional gender stereotypes. Thus, content published to defend feminist issues but which, nevertheless, present resistance tactics to social transformation (Gerbner 1978), such as the objectification of women, were coded in the consent category. These contents, thus, contribute to the permanence of patriarchal values, gender stereotypes and other structures of oppression. The others were reconfigured as resistance practices.

To recognize the tactics of resistance to the social transformation we used the concept developed by Gerbner (1978), which unfolds them into: discrediting, undercutting, isolating, and the function of images. The discrediting tactic reinforces feminism and feminists in a pejorative, hostile and derogatory way, usually through humour and irony; through the undercutting tactic, content that dehumanizes women, such as apologies for rape and sexual objectification, is propagated; the isolation tactic includes content that presents individual mantras, such as the confidence cult (Gill and Orgad 2016) and meritocracy (Littler 2018), which depoliticize gender inequality by stripping it of its political and collective content; the function of images is to create stereotypes that reflect the values of dominant structures as a projective resource, to “encourage the isolation of deviant identities” (Gerbner 1978, p. 49), where feminists are represented as hysterical and as man-hating women.

Thus, in the first phase of codification, we identified and characterized the videos collected in the light of the following variables: the number of likes, shares and comments, content (feminist or antifeminist), theme and dynamics (consent or resistance). In the second phase, we analysed the enunciating subjects. We identified the name, gender (female, male or another non-binary gender), profile (activist, commercial, personal, or public figure), age, sexual orientation, race, and social class of the users. Finally, in order to understand how the discourse reinforces the dominant hegemonic culture, we conducted a qualitative analysis of 12 videos coded as representative of consent dynamics, using Gerbner’s (1978) categories.

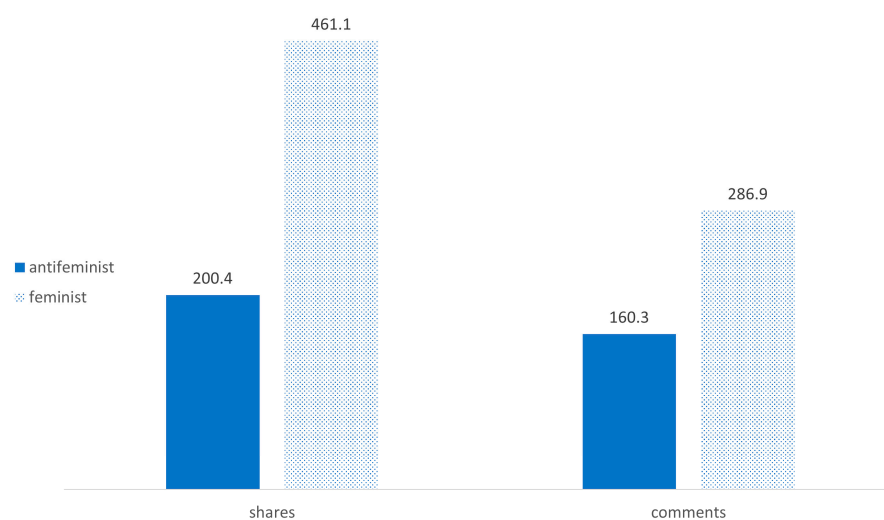
## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Popularisation of Feminism

Of the total 100 coded posts, 49% presented feminist content, and 51% presented antifeminist content. Of the 50 publications that used the hashtag #feminism, 24% presented antifeminist content. That is, the TikTok users intended to speak out against feminist values. Regarding the sample corresponding to the hashtag #antifeminismo, 22% of the posts were published by TikTok users who wanted to position themselves in favour of the feminist cause. It is seen, therefore, as a common strategy: a significant portion of users publish the content to reach audiences with a position contrary to their own; this phenomenon is equivalent to almost a quarter of the 50 most prominent publications in the hashtag #feminismo.

Feminist content is still more popular than antifeminist content. At the time of the study, feminist content totalled 22.9 million, which is more than the 7 million recorded

for antifeminist content. When comparing individual profiles with profiles identified as belonging to public figures, 66% of public figures' posts are feminist, and 48% of individual accounts' posts are feminist. Another figure demonstrating the popularity of feminist content relates to reactions, namely, through the metrics of shares and comments. As shown in Figure 1, feminist content was shared by 461 thousand users and generated more than 286 thousand comments. The antifeminist content was shared 200 thousand times and generated 160 thousand comments.



**Figure 1.** Number of shares and comments on feminist and antifeminist content expressed in thousands.

The discursive construction around feminism does not always represent a voice aligned with advocacy for gender justice (Fraser 2009). Often, the discourse that presents itself as feminist may contain a message that, in the dynamics of consent and resistance described by Stuart Hall (1998), works more towards reaffirming dominant values (consent) than representing a force for transformation (resistance).

Quantitatively, of the 49 posts that intend to convey a feminist message, 96% advocate for social transformation and 4% aim to reinforce gender stereotypes. Of the total 100 posts analysed, it can be observed that 53% act in favour of maintaining the dominant values, discrediting and ridiculing the essence of feminist politics and, therefore, consenting with the prevailing culture, while 47% present a discourse that supports the transformation of society in line with feminist ideals.

Of the posts coded as containing antifeminist content, 53% were published by men, 29% by women, and 18% did not allow the identification of their authorship. As for the posts with feminist content, 67% were published by women, 18% by men, and 14% did not allow the identification of the user. It is also possible to infer that 69% of the identified female TikTokers present themselves as feminists, while the remaining ones position themselves against feminism. As far as male users are concerned, the results show that 72% position themselves as antifeminists and 28% as feminists.

As shown in Table 1, among the most addressed themes was gender equality, present in 23% of the posts, with a relative balance identified between feminist (13) and antifeminist (10) content. The second most addressed theme was feminism itself, which means that 21% of the posts were concerned with positioning themselves in relation to the movement itself. However, of the 21 messages that focused specifically on this theme, 17 were antifeminist and aimed to reject feminist ideals. The third most addressed theme was abortion, present in 10% of the publications analysed. We believe that the legalisation of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy in Argentina was the driving force behind the content of this nature at a time when news of the legal change that occurred in that country on 30 December 2020 was still reverberating.

**Table 1.** Themes identified in the analysis corpus (absolute numbers).

Theme	Antifeminism	Feminism	Total
abortion	8	2	10
antifeminism		3	3
chauvinism		1	1
child abuse		3	3
conservatism	3		3
domestic violence	1	2	3
education	1		1
empowerment		2	2
femicide		2	2
feminism	17	4	21
gender equality	10	13	23
gender stereotype	1	3	4
harassment	2	5	7
hate speech	1		1
inclusive language	2		2
maternity		1	1
misogyny		1	1
objectification	1	2	3
police violence	1		1
sexuality	1		1
sorority		1	1
violation	1	4	5
wage gap	1		1
<b>total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100</b>

Overall, 82% of the videos came from personal accounts, 9% from activists, 6% from public figures, such as singers, politicians and influencers, 2% from political parties and 1% was commercial in nature. Most users (51%) were between 19 and 34 years old, 25% between 35 and 49 years old and 12% between 13 and 18 years old. Finally, white people were predominant (67%), heterosexuals (71%), upper-middle class (83%) and the female gender (68%).

#### 4.2. Dynamics of Consent

As [Fraser \(2009\)](#) explains, in contemporary societies, feminism manifests itself on two levels: through social movements and discursive constructions. As a social movement, feminism acts for gender justice; as a discourse, it can be just a sinister and treacherous copy of feminist causes. The two posts under the hashtag #feminismo that we identified as antifeminist are indicative of this process. The first of these messages consists of a video that brings together scenes from the Mexican soap opera *Tereza*, through which the protagonist utters the following phrases in a supposed representation of empowerment: “I hate being poor, I hate”, and “I will ask God to enlighten or eliminate you”. However, the content associates the idea of female empowerment with the image of a selfish and bad woman, an idea further reinforced by another scene in which another character says: “you give me fear, Tereza”. As we interpret it, the dissemination of this content acts as a tactic of resistance to social transformation through what [Gerbner \(1978\)](#) has labelled the function of images. The function of images consists of creating a stereotype as a way of projecting a deviant identity and provoking the isolation of the group associated with that image. Thus, this form of popular feminism shows an empowered woman who only thinks about money, and who is avowedly determined to eliminate whoever is in her way. This image projects the stereotype that empowered women are necessarily non-women because they not only defy gender norms but also moral norms: they are mean, Machiavellian and self-interested.

The other publication tagged as feminist, despite rejecting feminism, features a rhyming battle. Held in an outdoor space, it is apparently reminiscent of a multi-sports field. A large group of young people from Generation Z clap for two female MCs, one white



and the other black, who engage in the contest. The video shows only the second part of the battle when the white MC answers with the following discursive construction: “remember the first round when she called me a bitch? You look like a crazy person who was raped in the cell! Sorry, my sister, you are very bad, a hypocrite. But, in fact, listen, today you are not ready.” Theoretically, the content of the video would be an ode to female empowerment as it is about girls occupying positions predominantly held by men. However, the undercutting (Gerbner 1978) of women as a tactic of resistance to cultural transformation is explicit in the composition of the rhymes that reinforcement rape culture and female objectification using a hostile discourse. In this case, we have a video that disseminates a form of popular feminism that actually acts in a way that consents to and reaffirms traditional gender stereotypes and prevailing social norms that normalise violence towards women.

#### 4.3. Use of Discredit and Irony

In the presence of two characters, one male and one female, both matching Western beauty standards (young, thin, not physically or intellectually disabled, among others); one of the character, blonde with blue eyes, shares: “I have just opened the first feminist coffee shop”, and he says: “oww, congratulations. But what makes you a feminist?”. She retorts, “men pay 20% more and only women work there”. He replies, “that’s fine, but who does the dishes?”. The footage is recorded apparently in a Swiss village. This discursive pattern uses the tactic of discrediting (Gerbner 1978) through irony to harass the feminist bias of the female character. There is a reification with recourse to negative stereotyping in the digital public sphere to resist the social changes proposed by the feminist movement. The use of the soundtrack of the film *Fifty Shades of Grey* also contributes to this discrediting of women and the movement itself, referring to the objectification and sexualization associated with the film production.

Inside a room, a teenage girl records a 360° video around herself. Above her face, she presents a montage of a female dog incorporated into a muscular male torso wearing female clothing, referring to the traditional role of housewife. It is accompanied by the following inscription: “Feminist before: demonstrate that a woman can study and acquire a professional title”. Next to it is an image of another dog with purple hair and a green bandana around its neck with pro-abortion symbolism, accompanied by the caption: “Feminist now: mother, an oppressor looked at me, I want to abort”. It is a typical meme, which belongs to contemporary youth culture, which has the aim of harassing the feminist movement and feminists. It satirizes the pro-abortion movement, which claims women’s right over their own bodies, by discrediting.

The meme published by an antifeminist activist embodies a character branded as a ghost. She starts the video with her image wrapped in a sheet. Characteristic of this type of publication, the recording takes place inside the bedroom. The following question appears over the image: “have you ever imagined how crazy it would be if this so-called equality between men and women really happened?” Next, an image of soldiers in the middle of a bombing is shown. He declares some arguments to justify his antifeminist position: “1. Men’s police station, 2. Men become only 50% of in coal mines; 3. International men’s day in honour of all those who went to war without the right to choose; 4. Men retire eight years earlier than women because of life expectancy; 5. Men’s murder law implemented for women who killed for inheritance/insurance; 6. ‘João Lapa’ meets revolutionary new law that will severely punish women who cut off their partner’s genital organs and laugh immediately afterwards; 7. The majority in universities are now men”. In light of the above, it becomes apparent that this publication also resorts to the tactic of discrediting. Using trolling, which aims to discredit feminist claims, the author addresses with irony and humour supposed male claims that correspond to some of the guarantees and rights already obtained by women.

#### 4.4. Role of Images and Construction of Stereotypes

In a context of conviviality, in the garden of a villa, a barbecue is presented between family and friends. All the characters conform to hegemonic Western standards of beauty. The main character is a man who assumes the typical role of the head of the family. He is authoritarian, and hostile and slaps all the people who are at the event: male and female adults, children and even police officers who appear at the end of the video. In other words, what this video intends to say is that feminists perceive male violence in a generalized, exaggerated and exacerbated way, which is reinforced by the subtitles: “No one: ( ) Absolutely no one: ( ) How are we, men, according to feminists:”. This way of constructing memes in social media symbolically structures the interpretation that should guide each individual, in this case, as a social group. In this case, the captions say that no one, absolutely no one, has said or thought anything, but women are already talking about men being violent. The content reinforces the stereotype of hysteria, where feminists exaggeratedly and radically set out their demands. In this way, it undermines any claim that may arise from them in the future.

#### 4.5. Conservative Minorities

A video is recorded inside the bedroom, by a young woman who corresponds to traditional standards of beauty and who assumes a populist discourse. With an inscription over her face, she simulates a question asked by her mother: “daughter, what did you see in him?” She then presents images accompanied by captions with the reasons why, supposedly, she chose her boyfriend: “to be Christian, to be patriotic and to be anti-communist”. The named characteristics allude to the values defended by far-right parties in political speeches. Following this, another of this young woman’s videos appears as one of the most viewed and presents the same line of conduct and sentence construction. The young woman films herself in her room, and with an inscription on the image, she asks: “If it is difficult for you, imagine for me that: I am right-wing, Christian, I do not support feminism, conservative”.

In a third video, also among the most viewed, the same speaker films herself from her intimate space, the bedroom, to provide answers to what she considers to be the main feminist myths: “Today I come to talk about the five myths propagated by the feminist movement. First, the so famous one: men earn more than women for the same work. This is not true mainly because men work nine hours more per week than women. They work two hours longer away from home. And they do harder work and in more dangerous places. And if you took the two variables, the effort and the work, the woman does earn more than the man. Not to mention that men are the majority in the worst types of work. Research shows that women work 17 h a week at home and men 22 h. And still, on salary differences, research shows that there are 25 differences between men and women when it comes to choosing a professional career. Women, on the other hand, prefer a job that gives them a more balanced and happier life.”

This set of videos points to possible confirmation biases in the interpretation of the data, since we did not expect that we have resistance to social transformation regarding gender equality coming from a woman. The discourse of consent to the dominant culture is reverberated by those who, even though they are privileged within the female context (white, young, heterosexual, without disabilities and upper-middle class), are still part of the minority of being a woman. The “facts” presented the work as a way of discrediting the movement, reinforcing the idea circulating both in antifeminist discourses and in the most popular feminist discourses, that gender equality has already been achieved.

Another TikToker who presented more than one video among the most viewed also presents a conservative discourse, even though he belongs to the LGBTQI+ community. In the first content analysed, he records, inside his car, responding to a comment he received on social media. The comment reads: “straight people do have their problems, but not related to sexuality”. The answer offered to this comment was: “it’s the following, the hetero has no problem with his sexuality because he likes his sexuality. Because he honours his sexuality. So, that’s the difference. I am gay and I have no problem with my sexuality,

I was never oppressed, I was never offended, I was never beaten in the street. It's not because, look, I have a macho face and, in the street, I play macho to hide that I am gay. No. No. Understand? I am married, I go out with my husband on the street. I have no problem with that. If I have to kiss him, I will kiss him. The difference is that I know how to respect the place where I am. The environment I am in and the people who are there. In the same way that it is ugly to see a straight couple kissing and eating at a restaurant table, it is ugly to see a gay couple kissing and eating at a restaurant table. That is the difference. Be proud of your sexuality. When you are proud of who you are. No one will oppress you".

The second video of this same user is in response to the video of another homosexual TikToker. The beginning of the post is an excerpt from the recording of this other TikToker made in an intimate environment, probably in his bedroom. The young man, Generation Z, white with blue eyes, who adopts an irreverent style by presenting blue hair, piercings, earrings, and long painted nails, says the following: "besides being ugly, you are also stupid. So, let's explain what the difference between these two things is". The interlocutor's answer, which is also recorded in a domestic environment, states: "let me see if I understand. When a gay man makes a joke with a straight man it's funny. When the hetero makes a joke to a gay is it a crime? Sorry, that doesn't enter my head either and I'm in my place of speech before you say anything because I'm gay too. And . . . no. It's not right. It's not right to make fun of anybody. I think a joke is funny when it's not offensive. From the moment it becomes offensive, it's not funny. Your limit ends when the other's limit begins. And when you learn this, you will understand that it is not funny to joke with heterosexuals, nor with gays. And not even with transgender people. Not with anyone. Do you understand? I am not represented by the LGBT community, because I always looked for my rights. And I was never offended, I was never harassed. Because I always knew the limit of my freedom". The posts show a conservative positioning on the part of the interlocutor who declares being homosexual and for this reason is in his "place of speech." He does not agree that there is discrimination towards the LGBT community, and therefore, reproduces a discursive strategy imposed by the dominant culture. He blames the community itself for the discrimination and violence he is the target of, stating that the people who are offended or discriminated against are the ones who do not know how to be in public spaces.

#### 4.6. Hate Speech Disguised as a Joke

Another publication analysed brings the comments echoed in social networks about the news: "a 19-year-old girl with Covid is raped by the driver of the ambulance that was taking her to hospital". Among the comments gathered on this TikTok video, it is possible to read the following messages: "poor driver, now he has the corona", "I feel it, but I have to laugh", "I don't want to do it, but I have to laugh", "hey, poor driver", "not a driverless", "it was not the driver's day", "I laugh at the feminist comments because of the way they take it, but if the girl was bad, how does she go alone, she asked", "this happened because she went alone". Although the publication aims to problematize the violent and uncivil behaviour of people on digital platforms, it is clear that we have on social networks many manifestations of violence and disrespect towards women. The comments listed above show how humour is used to disguise violent misogynist rhetoric, a result of the undercutting tactic, since rape is naturalized in this type of "joke" and women are not seen as humans.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper aimed to understand the incorporation of feminist politics on of TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic under the Portuguese hashtags #feminismo and #antifeminismo. This study has limitations; namely, the small sample size, the language of the hashtags and the scarce information about the users, which hinder the generalization of findings. Despite these limitations, one conclusion can be drawn: the use of TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights a complex dynamic of feminist discursive construction. Although most of the avowedly feminist publications actually aim at social transformation

(96%), which indicates that the most popular TikTokers are attuned to the discursive constructions of resistance of feminism as a social movement, the overall results are lacklustre. The resistance tactics are diverse, going through discrediting, undercutting and isolating, and often resort to humour, irony, and covert hate speech. Of the total videos analysed, more than half contain discursive dynamics conforming to social hierarchization, often reaffirming gender stereotypes, in line with the hashtag #antifeminismo with which most of these posts were tagged. By allowing forms of popular feminism and antifeminism to permeate the discourses shared, the platform gives rise both to feminist ideas and discourses that reify unbalanced power relations. In this sense, the platform's organic potential seems to both challenge and reinforce dominant values through the ambivalences that the concept of popular misogyny wants to capture (Banet-Weiser 2018).

Future research should deepen the role of popular platforms such as TikTok as powerful tools to fight inequalities but also as vehicles that reify forms of subordination and oppression, particularly among young users. The methodology adopted for the present research can be replicated by researchers to compare results and overcome the limitations of a sample with 100 publications, essentially published by Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking users. Forthcoming studies can also replicate the articulation of a feminist constructivist perspective with a culturalist approach to map and analyse content published in the English language. As the most widely spoken language in the world, this content has been demonstrated to receive more interactions on TikTok.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The success of the parent company ByteDance, founded in the year 2012, is mainly due to the artificial intelligence and algorithms that are developed and make it possible to provide personalised main pages of feeds with high levels of quality according to each user's tastes and interests, which can be obtained through the interaction that each individual triggers with the content by means of touches, swipes, times spent, comments, among analysis tools (Marr 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> In the course of this study, we came across the association of feminism with Nazism through the hashtag #feminazi. However, at the moment of collecting this corpus for further analysis, the publications were no longer available, and a message from the TikTok platform appeared instead: “This phrase may be associated with hate behaviour. TikTok is committed to maintaining a safe community and working to prevent the spread of hate. For more information, we invite you to read the Community Guidelines” (26 January 2021).

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