

APPEALING TO EMOTION IN COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: THE CASE OF SPANISH UNIVERSITIES ON INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the emotions conveyed by Spanish universities through their Instagram profiles at the start of the 2024/2025 academic year. The beginning of the academic year marks a pivotal moment of first contact between universities and incoming students; as such, it is particularly relevant to examine the communication strategies employed at this time. The research adopted an integrated methodology, combining rhetorical analysis and digital discourse analysis with semi-structured interviews conducted with communication professionals from four universities: the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Complutense University of Madrid, University of Salamanca, and University of Seville. The findings indicate that these institutions adopt a multimodal discourse — incorporating text, images, and videos — and a multiplatform approach, utilising their websites and other social media platforms, such as TikTok. The universities aim to construct an *ethos* of internationalisation and evoke emotions such as pride, belonging, and nostalgia among students. The findings also indicate that university communication professionals intentionally evoke emotions in their digital communications, such as on Instagram, to attract attention and foster engagement among their audiences. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, interaction levels remain low. In other words, although emotional appeal proves effective, it remains insufficient to establish a deeper connection with online student audiences.

KEYWORDS

universities, public communication, emotion, digital discourse analysis, Instagram

O APELO À EMOÇÃO NAS ESTRATÉGIAS DE COMUNICAÇÃO: O CASO DAS UNIVERSIDADES ESPANHOLAS NO INSTAGRAM

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar as emoções que as universidades espanholas mobilizaram a partir dos seus perfis no Instagram, no início do ano letivo de 2024/2025. O regresso às aulas é um momento importante de primeiro contato das universidades com os novos estudantes, por isso, consideramos pertinente estudar as estratégias de comunicação utilizadas neste período. Como metodologia, combinamos a análise retórica e a análise do discurso digital, complementadas por entrevistas semiestruturadas com os profissionais de comunicação de quatro universidades (Universidade Autônoma de Barcelona, Universidade Complutense de Madrid, Universidade de Salamanca e Universidade de Sevilha). Os resultados identificaram que estas instituições adotam um discurso multimodal (com textos, imagens e vídeos) e multiplataforma (por exemplo, o seu site e outras plataformas sociais, como o TikTok). As universidades procuram construir um *ethos* de internacionalização, bem como despertar nos estudantes emoções de orgulho, pertencimento e nostalgia. Também foi possível concluir que os profissionais de comunicação universitária mobilizam intencionalmente emoções na sua comunicação em plataformas digitais, como, por exemplo, no Instagram, para captar a atenção e o envolvimento dos seus públicos. No entanto, apesar deste esforço comunicativo, a interação do público permanece baixa. Ou seja, a mobilização de emoções funciona, mas ainda não é suficiente para estabelecer uma conexão mais profunda com os estudantes online.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

universidades, comunicação pública, emoção, análise do discurso digital, Instagram

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this article is to examine the emotional appeals employed by Spanish universities in their social media discourse. To this end, we analysed the Instagram posts of four universities (Autonomous University of Barcelona, UAB; Complutense University of Madrid, UCM; University of Salamanca, USal; and University of Seville, US) during the start of the 2024/2025 academic year. University welcome messages represent the first contact between universities and new students; hence, the importance of observing this period.

Simancas-González et al. (2022) identified the need for qualitative research on the communication of Spanish public universities, as this field remains relatively unexplored. Currently, the large number of public and private universities makes competition for new students increasingly difficult (Jiang et al., 2025; Orgilés et al., 2023; Ruão & Carrillo, 2005; Schüller & Rašticová, 2011). In addition, with the advancement of technology, most young people seek and receive information through social media such as Instagram, WhatsApp (Giraldo-Luque & Fernández-Rovira, 2020; Pérez-Bonaventura et al., 2025), and TikTok (Muñoz-Gallego et al., 2024). In Spain, Instagram has more than 24 million users (Forner, 2024), 70% of whom are aged between 16 and 30 and access the platform daily, primarily via mobile phones (IAB Spain & ELOGIA, 2024). In this context,

universities must maintain a presence on these platforms, offering engaging content to compete for the attention of young people alongside other universities, friends, companies, and the vast array of information and entertainment available on digital media.

This study offers new perspectives on communication by public universities in the “platform society” (van Dijck et al., 2018) and provides insights into what is planned and what in fact works to compete for the attention of audiences on social media, serving both researchers and professionals working in communication at these institutions.

2. EMOTIONS AND AFFECT IN THE CONTEST FOR PUBLIC ATTENTION

Despite the challenges posed by the “platform society” (van Dijck et al., 2018) — such as the overabundance of information and constant competition for users’ attention — social media also offer opportunities to mobilise connected audiences (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Papacharissi (2015) defines online affective publics as “networked public formations that are mobilised and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 125). These publics may engage online with ideas, institutions, news, and brands, depending on how they are emotionally affected. In a similar vein, Bulgarova and Tabatabai (2023) argue that the expression of emotions on social media generates a contagion effect, whereby content charged by emotion spreads more quickly and captures greater attention.

Concerning the diffusion of emotional responses online, Döveling et al. (2018) advocate the formation of a digital culture of affect, which is characterised by three main elements: (a) the digital environment realm constitutes a unique discursive space where participation and orientation are shaped by chains of emotional interaction; (b) individuals’ subject positions invite emotional identification, leading people to align emotionally, ideologically, culturally, or socially with who share similar positions; and (c) engagement on social media prompts a sense of cultural and social belonging.

The use of emotion to capture public attention is rooted in the rhetorical principle of *pathos*, which involves presenting information with emotional appeals that resonate with the audience’s beliefs and socio-cultural background. In this regard, institutions may adopt discursive strategies along four key dimensions:

- 1) how contact is initiated with others and the nature of the relationship that is established; 2) the construction of the speaker’s image (*ethos*); 3) the appeal to the audience’s emotions to persuade or captivate them (*pathos*); 4) the structuring of discourse in ways that allow the world to be described and explained according to principles of truthfulness (*logos*). (Charaudeau, 2010, p. 59)

Within this Aristotelian framework, the distinction between *pathos* and *logos* is central: “*logos* indicates the discursive, argumentative and rational evidence that stems from coherent reasoning. (...) It arises through the invocation of data, elements, studies or conclusions that guide the argumentation” (Mateus, 2018, pp. 108–109). *Logos* is

fundamental to university communication, whose primary aim is to inform the public rigorously and transparently about matters, products, and services of public interest. However, in the competitive environment of digital platforms, it is not enough to merely inform; it is also necessary to fulfil the principle of public emotion (*pathos*). According to Charaudeau (2010), discursive strategies aimed at evoking emotion can function as rhetorical traps that dramatise content to draw the interlocutor into an emotional web.

In this context, *ethos* also plays a crucial role in university communication, as it relates to the image or credibility of the speaker, in this case, the institution. Magalhães (2019) summarises Aristotle's view of *ethos* as follows:

ethos (1) presupposes *logos* (2) and *pathos* (3): the second, linked explicitly to the speaker, is their capacity to persuade through knowledge, argumentation, and logical reasoning; the third, associated with the audience, concerns the speaker's ability to arouse emotions in the audience, moving them through the feelings they provoke. (p. 31)

Magalhães (2019) further argues that no discourse is independent of the speaker's image, as "the image permeates the discourse and the discourse constructs the image" (p. 39). The COVID-19 pandemic, the proliferation of disinformation, and growing distrust in science and public institutions have all highlighted the importance of *ethos* in the communication strategies of public universities.

Lastly, the contact established with audiences in this study is mediated through the digital platform of Instagram. This platform is analysed using digital discourse analysis (Paveau, 2017/2021), in conjunction with rhetorical discourse analysis (Charaudeau, 2010; Mateus, 2019).

3. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN UNIVERSITIES

Research into the use of marketing strategies by universities has grown in recent years (Isaacs & Mulder, 2024; Mogaji et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2020). However, academic investigations into how public universities mobilise emotions and affections in their digital discourse remain scarce. Atarama-Rojas and Vega-Foelsche (2020) analysed the use of Facebook as a communication channel by Peruvian universities, aiming to identify the elements that generate the most significant interaction. Their findings show that the most valued content is that which seeks to educate and inspire, often using audiovisual formats and focusing on research results and scientific innovation, thereby appealing to the academic community's sense of pride.

In Portugal, Almeida and Morais (2020) studied the communication of public universities at the start of the academic year. They concluded that most posts during this period focused on topics such as enrolment, registration, welcome messages, and institutional greetings from rectors. On Instagram specifically, the content was predominantly promotional. The authors also noted that the use of hashtags was associated with greater reach.

Blanco-Sánchez and Moreno-Albarracín (2023) conducted a content analysis of the Instagram profiles of the world's top five universities, according to the 2022 Shanghai Ranking (<https://www.shanghairanking.com/>). Their results reveal a degree of homogeneity in terms of format — primarily image-based posts — and a discursive emphasis on showcasing the institution's human capital and life stories. However, a discrepancy remains between the most frequently published content and the material that generates the highest engagement, with videos and content addressing social and environmental responsibility proving the most impactful.

Spiazzi and Pozobon (2024) observed that Brazilian universities actively mobilise emotions on Instagram. Their content focuses on institutional promotion, highlighting infrastructure and service quality, while also foregrounding the contributions of students and staff, and showing a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and socio-environmental causes.

In a broader study covering a more extended period and a larger sample of institutions, Sörensen et al. (2023) analysed the communication strategies of 42 Swiss universities on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter between 2014 and 2021. The research found that Instagram yielded the highest levels of interaction, with most content centred on institutional and academic topics. It also observed that universities were adapting to the affordances of digital platforms by increasingly incorporating hypertext and multimedia elements.

In the Czech context, Eger and Gangur (2024) found that engagement on Instagram was higher for photo “carousels”, while the content published by universities was primarily informative, with little investment in entertainment to connect with younger audiences. Similarly, Capriotti et al. (2024) measured and evaluated the interactivity strategies of Latin American, North American, and European universities. The authors identified an interactivity strategy centred on informative and expository posts, increasingly complemented with elements designed to foster interaction. The study highlights a gradual shift in university communication strategies aimed at promoting greater engagement and closer connections with their audiences.

Regarding the role of humour, Costa et al. (2019) compared student engagement and emotional responses to static informative posts and humorous GIFs on the Instagram profile of the Federal University of Goiás in Brazil. Their findings show that humour fosters identification and encourages engagement among prospective students preparing for entrance exams.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a rhetorical analysis of digital discourse (Mateus, 2019; Paveau, 2017/2021) focusing on the Instagram profiles of four Spanish public universities during the first 15 days of September 2024, at the start of the 2024/2025 academic year. Instagram was selected to analyse the competition for space and attention among new students within the “platform society” (van Dijck et al., 2018), as it is one of the platforms that facilitates a variety of techno-discursive compositions (Paveau, 2017/2021), including photographs, videos, artwork, “carousels”, and textual elements such as captions, emojis, and hashtags.

As Mateus (2018) contends, rhetoric is a persuasive practice aimed at influencing and shaping audiences' perceptions and reactions to a given subject. The rhetorical analysis of discourse seeks to uncover the meanings and intentions embedded in language use within communication contexts (Charaudeau, 2010). This investigation analyses the meanings and intentions conveyed in Instagram communications from four Spanish public universities, targeting their respective audiences. This rhetorical analysis of digital discourse is further enriched by semi-structured interviews with members of the university's communication teams.

4.1. SAMPLE SELECTION

The universities included in the sample are: UAB, UCM, USal and US. We compared the communication strategies of UAB with the digital performance of the largest universities (by Instagram follower count) across other macro-regions in Spain. This study is part of a doctoral thesis analysing the communication practices of Spanish and Brazilian public universities, recognising that public universities' communication budgets largely depend on Government funding allocations. The start of the academic year was chosen because, according to Papacharissi (2015), the public is particularly receptive to emotional appeals in university discourse during this period.

UAB (<https://www.uab.cat/>) was founded in 1968 and currently enrolls over 30,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students. It has a Vice-Rectorate for Communication and Culture responsible for news production for the website and social media, event organisation, press relations, visual identity, and marketing. The university maintains a presence on Facebook, X, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Telegram.

UCM (<https://www.ucm.es/>), established in 1508, currently has approximately 65,500 students. The Vice-Rectorate for Communication oversees institutional and digital communication services, press relations, and marketing. The university is active on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and TikTok.

USal (<https://www.usal.es/>), founded in 1218, enrolls around 30,000 students. Its communications department manages news production, scientific journalism, press relations, advertising, social media, and brand positioning. The university maintains profiles on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, and LinkedIn.

US (<https://www.us.es/>) has over 70,000 students. Its communications department is responsible for content production across the website, social media, press office, journal, and radio station. The university is present on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and TikTok.

4.2. CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS

Instagram data were collected manually, based on posts from the selected universities that were published on the platform in real-time. The analysis encompassed all posts from 1 to 15 September 2024, totalling 33, including those welcoming the new academic

year. The emotional appeals in the universities' discourse — namely *pathos* and *ethos* (Charaudeau, 2010) — are analysed according to Mateus' (2019) categories:

- Suggestibility: aims to influence the audience's power of choice subtly;
- Satisfaction of audience needs and desires: conveys what the audience wants to hear or read, particularly regarding self-esteem and social status;
- Emotional effects related to the speaker: emphasises the speaker's strengths, *ethos*, and credibility, seeking to inspire confidence in the quality of products and services;
- Figurative, adjectival, and connotative language: employs language designed to encourage approval of the discourse.

Charaudeau (2010) identifies social platforms as the primary form of contact in this context. Content created for these platforms is considered native digital, as defined by Paveau (2017/2021), since the communicator produces it under the influence of the digital environment and platform-specific technical possibilities and limitations. This study will analyse the following techno-discursive characteristics:

- Composition or format: multimodal discursive formations combining text, images, sound, hyperlinks, captions, hashtags, and emojis;
- Relationality: connections to discourses on other platforms;
- Enunciative amplification: the potential for content to be amplified through audience comments and interactions, a feature that is intensified on social platforms.

4.3. INTERVIEWS

The data obtained from the rhetorical analysis of digital content were complemented by semi-structured interviews with the communication teams of three of the four universities, aiming to verify how online discourse is planned. The interview with UAB was conducted in person with the Vice-Rector for Communication and Culture. The other interviews were held online via video call on Google Meet, involving the advisor to the Vice-Rector for Communication at UCM and the head of the New Media department at US. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. USal declined to participate in the interviews for this investigation.

The thematic areas explored during the interviews were: (a) planning and presence on social media; (b) organisation of the welcome activities; (c) specific characteristics of content on Instagram; and (d) reactions, interaction, and the use of emotion in online communication strategies. The first two themes provided complementary information about the objects of analysis and the event studied, while the latter points facilitated comparison with the digital rhetorical analysis in terms of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* (Charaudeau, 2010; Mateus, 2018).

5. FINDINGS

The findings are summarised in Table 1 (quantitative results) and Table 2 (qualitative results of the rhetorical analysis of digital discourse). Below, we present the outcomes by

university, first based on the Instagram analysis and then on the interviews, accompanied by images to enhance visualisation and illustrate the conclusions.

UNIVERSITY	INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT NAME	NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS	TOTAL NUMBER OF POSTS	NUMBER OF POSTS DURING THE ANALYSIS PERIOD	NUMBER OF WELCOME MESSAGES
Autonomous University of Barcelona	@uabbarcelona	49,000	2,566	5	2
Complutense University of Madrid	@uni.complutense	89,000	2,606	12	6
University of Salamanca	@usal	76,700	1,622	3	2
University of Seville	@unisevilla	62,500	4,835	13	7

Table 1. University activity on Instagram during the first 15 days of September 2024

Note. Data collected on 12 September 2024.

RHETORICAL AND DIGITAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISCOURSES	EXAMPLES FOUND IN THE ANALYSIS
Suggestibility	Calls to action: “use the form”, “attend and receive guidance”.
Satisfaction of the audience’s needs and desires (<i>pathos</i>)	Nostalgia, belonging, joy, hope, challenge, integration, protagonism, respect.
Emotional effects related to the speaker (<i>ethos</i>)	Social responsibility, internationalism, multiculturalism.
Figurative, adjectival and connotative language	Humour, poetry, TikTok aesthetics, viral content.
Composition or format	Photographs, “carousels”, videos, animations, music. Captions with emojis, hashtags and mentions. Informal language using the second person (you), except at Complutense University of Madrid. Autonomous University of Barcelona communication is in Catalan.
Relationality	With other digital platforms such as YouTube and websites. Mentions of other institutional profiles.
Enumerative expansion	Consultations, questions, and thanks. Praise for the beauty of the university and the content (University of Salamanca). Criticism (University of Seville).

Table 2. Characteristics of the digital rhetorical discourse of the universities analysed

Note. Data collected on 12 September 2024.

5.1. DIGITAL RHETORICAL DISCOURSE AT THE AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA

The content posted by @uabbarcelona includes photographs, “carousels”, and videos. The captions utilise emojis, hashtags, mentions, and informal language, addressing the audience in the second person (“you”). In this sense, the discourse is multimodal, as defined by Paveau (2017/2021). Communication is conducted in Catalan, reinforcing a sense of identification with students, staff, and the local cultural and historical context.

The first post of the month is a photograph of the campus, whose caption conveys the nostalgia students feel for the university — an emotion that, according to Mateus (2019), can meet the audience’s need for belonging: “we already miss #CampusUAB” (Figure 1). This post also received the highest number of likes during the period (1,158, number collected at 12 September 2024).

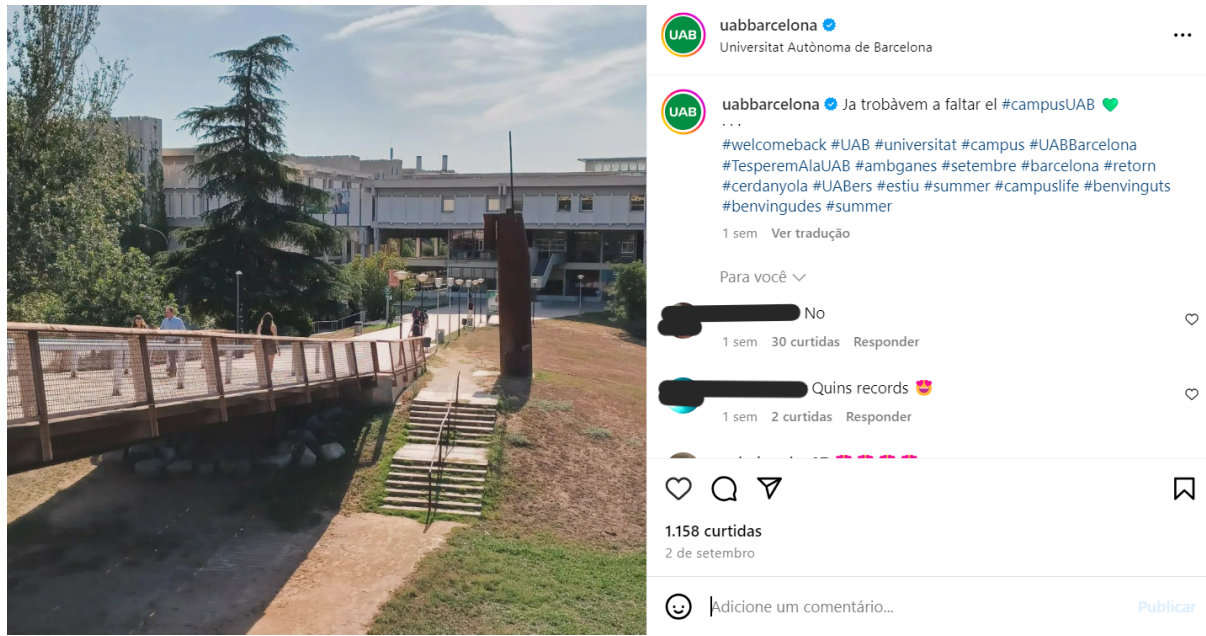


Figure 1. Photograph of the campus of the Autonomous University of Barcelona and message of nostalgia (2 September 2024)

Source. From *Já trobàvem a faltar el #campusUAB* [Photograph], by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona [@uabbarcelona], 2024a, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_aNrBLorQY/)

The post published on 12 September 2024 (Figure 2) shows smiling students returning to class, casually seated on the lawn — a highly recognisable and emblematic space on UAB’s campus, frequently featured in institutional materials. The image evokes feelings of belonging and joy. The caption, “new beginnings and reunions! Make the most of your university years”, creates an atmosphere of hope, challenge, and integration.



Figure 2. Photograph of students reuniting (12 September 2024)

Source. From *Nous inicis i retrobades! Gaudiu de l'etapa universitària al màxim!* [Photograph], by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona [@uabbarcelona], 2024c, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_of3gBoN-O/)

The other UAB posts during the period are more informative and do not explicitly address the return to classes. One exception is the video shown in Figure 3, which explains how to access the university's Wi-Fi network. It features two students, identified in the caption — “Laura Pierola and Víctor Rodríguez explain why you should use this network”. The video adds touches of humour in their delivery and body language. While meeting the audience's need for protagonism, the content employs a figurative tone through its humorous style.



Figure 3. Video on how to connect to Wi-Fi on campus (10 September 2024)

Source. From *Coneixeu la xarxa wifi @eduroam* [Video], by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona [@uabbarcelona], 2024b, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_vC6vOliEt/)

Relationality (Paveau, 2017/2021) is evident in the encouragement for users to explore additional content on the university's profile on another digital platform — its YouTube channel (Figure 3): “video for the #UAB YouTube channel”. However, suggestibility (Mateus, 2019) is less prominent than in the discourse of the other universities analysed.

No significant increase in audience comments was observed during this period. In addition to the analysed posts, UAB also published content about a new folder for sale in its university store and a visit to the campus by students who had participated in the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games.

5.2. DIGITAL RHETORICAL DISCOURSE AT THE COMPLUTENSE UNIVERSITY OF MADRID

The six posts by @uni.complutense welcoming students predominantly consist of audiovisual content: an animation featuring technographic elements (Figure 4); two videos — one showcasing the reception of international students (Figure 5) and another highlighting the university campus; two posts comprising photographs of arriving students accompanied by music (Figure 6); and one post combining images and text to describe the welcome programme. In other words, the discourses are multimodal.

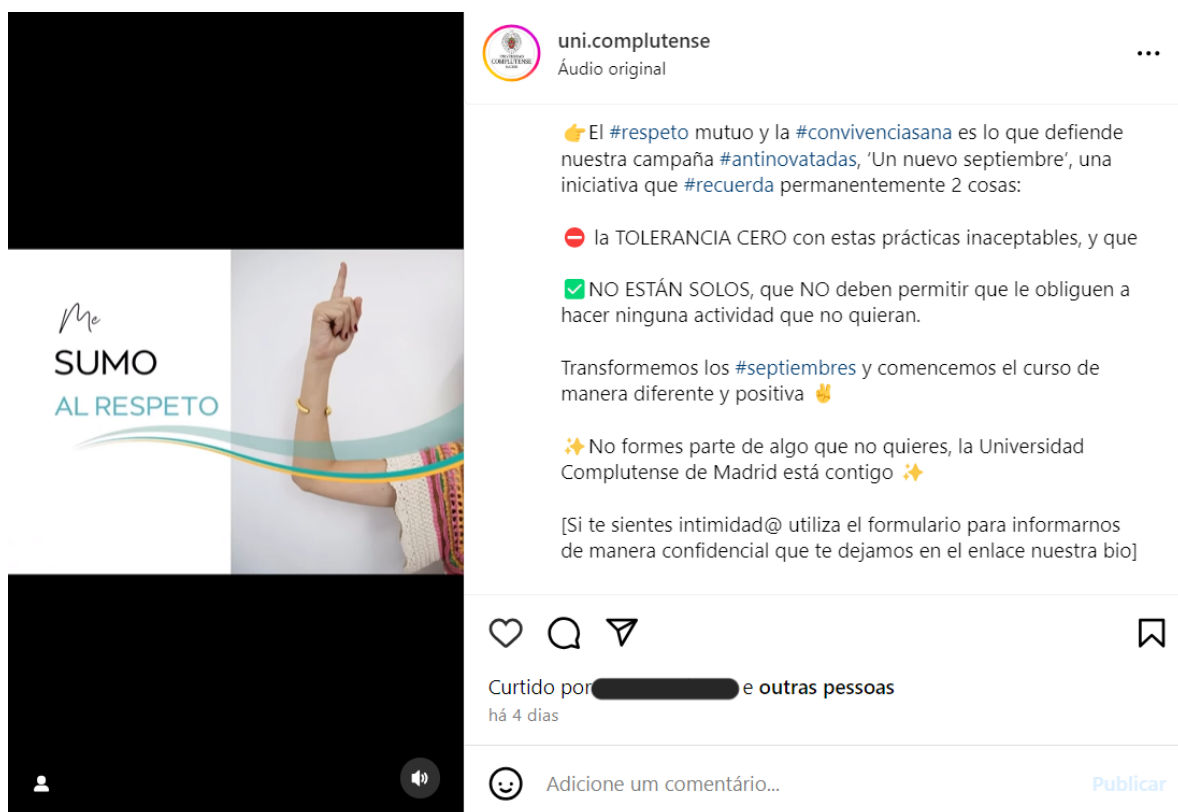


Figure 4. Video with animation about the anti-hazing campaign (8 September 2024)

Source. From *#respeto mutuo y la #convivenciasana es lo que defiende nuestra campaña #antinovatadas*, ‘Um nuevo septiembre’, una iniciativa que *#recuerda permanentemente 2 cosas* [Animation], by Universidad Complutense [@uni.complutense], 2024c, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_ngo3ouee/)



Figure 5. Welcome video for international students at the Complutense University of Madrid (6 September 2024)

Source. From #Septiembre es el mês en el que #LaComplutense se llena de actos de #bienvenida para recibir a miles de nuevos #estudiantes de hasta 12 nacionalidades distintas para que aprendam, convivan, dialoguen y disfruten de todo lo que les ofrece esta grande Universidad [Video], by Complutense University [@uni.complutense], 2024b, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_ilpaFIDmp/)



Figure 6. Photograph and music about returning to university (2 September 2024)

Source. From VOLVER [Video], by Universidad Complutense [@uni.complutense], 2024a, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_aOBfzof-T/)

The university also employs techno-discursive elements in the captions, including emojis, hashtags, mentions of other institutional profiles, and informal second-person language (Figure 4): “don’t be part of something you don’t want to be part of, the Complutense University of Madrid stands with you”. Relationality and suggestibility are present in calls such as: “if you feel intimidated, use the form we have provided in the link in our bio”. The video in Figure 4 promotes respect in the integration of new students: “#MutualRespect and #HealthyCoexistence is what our #AntiHazing campaign stands for”. This anti-bullying campaign demonstrates the university’s commitment to students and helps foster an *ethos* of social responsibility.

The video in Figure 5 reflects an effort to meet audience needs by highlighting the protagonism and belonging of young people arriving at the university, with scenes featuring the students themselves during welcome activities. The caption furthers an *ethos* (Charaudeau, 2010; Mateus, 2019) of an international university by publicising opportunities and exchange agreements: “more than 1,120 come through the #Erasmus programme. The majority of the group comes from Italy, followed by France and Germany, and they will be distributed across all faculties at Complutense”. The Erasmus programme is the primary exchange initiative among European universities.

In Figure 6, nostalgia is triggered as another emotional appeal to satisfy audience needs. The caption employs figurative language (Mateus, 2019) through poetic expression: “coming back to college, seeing your classmates again, training again, going back to the library, enjoying those pints at @barcentralucm again, returning to that routine... which, deep down, we love so much”. Additionally, the text fosters an *ethos* of a multicultural university with abundant activities: “we have a lot of culture, science, music, sport... and a great desire to share the thousands of new things we have prepared for you”.

UCM does not display the number of likes on its videos, so it is not possible to identify the post with the highest engagement on its profile. However, enunciative expansion (Paveau, 2017/2021) is observable in the comments sections, where students ask questions and express gratitude for the welcome, sharing feelings of joy and belonging at the academic year’s start: “thank you, and the same to everyone. Happy back-to-school to all!” (Figure 7).

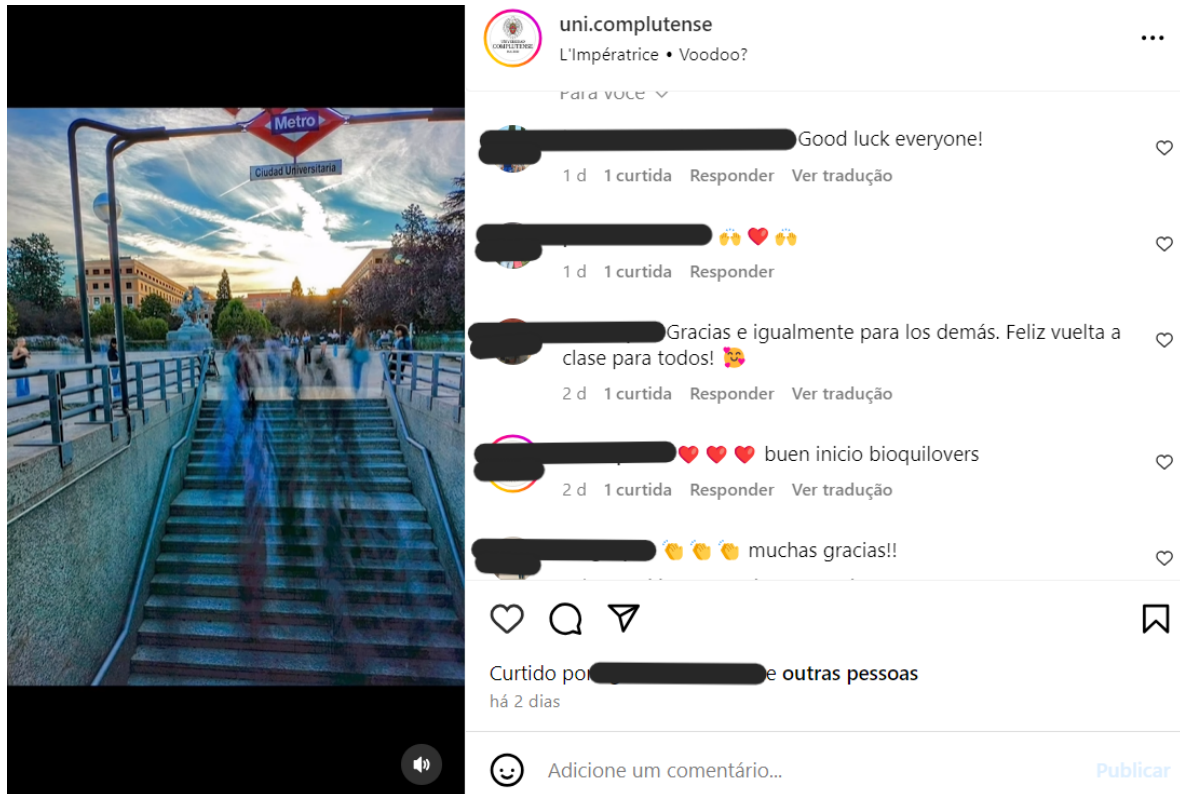


Figure 7. Comments on the welcome post by the Complutense University of Madrid (9 September 2024)

Source. From *¡¡ Happy new classes & happy new week !!* [Video], by Universidad Complutense [@uni.complutense], 2024d, Instagram.
(https://www.instagram.com/p/C_sWf4-IM85/)

Other UCM Instagram posts during the period provide information about university services, such as language courses, campus infrastructure, and departments (including heritage preservation), as well as awards received by students or graduates.

5.3. DIGITAL RHETORICAL DISCOURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SALAMANCA

The content on @usal's Instagram account combines photographs, videos, and music. The captions also include emojis, hashtags, and mentions, similar to the other universities in the sample, confirming that the discourses are multimodal.

Like UCM, which posted a photograph of students arriving on campus (Figure 6), @usal also satisfies the audience's needs through student protagonism (Figure 8). The language, although informal, is less familiar, using the plural "vosotros" (you all) rather than the singular "you", as seen with the other universities: "how are your first days of classes going?".



Figure 8. Photograph of people walking on the University of Salamanca campus and some comments (12 September 2024)

Source. From *¿Qué tal vuestros primeros días de clase?* [Photograph], by Universidad de Salamanca [@usal], 2024b, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_z3ninMjg-/)

There is also enunciative expansion with the audience, as comments reference the beauty and festivities of the university, such as “beautiful University of Salamanca”, and wish new students well: “I wish you the best of luck in your studies. Congratulations, guys” (Figure 8).

In Figure 9, USal shares a video with a TikTok-style aesthetic, where rotating the image to the right, left, up, or down changes the scenes to show different spaces, courses, and activities at the university. The video’s aesthetics, which went viral on other social networks and Instagram, represent a form of figurative language.

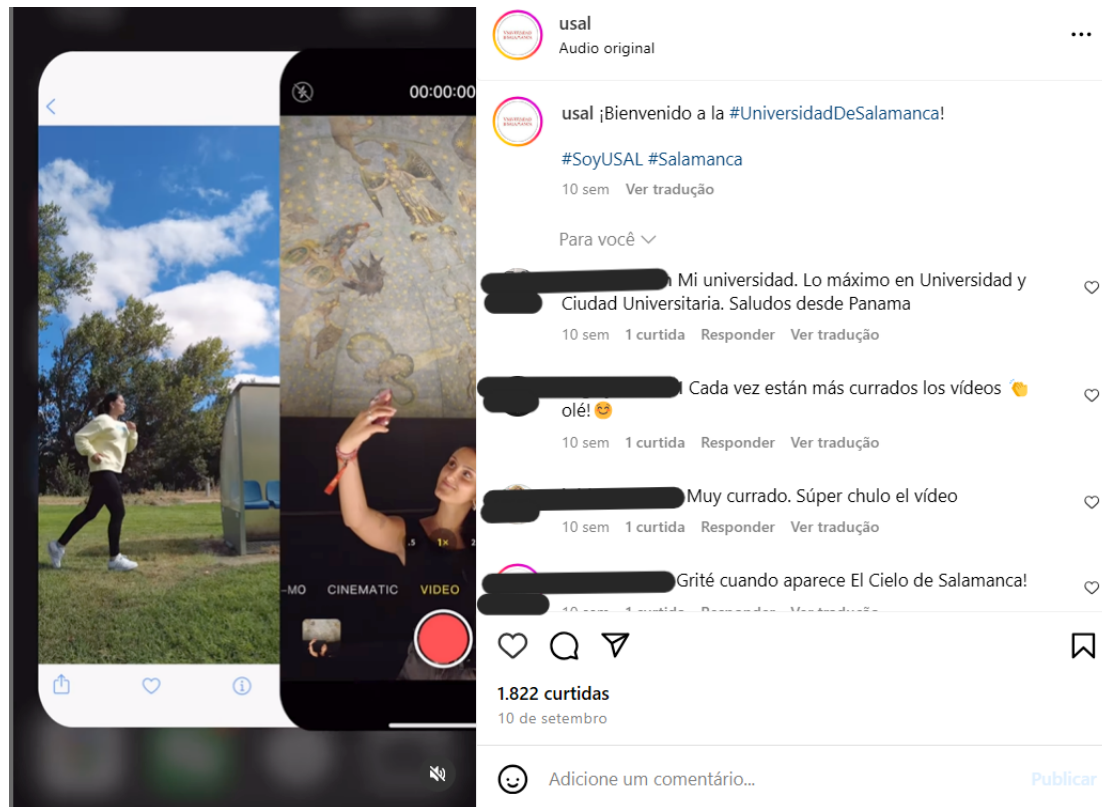


Figure 9. Video showing various scenes from campus and some comments (10 September 2024)

Source. From ¡Bienvenido a la #UniversidadDeSalamanca! [Video], by Universidad de Salamanca [@usal], 2024a, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_umfgQMWqK/)

As of 21 November 2024, this video had received 1,822 likes and 13 comments, indicating an expansion of digital discourse. Compliments centre on pride in belonging to the university: “my university. The best University and University City. Greetings from Panama”. Furthermore, it is the only university in the sample to have received commendations for its published content within the comments, as exemplified in Figure 9: “the videos are getting better and better!” and “great work. Really cool video”.

Relationality, *ethos*, and suggestibility are less prominent in USal’s discourse compared to other universities, at least during the welcome period. Besides these two posts, USal also announced its participation in Salamaq Fair, a technology fair held in the city.

5.4. DIGITAL RHETORICAL DISCOURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SEVILLE

Among the seven posts by @unisevilla, four are audiovisual pieces that combine student videos with text. There are also photo “carousels” showing students participating in welcome activities or their first days of class, along with an image featuring text that presents the welcome programme.

US employs multimodal discourse, integrating various techno-discursive elements. Captions include emojis, hashtags, and mentions of other institutional profiles. Informal

language is used, addressing the audience as “you” or “you guys”, as exemplified in Figure 10: “attend and receive guidance on the course, scholarships and services offered by the University”.



Figure 10. “Carousel” with photographs of students in welcome activities and some comments (6 September 2024)

Source. From *Días de bienvenida en la US. Asiste y recibe orientación sobre el curso, becas y servicios de la Universidad* [Photograph], by Universidad de Sevilla [@unisevilla], 2024b, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_ks1i9OWeH/)

Relationality is evident, with content linked to other platforms, encouraging the audience to access further information through links on the university’s Instagram profile: “there are still dates available at many centres. Check them out in the link in the bio” (Figure 10). These calls to action also serve as a subtle form of emotional suggestibility, promoting audience engagement.

This particular post, a “carousel” of photographs showcasing students during presentation activities, recorded the highest engagement within the analysis period (2,041 likes). Enunciative expansion is visible through comments (15 as of the analysis date; Figure 11). The comments section serves as a space for frequently asked questions, with the public enquiring about activities, timetables, and academic matters: “is the presentation for US students in general, or does each faculty have a different one on the same day?”. However, some comments are critical, referencing high tuition fees and the lack of Black representation in the photos: “from today onwards, your bitterness begins and your pockets will be empty”.



Figure 11. “Carousel” with photographs of students in welcome activities and some comments (6 September 2024)

Source. From *Días de bienvenida en la US. Asiste y recibe orientación sobre el curso, becas y servicios de la Universidad* [Photograph], by Universidad de Sevilla [@unisevilla], 2024b, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_ks1i9OWeH/)

Regarding the post shown in Figure 10, protagonism and a sense of belonging are fostered through images of students engaged in activities. Similarly, the video in Figure 12 features students discussing their goals for the academic year. Despite this effort to build identification, the enunciative amplification includes some negative comments about the university's projects and alliances: “my purpose is for US to cancel its agreements with the Zionist entities with which it collaborates”. This comment likely relates to the ongoing hostilities between Israel and Palestine¹.

¹ It is estimated that around 1,300 Palestinians currently reside in Spain, according to the HuffPost website (Redacción HuffPost, 2023).



Figure 12. Video about students' goals for the course (11 September 2024)

Source. From *Primera semana del curso* [Video], by Universidad de Sevilla [@unisevilla], 2024d, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_xhfvgkmO/)

Another emotional device found in US's welcome communication is the use of figurative language, including humour and trending topics (such as recommended and viral content). Figure 13 shows part of a video where a student appears to jump over a university building as a giant. When landing, the text "course 2024/2025" appears on screen.



Figure 13. Welcome video (9 September 2024)

Source. From *Buen inicio de curso* [Video], by Universidad de Sevilla [@unisevilla], 2024c, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C_sadGzNv2T/)

At the start of the academic year, the university highlights its positive attributes while promoting student leadership and fostering a sense of belonging. It cultivates an *ethos* of internationalisation by sharing details in captions (Figure 14 and Figure 15) about the number of students on academic mobility programmes and their countries of origin:

the University of Seville organised a welcome day for 1,455 international mobility students (...). This year, the countries sending the most students to US are Italy, Germany, France and Poland within Europe. Additionally, US welcomes students from countries outside the continent, including Mexico, the United States, Brazil and Chile.



Figure 14. Welcome video for international students and some comments (4 September 2024)

Source. From *La US acogerá este año a unos 3.000 estudiantes internacionales* [Video], by Universidad de Sevilla [@unisevilla], 2024a, Instagram.

(https://www.instagram.com/p/C_fkMkvgPfZ/)



Figure 15. Welcome video for international students and some comments (4 September 2024)

Source. From *La US acogerá este año a unos 3,000 estudiantes internacionales* [Video], by Universidad de Sevilla [@unisevilla], 2024a, Instagram.
(https://www.instagram.com/p/C_fkMkvgPfZ/)

Some comments from Spanish students criticise the welcome being focused mainly on international students: “domestic students are also welcome”. Others express eagerness to start university or nostalgia for their time in US: “I miss Seville and US”.

Other posts during this period address sexual health, exchange experiences, and sports opportunities available while studying at the university.

5.5. INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS FROM THE UNIVERSITIES ANALYSED

The semi-structured interviews conducted with communication professionals at the selected universities serve as a complementary method to understand how they plan online communication and welcome new students. At USal, the communications team declined to participate in an interview for this study. Consequently, we were unable to gain further insight into the digital rhetorical discourse observed during our analysis of this institution.

At UAB, we interviewed the Vice-Rector for Communication and Culture, who also holds a PhD and is a Professor of Communication. She explained that a journalist and a funded student manage the university’s social media profiles. The institution has a communication plan that focuses on UAB’s recently updated visual identity, as well as a social media guide, best practices, and digital safety guidelines. The vice-rector stressed the

importance of being active on social media, stating that “younger generations no longer read websites — they only follow digital platforms, primarily Instagram and TikTok” (personal interview, September 23, 2024). The team evaluates performance every six months and adjusts content based on each platform’s audience.

The university’s Instagram features content on services, shop products, science communication, campus spaces, and a student guide. According to the interviewee, the communication strategy avoids humour and memes, instead focusing on evoking emotions related to agency and participation. Stories often include questions to stimulate community engagement and interaction.

Students who help manage social media have mobile phones provided by the university and produce content themselves — “from student to student” — as illustrated in the video in Figure 3. Our digital rhetorical analysis confirms the use of informal language and an emphasis on student protagonism.

At UCM, we interviewed the head of the marketing team and advisor to the vice-rector for Communication. He is a professor of Information Sciences with a PhD in Advertising and Public Relations. UCM’s social media accounts are managed by two staff members: one from the Press Office and one from Strategic Content. While the university has a communications plan, it is not publicly available. The team holds weekly meetings. The interviewee emphasised the importance of a strong social media presence: “if you are not there, you do not exist — especially for young people” (personal interview, September 12, 2024). The team aims to tailor both the content and tone to match the demographic profiles of audiences across platforms and monitors engagement monthly using the MediaTool software.

Instagram content includes posts on research, technology transfer and university life (such as sport and culture). According to the interviewee, sport and cultural activities are among the most valued by younger students, as evidenced in Figure 6. Additional posts during the analysed period — aside from welcome messages — also contribute to science communication.

UCM’s communication emphasises feelings of pride and belonging (Figure 5), but does not employ trends or memes. Instead, it builds an online *ethos* centred on tradition, history, experience, innovation, cutting-edge research, technology, and sustainability. The posts generating the highest engagement relate to hazing and student welcome initiatives. The advisor noted that the anti-bullying campaign (Figure 4) was designed to put an end to abusive or inappropriate hazing practices. Our digital rhetorical analysis revealed a focus on agency, services available to the academic community, and scientific outreach.

At US, we interviewed the head of the New Media sector in the Directorate of Communications — a journalist and specialist in marketing and social media. He manages all of the university’s social media platforms with support from student interns. The team adheres to a style and usage guide for social media. It maintains an online directory that compiles the university’s official social media accounts, including those of faculty members and other departments.

Although the university does not have a dedicated communication plan, the team follows the institution's overall strategic plan. They organise weekly departmental meetings, but also allow for a degree of spontaneity, making use of memes and viral content, as illustrated in the video in Figure 5. Monthly performance reviews are conducted using Hootsuite, and content planning is informed by these results, with formats and tone adjusted in response to audience interaction.

The interviewee emphasised the need to be active on social platforms: “young people get their information from social media. Other forms of media are obsolete or too formal” (personal interview, September 5, 2024). The communications team prioritises serving the academic community over virality. However, the professional noted that algorithm changes occur rapidly and that student engagement remains limited: “they must take the lead in interacting” (personal interview, September 5, 2024), as shown in the video in Figure 12.

US's social media content focuses on the community, student achievements and awards, sports, research, cultural heritage, art and architecture. Stories are used to share services and urgent announcements. The university also promotes itself through themes such as internationalisation (Figure 14 and Figure 15), sex education, knowledge dissemination, contributions to the city, industry relations, and technological innovation. The emotions targeted in communication include agency (as seen in Figure 10 and Figure 12), humour (Figure 13), pride of the city, and solidarity.

The most engaging recent posts include the academic calendar, which received a high number of likes and shares, as well as a welcome video featuring students (Figure 12). Our analysis highlighted the use of humour, agency, and the strategic role of welcome messages in the competition for attention on Instagram, a finding echoed by the interviewee.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Through the rhetorical analysis of the digital discourse of these four Spanish universities during the first 15 days of the 2024/25 academic year, it is evident that all universities engage in multimodal communication on Instagram, characterised by the use of various techno-graphic elements (Paveau, 2017/2021), such as videos, photographs, art, text, mentions, emojis, and hashtags. This corroborates the findings of Sörensen et al. (2023) in their study of Swiss universities on social media, demonstrating that Spanish universities similarly adapt to platform resources through the use of hypertexts and multimodal content.

The language used is primarily informal and friendly, using forms of “you” or “you all”. Additionally, relationality (Paveau, 2017/2021) is observable through references to content published in stories or on other platforms, such as YouTube or websites linked in the universities' Instagram biographies.

Enunciative expansion (Paveau, 2017/2021) is more prominent in posts by USal, US, and UCM, possibly due to more frequent posting, a larger Instagram audience, or because UAB communication team prioritises encouraging participation through other means, such as stories. The audience uses the comments sections to ask questions,

praise (notably among USal followers), and critique (especially concerning US). However, some authors argue that post frequency and follower numbers do not necessarily correlate (Ladogina et al., 2021).

Regarding the emotional dimensions of discourse (Mateus, 2019), US and UCM notably construct an *ethos* of internationalisation in their student receptions. All these universities satisfy audience needs and desires through a sense of protagonism and belonging, with some also evoking nostalgia. This finding aligns with the study by Spiazzi and Pozobon (2024) on Brazilian universities, which similarly emphasise the protagonism of the academic community in Instagram communication.

Concerning figurative language, humour is more extensively employed by US compared to the others. UCM, conversely, places greater emphasis on information and services, as confirmed by the communications advisor interviewed and other publications from the period, which include scientific dissemination (Farnese, 2023). Hence, UCM focuses more on the *logos* aspect of communication. The vice-rector of UAB also views social media as a channel for disseminating information, more than just use it for entertainment, and viral memes. This view is supported by Capriotti et al. (2024), who found that universities in Latin America, North America, and Europe tend to prioritise informational content over entertainment in their social media strategies.

In conclusion, there is a clear utilisation of the institution's human capital and personal narratives, as demonstrated by Blanco-Sánchez and Moreno-Albarracín (2023). Universities are progressively shifting towards a social sphere approach to increase content appeal and foster interaction (Larson, 2024). Nevertheless, they maintain a commitment to information and transparency, hallmarks of public interest communication (Zémor, 2009). Furthermore, appealing to the academic community's sense of pride remains one of the most effective emotional strategies for engaging audiences (Atarama-Rojas & Vega-Foelsche, 2020).

The interviews reveal that communication professionals deliberately and strategically use these emotional discourse forms, especially protagonism, recognising that young people appreciate seeing themselves reflected in their university's communication. They also mobilise *pathos* to compete for audience attention and engagement, adapting to the recommendation and viralisation dynamics of the "platform society" (van Dijck et al., 2018), particularly during welcome events, which present opportunities for targeted communication with students.

All professionals agree that engaging young people requires a presence on social media platforms, as these are their primary sources of information. These findings align with Torrente and Cabrera's (2024) research on the importance of social media planning and the role of communication managers in Spanish universities. These authors highlight issues such as a lack of institutional support, communication department limitations, and scarce resources.

This study is limited by the number of universities analysed and the short time frame considered. Therefore, its findings cannot be generalised to all Spanish universities but can offer valuable insights for other institutions and regions. Future research

should consider analysing university discourse over an extended period, including additional topics that evoke emotional engagement, and expanding the sample to encompass universities from all regions of Spain.

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