

DIVISIONS IN MOTION: Visual Affective Polarization on TikTok During the 2024 European Parliament Elections

Divisiones en movimiento: Polarización afectiva visual en TikTok durante las elecciones al Parlamento
Europeo de 2024

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KEYWORDS

*Visual polarization
Affective polarization
Radical and far-right
parties
TikTok
Politainment
Populism
Political communication*

ABSTRACT

Visual polarization is a key element of digital political communication, reinforcing group identity and deepening affective divisions. During the 2024 European elections, radical and far-right candidates used TikTok to modernize their image and promote polarizing, anti-establishment narratives. An analysis of N = 190 videos posted by seven candidates reveals a preference for emotionally charged, simplified content while avoiding interactive features. This strategy fostered in-group cohesion, heightened ideological divides, and increased the risk of misinformation, limiting substantive debate and mobilization. These findings highlight the role of visual rhetoric in shaping contemporary political discourse and its impact on polarization in digital environments.

PALABRAS CLAVE

*Polarización visual
Polarización afectiva
Partidos de extrema derecha
TikTok
Espectacularización política
Populismo
Comunicación política*

RESUMEN

La polarización visual es un elemento clave de la comunicación política digital, que refuerza la identidad grupal y profundiza las divisiones afectivas. Durante las Elecciones al Parlamento Europeo de 2024, candidatos de derecha radical y extrema derecha utilizaron TikTok para modernizar su imagen y difundir narrativas polarizadoras y anti-establishment. El análisis de N = 190 vídeos de siete candidatos muestra una preferencia por los contenidos simplificados y de alto impacto emocional, con escaso margen para la interactividad. Esta estrategia fortaleció la cohesión identitaria, amplificó las divisiones ideológicas y aumentó el riesgo de desinformación, limitando el debate sustantivo y la movilización. Los hallazgos subrayan el impacto de la retórica visual en la polarización digital.

Recibido: XX/ XX / XXXX

Aceptado: XX/ XX / XXXX

1. Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament elections, held between June 6 and 9, marked a pivotal moment in the political landscape of the European Union. Radical and far-right parties significantly increased their influence, shaping electoral discourse and raising pressing ethical concerns about the impact of polarization on democratic quality (Arroyas et al., 2022; Mudde, 2024; Picheta, 2024). Although these parties had already gained traction in previous elections (Manucci, 2021; Martín-Cubas et al., 2018; Mudde, 2014, 2019; Popivanov, 2022), the 2024 elections saw a pronounced normalization of extreme views within mainstream political narratives (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024).

The increasing acceptance of extreme perspectives is closely linked to the growing use of digital platforms by radical-right and populist parties. These platforms facilitate the dissemination of polarizing messages, often targeting marginalized communities such as immigrants and refugees (Lilleker & Pérez-Escobar, 2023) or women (Carlson, 2019). Additionally, other narratives aim to discredit political opponents or ideological adversaries (Chambers & Kopstein, 2023). Frequently based on fabricated or decontextualized content, these messages intensify societal instability and deepen political polarization (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2024).

Among digital platforms, TikTok has emerged as a particularly effective tool for populist and radical-right parties across Europe. These parties have achieved high levels of engagement, often surpassing traditional parties by employing emotive and visually compelling content that resonates with younger audiences (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023). Radical-right leaders utilize TikTok's features to enhance their visibility, strategically incorporating *politainment* elements into their campaigns (Bonansinga, 2024; Classen et al., 2024; Widholm et al., 2024). While some parties fully exploit TikTok's affordances with bold and creative strategies, others adopt more restrained approaches, aligning their activity with traditional political communication methods (Cervi et al., 2023; López Cañellas, 2022; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023).

Existing studies (Donà, 2022; Jiménez-Aguilar, 2023; Vahter & Jakobson, 2023; Volk, 2022) have primarily focused on national-level analyses of radical-right parties. However, the 2024 European elections offer an opportunity to examine TikTok's use by radical-right parties from a comparative, transnational perspective. This research seeks to identify the main characteristics of populist radical-right discourse on TikTok, providing insights into their visual and rhetorical strategies.

A central concern is the role of visual polarization, which has emerged as one of the most significant consequences of radical-right rhetoric during the 2024 elections (Green, 2024). The visual content disseminated by these parties not only amplifies divisions but also fosters disinformation and manipulative narratives, thereby undermining social cohesion and trust in democratic institutions.

This study highlights the urgent need for media literacy initiatives to counteract the divisive effects of radical-right rhetoric on platforms like TikTok. As these strategies continue to reshape political communication across Europe, fostering critical thinking among citizens is essential to safeguarding democratic values.

1.1. Visual Affective Polarization as a Communication Strategy in Electoral Campaigns

Political polarization has traditionally been interpreted from an ideological perspective, referring to the divergence of opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and political stances among adversaries (Dalton, 1987). However, social media has intensified a more affective form of polarization, where negative emotions and attitudes toward members of opposing political groups increase while affinity toward one's political allies strengthens (Iyengar et al., 2012). Affective polarization shifts the focus from ideological differences to the emotional dimensions of political competition, highlighting how political parties and politicians perceive their adversaries with growing hostility while fostering deeper emotional connections with their followers (Huddy et al., 2015).

Beyond textual discourse, political actors increasingly leverage visually oriented platforms to attract and mobilize supporters during election campaigns. These platforms enable the strategic creation of highly emotional visual narratives, facilitating communication tactics rooted in affective polarization. Such narratives intensify affinity toward political allies while fostering negative attitudes toward political adversaries (Iyengar et al., 2012).

In addition to their role in image management and disseminating campaign information, visual platforms have become key tools for electoral mobilization (Filimonov et al., 2016; Gamir-Ríos et al.,

2022). By combining visual and emotional elements, political actors enhance the emotional impact of their communication strategies, paving the way for approaches that use polarization as a means of differentiation between parties and politicians with varying ideological perspectives.

In a political context marked by increased party fragmentation and electoral volatility (Gidron et al., 2020), the rhetoric and communication strategies of political actors have contributed to the creation of political identities that transcend traditional ideological differences. Social media further enables political actors to dedicate part of their discourse to criticizing opponents, emphasizing their flaws, mistakes, and contradictions (Nai & Maier, 2021). This dynamic has intensified political polarization globally, defined as the growing division and differentiation between distant political groups or individuals (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

These strategies emphasize a sense of belonging to a group—the “us”—in contrast to the perception of another group—the “them”—which is portrayed as a threat (Rebollo-Bueno & Ferreira, 2023). This dynamic takes on an affective dimension when framed as a conflict between “the people” and “the elite,” where populist actors claim to represent popular sovereignty while fostering distrust, aversion, and disdain toward the management and ideology of their political opponents (Gidron et al., 2020).

Studies indicate that political polarization manifests differently across platforms, highlighting how interactional and affective polarization vary within a multiplatform environment (Yarchi et al., 2021). Among the strategies employed by political actors on social networks, the instrumental use of visual communication to reinforce group identity, evoke emotional responses, and drive affective polarization plays a critical role in shaping perceptions and contributing to ideological divides (Yarchi et al., 2021). On visually oriented platforms, populist political actors strategically craft emotional narratives that appeal to national identity and cultural values, fostering loyalty among political allies while intensifying negative attitudes toward opponents (Iyengar et al., 2012).

The strategic use of Instagram as it relates to political polarization has been well-documented (Bast, 2021; De-Lima-Santos et al., 2023; Zamora et al., 2024). These studies provide a nuanced understanding of how political leaders leverage visuals to shape their public image and influence voter perceptions, thereby contributing to political polarization. By reinforcing group identity through national identity, cultural values, and emotional connections, political actors craft divisive narratives that deepen ideological divides.

Bast (2021) examines the visual strategies employed by right-wing populist politicians on Instagram, drawing on image management theory and populist communication to explore how imagery shapes public personas and influences voter perceptions in the context of populism. Expanding on the intersection of visual communication and politics, De-Lima-Santos et al. (2023) incorporate insights from polarization, digital campaigning, and social semiotics, using computational semiotics to analyze visual patterns during the polarized 2018 and 2022 Brazilian elections. Their findings reveal significant shifts in campaign imagery during periods of heightened polarization. Building on these approaches, Zamora et al. (2024) apply a visual framing framework to examine the impact of visual affective polarization on Instagram among European radical and far-right political parties. Their study highlights the diverse strategies used to construct political identities through visual rhetoric, emphasizing the complexity of identifying shared patterns in visual polarization across different contexts.

In the case of TikTok, research examining affective polarization from a visual perspective and its manifestation on this trending platform remains limited, often addressing polarization only tangentially. Hohner et al. (2024) explored the mobilization strategies of radical and far-right groups on TikTok outside of electoral campaigns, employing a mixed-method approach to analyze the dynamics of radical visuals at scale, with a focus on popularity and engagement. Their findings revealed that while conspiracist content thrives in terms of overall popularity and internal mobilization, nationalist and protest-oriented content succeeds by employing a variety of persuasive visual elements to attract and engage external audiences.

Focusing specifically on how right-wing populist parties and politicians use TikTok as part of their online communication strategies, González-Aguilar et al. (2023) examined the presence of hate speech and the identification of certain groups as “enemies” of “the people.” Their analysis highlighted differences in engagement associated with the inclusion of hate speech and entertaining or humorous

features. However, their study, which compared only three cases from different geographical regions, encountered difficulties in identifying a consistent pattern in the use of these strategies.

Our study seeks to address this gap in comparative research on affective polarization on TikTok from a visual perspective. By focusing on the platform affordance approach, we aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how TikTok's unique features shape the visual communication strategies of political actors and influence the dynamics of affective polarization.

1.2. Leveraging TikTok Affordances for Radical and Far-right Political Strategy

Initially focused on music and dance, TikTok launched in 2017 and quickly gained global popularity, particularly among younger audiences drawn to its lip-syncing and choreographed content (Cervi et al., 2023). Over time, the platform has evolved into a tool for political communication, driven by the mediatization of politics, which promotes the “spectacularization” of political activities through entertainment-driven strategies, or *politainment*, to expand outreach (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2022). While this trend is often criticized for trivializing political discourse, it also has the potential to make politics more accessible, reconnecting citizens with public life in a fragmented media landscape (Battista, 2023).

Both traditional and emerging political entities have embraced TikTok's affordances to achieve political objectives such as agenda-setting, candidate promotion, and supporter mobilization (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023; Zamora-Medina, 2023). TikTok's viral nature facilitates the dissemination of political messages tailored for younger audiences through memes, humor, slang, and popular music, often used to satirize opponents or critique the media (Fernández Arriola, 2023). Political actors across the ideological spectrum have recognized the platform's potential, particularly given that 68.8% of its users in 2024 were aged 18–34 (Statista, 2024).

Radical and far-right groups have capitalized on TikTok's predominantly youthful demographic, reaching an audience of approximately 142 million within the European Union. These parties have gained significant traction on the platform, accounting for nearly 40% of user accounts following Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and amassing 39 million likes and 2 million followers in 2024—figures that far surpass those of other political groups (Goujard et al., 2024).

To maximize their reach and engagement, radical and far-right parties utilize TikTok's participatory features, such as duets, stitches, challenges, and reactions, fostering interaction and amplifying their content. Among these features, duets have been extensively studied for their role in creating “echo chambers,” where hate speech is propagated, radical positions are validated, and confrontation is encouraged (Amador, 2024; Weimann & Masri, 2020).

TikTok's architecture supports decentralized content creation, enabling users to participate in political discourse by generating, amplifying, and resharing content. The use of humor, gamification, and emotional appeals enhances engagement, with posts featuring anger, humor, or celebration achieving higher interaction rates (Fernández Arriola, 2023; Widholm et al., 2024). Radical and far-right groups exploit these dynamics to evoke negative emotions such as anger and indignation, alongside positive sentiments like pride and hope. These groups rely heavily on emotional rhetoric (*pathos*) to foster engagement and promote polarizing narratives (Oskolkov et al., 2024; Rifesser, 2023; Widmann, 2020).

By bypassing traditional media gatekeepers, TikTok enables radical and far-right parties to communicate directly with audiences within a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017). These parties use short videos to construct symbolic enemies and amplify anti-establishment sentiments, tactics central to their populist appeal (González-Aguilar et al., 2023; Pérez-Díaz & Arroyas Langa, in press). Their messaging often incorporates nationalist, xenophobic, and anti-democratic themes, while visual strategies are employed to modernize their image, appealing to a broader electorate through a process of “de-demonization” (Bonansinga, 2024; Heyna, 2024).

TikTok's format of short, engaging videos enables radical and far-right groups to simplify complex issues into accessible “snackable” content (Ozduzen et al., 2023). Music plays a central role in these narratives, with popular and epic tracks used to construct visual stories that amplify nationalist themes (Cervi et al., 2023; López-Cañellas, 2022). The platform's creative tools—including filters, emojis, and sound effects—enhance the visual appeal of these messages, resonating strongly with younger audiences. Emojis, for example, are used to simplify ideas or encode extremist messages to bypass censorship (Classen et al., 2024; Ozduzen et al., 2023). Hashtags serve dual purposes:

connecting messages to broader trends for visibility and creating closed communities for disseminating extremist content (Hohner et al., 2024).

Radical and far-right discourse on TikTok aligns seamlessly with the platform's logic, employing tactics such as provocation, conspiracy theories, emotionalization, and alarmism to drive engagement. These strategies emphasize crisis narratives, fostering perceptions of social decay, inequality, and relative deprivation (Classen et al., 2024; Engesser et al., 2017). Leaders of these groups combine entertainment-oriented stylistic resources with traditional personalization strategies, presenting candidates as relatable and approachable through the sharing of personal details or participation in memes (Barragán-Romero et al., 2024; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021).

TikTok's algorithm plays a pivotal role in amplifying radical and far-right content. By prioritizing material that provokes strong emotional reactions, the platform not only ensures high engagement but also facilitates the spread of polarizing narratives (Heyna, 2024; Pérez-Curiel & Baptista, 2024). The *For You* page algorithm favors trending and previously viewed content, intensifying users' exposure to biased material and creating an ideological "rabbit hole" effect that can lead to audience radicalization (Boucher, 2022; Widholm et al., 2024).

Despite TikTok's content moderation policies, radical material remains easily accessible, reflecting significant gaps in enforcement. This lack of effective moderation normalizes fringe ideologies and leaves users vulnerable to extremist rhetoric (Boucher, 2022). As radical and far-right groups adapt to TikTok's unique affordances, they exploit its potential to reshape political communication, leveraging entertainment-driven strategies to engage and influence a broad audience.

The 2024 European elections provide a unique opportunity to assess the effective use of TikTok by European political actors from radical and far-right parties, addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent did European radical-right candidates employ TikTok's affordances—technical, content-based, and persuasive—to mobilize their voters?

The literature identifies two primary approaches political actors use on TikTok. One perspective emphasizes bold strategies aimed at engaging young audiences by leveraging TikTok's unique features within a *politainment* context (Bonansinga, 2024; Classen et al., 2024; Widholm et al., 2024). The other highlights a more conventional approach, where political actions align with the formality and seriousness of traditional parties (Cervi et al., 2023; López-Cañellas, 2022; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). Radical-right actors are anticipated to derive significant benefits from TikTok's affordances, utilizing humor, memes, and emotionally resonant content to simplify complex ideologies, making their messages more shareable and fostering echo chambers (*H1*). Additionally, TikTok's informal, visually driven culture aligns with anti-establishment and countercultural narratives, enabling radical-right actors to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and spread polarizing messages, thereby increasing visibility, and engaging younger, less politically active voters.

RQ2: What kinds of visual affective polarization strategies were most effective in engaging voters?

Previous studies demonstrate that populist actors create emotional narratives to strengthen national identity while amplifying negative sentiments toward opponents (Iyengar et al., 2012). TikTok plays a central role in driving affective polarization by reinforcing group identity and manipulating emotions through its content (Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2022; Knudsen, 2021; Yarchi et al., 2021). Nationalist and protest-oriented content, employing persuasive visual elements, effectively attracts external audiences (Hohner et al., 2024). Additionally, the use of hate speech and the identification of "enemies" of the people further intensify polarization (González-Aguilar et al., 2023). Based on this evidence, it is hypothesized (*H2*) that radical and far-right candidates will employ emotional narratives, incorporating negative references to opponents and ideological symbols, to mobilize support.

2. Sampling and Data Collection

Our study investigates the extent to which European radical-right candidates utilized TikTok's affordances to mobilize voters and identifies the most effective visual affective polarization strategies for voter engagement. To answer these research questions, a quantitative content analysis was conducted, focusing on a strategically selected sample of radical and far-right candidates in the 2024

European Parliament elections. The sampling criteria ensured representativeness by including candidates with significant parliamentary relevance or projected visibility.

Certain radical and far-right candidates were excluded based on three criteria:

1. Radical and far-right parties that secured fewer than three seats in the 2019 European Parliament elections.
2. Prominent candidates without an official TikTok profile, such as Sebastiaan Stöteler (Partij voor de Vrijheid – Party for Freedom [PVV], Netherlands).
3. European candidates with rarely updated TikTok accounts, such as Maximilian Krah (Alternative für Deutschland – Alternative for Germany [AfD], Germany) or Roberto Vannacci (Lega per Salvini Premier – League for Salvini Premier [LSP], Italy).









The final sample consisted of five lead candidates:

- @viktor_a_tiktokon (Viktor Orbán, Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség – Hungary),
- @tomvandendriessche (Tom Vandendriessche, Vlaams Belang – Belgium),
- @jorgebuxade (Jorge Buxadé, VOX – Spain),
- @jordanbardella (Jordan Bardella, Rassemblement National – France), and
- @haraldivilimsky (Harald Vilimsky, Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs – Austria).

To enhance the representativeness of the sample and fully illustrate the political landscape of right-wing populism in the 2024 European Parliament elections, we also included two additional candidates: Giorgia Meloni (@giorgiameloni_ufficiale, Fratelli d'Italia – Italy) and Alvisé Pérez (@alviseperez, Se Acabó La Fiesta – Spain). Although these two candidates did not secure seats in the 2019 elections, polling data predicted their parties would gain significant relevance and visibility in 2024—a projection that was ultimately confirmed.

Thus, the final sample comprised seven lead candidates, offering an in-depth analysis of their TikTok strategies, including messaging, engagement tactics, and the dissemination of ideological positions. This sample enables the examination of TikTok usage across varying political and cultural contexts, showcasing how different European leaders with significant parliamentary representation leverage the platform. Furthermore, the inclusion of Alvisé Pérez reflects our aim to capture the diversity of radical and far-right parties within the European spectrum.

Table 1. Sample distribution of TikTok videos by European radical and far-right political candidates

	European candidate	Political party	Country	TikTok profile	TikTok followers	Number of videos
	Giorgia Meloni	<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i>	Italy	@giorgiameloni_ufficiale	1.6M	20
	Jordan Bardella	<i>Rassemblement National</i>	France	@jordanbardella	1.3M	30
	Alvise Pérez	<i>Se Acabó La Fiesta</i>	Spain	@alviseperez	165K	13
	Viktor Orbán	<i>Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség</i>	Hungary	@viktor_a_tiktokon	176K	22
	Jorge Buxadé	<i>VOX</i>	Spain	@jorgebuxade	78K	34
	Harald Vilimsky	<i>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</i>	Austria	@haraldvilimsky	4K	16
	Tom Vandendriessche	<i>Vlaams Belang</i>	Belgium	@tomvandendriessche	4K	55

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

3. Fieldwork and Data Analysis

This research collected all TikTok posts ($N = 190$ videos) shared by the selected candidates between May 25 and June 9, 2024. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample, including the number of analyzed videos per candidate and country. To analyze the TikTok videos, a coding sheet was developed (see Annex 1), structured into five sets of variables, each addressing specific dimensions of visual and discursive content for a comprehensive examination. This coding sheet is based on those employed in previous and ongoing studies (Marcos-García et al., in press; Morejón-Llamas, 2023):

1. **Descriptive Variables:**
These variables captured fundamental elements such as the number of posts, posting dates, candidate profiles, and engagement metrics (likes and comments). This provided a quantitative foundation for assessing reach, activity levels, and overall visibility.
2. **Technical Variables:**
These variables examined structural elements such as video type, format, and the presence and functionality of music. Additionally, content source, multimodal linguistic elements (like emojis, hashtags, surveys, and mentions), and type of post were analyzed to understand how technical features shape content presentation and enhance engagement.
3. **Content Variables:**
This set analyzed who appeared in the videos, the context in which they were featured, the activities performed, and whether the content was political or non-political. These variables facilitated the identification of visual narratives within the videos.
4. **Persuasion Variables:**
These variables focused on rhetorical strategies (*ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*) and the tone of the

content, identifying persuasive techniques based on leadership appeals, emotional triggers, or factual evidence.

5. Affective Polarization Variables:

This set assessed defiant attitudes toward institutions, the use of ideological symbols, stereotypes, divisive language, and calls to mobilization. These variables captured the ideological and emotional underpinnings of the content, shedding light on the degree of polarization present.

A manual pretest coding analysis was conducted with two coders using a sample of 19 videos (10% of the dataset). The videos were analyzed in successive phases to ensure consistent application of the coding criteria. Results demonstrated acceptable reliability for nearly all variables (Holsti SR coefficient > 0.70). Once adequate reliability was confirmed in the pretest, the coding of the entire sample was carried out.

4. Findings

The findings are structured in alignment with the research questions:

RQ1: To what extent did European radical-right candidates employ TikTok's affordances—technical, content-based, and persuasive—to mobilize their voters?

4.1. Technical Affordances

The candidates exclusively employed simple video formats (100%), avoiding interactive formats such as duets or challenges. The most utilized format consisted of videos incorporating effects, text, and music (42.1%), followed by videos with music alone (16.8%) and videos with text alone (13.2%). Music featured in 64.2% of the videos, underscoring its significant role ($\chi^2 = 28.74, p = 2.6e^{-5}$) in capturing attention on the platform. Videos with music were particularly prevalent in opposition-focused posts (22.13%) and deliberation-themed posts (20.49%). In contrast, videos without music were primarily associated with information dissemination (22.06%).

Music with a narrative function dominated 62.63% of videos and was significantly associated with self-promotion (39.50%), opposition (22.68%), and deliberation (21.01%) ($\chi^2 = 33.47, p = 2.3e^{-4}$). This narrative use of music contrasted with the minimal presence of playful formats, such as lip-syncs or comedic sketches, which appeared in only 1.58% of the videos.

Candidates predominantly relied on their own content, either exclusive (42.11%) or adapted (41.58%). Posts originating from external media accounted for just 13.68%, and only 2.11% of videos featured content generated by platform users. Regarding multimodal elements, 88.42% of the videos avoided using emojis or GIFs, while 94.74% excluded direct mentions (@). However, hashtags were present in 44.74% of videos, serving to enhance visibility and categorization. Audience interaction remained limited, as polls were used in only 0.53% of posts, reflecting minimal efforts to engage viewers directly.

4.2. Content-related affordances

The analysis of the videos revealed a dominant preference for self-promotion posts (40%), followed by opposition (20%) and deliberation (15.79%), with information dissemination (11.05%) and mobilization (10%) being less frequently employed. Most videos visually featured candidates either alone (26.84%) or in small groups (35.79%), conveying a sense of proximity and individualized leadership.

Significant differences emerged among candidates' communication strategies ($\chi^2 = 204.03, p = 8.7e^{-28}$). Orbán exhibited a pronounced focus on self-promotion, with 86.36% of his posts reflecting this strategy. Alvisse Pérez (61.54%) and Meloni (55%) also emphasized self-promotion, though Pérez combined this approach with a notable emphasis on opposition (23.08%), while Meloni included information dissemination (25%) as a complementary strategy. Vandendriessche balanced deliberation (50.91%) with self-promotion (40%), while Bardella maintained equal proportions of self-promotion (30%) and opposition (30%). Vilimsky, in contrast, combined self-promotion (25%) with a distinctive focus on mobilization (31.25%). Buxadé, however, stood out with a predominant focus on information dissemination, which accounted for 70.59% of his content.

Media settings (30%) and political or institutional contexts (27.37%) were the most frequently utilized backdrops, with significant associations ($\chi^2 = 121.07$, $p = 1.43e-14$). Media spaces were predominantly used for self-promotion (71.05%), whereas political settings were more often associated with opposition or deliberation-oriented content (47.37%). Public spaces reflected a mixed approach, combining self-promotion (32.35%) with information dissemination (32.35%). Overall, the content was overwhelmingly political in nature (94.21%), characterized by direct verbal communication (79.47%) and minimal inclusion of casual or non-public activities.

Engagement analysis based on median values highlighted significant variations across different content types. Humorous or dramatic posts generated the highest median likes (42,638), followed by mobilization posts (3,626), information dissemination (2,214), and deliberation, which garnered only 109 likes. For views, humorous posts again led with a median of 191,454, followed by information dissemination (27,643), mobilization (17,110), and deliberation (2,467). Regarding comments, humorous posts generated 749, while information dissemination reached 150, mobilization 124, and deliberation only 11. Similarly, shares were dominated by humorous posts (909), followed by information dissemination (164), mobilization (103), and deliberation, which was shared only 4 times. The Kruskal-Wallis test confirmed these differences as statistically significant across all engagement metrics: likes ($H = 44.34$, $p = 1.98e-8$); views ($H = 22.79$, $p = 3.70e-4$); comments ($H = 8.56$, $p = 2.91e-7$); and shares ($H = 43.20$, $p = 3.37e-8$).

4.3. Persuasive affordances

The analysis of persuasive strategies highlighted a focus on constructing candidates' images as credible leaders through *ethos* (38.42%), alongside frequent use of *pathos* (31.05%) to evoke emotions and *logos* (27.37%) to provide objective arguments and data. A predominantly positive tone characterized most posts (71.05%), while negative tones appeared less frequently (25.79%), with neutral tones being rare (3.16%).

A significant relationship between rhetorical strategy and tone emerged ($\chi^2 = 50.13$, $p = 4.43e-9$). *Ethos* and *logos* were strongly associated with positive tones, present in 84.93% and 86.54% of respective posts, while negative or neutral tones were minority approaches in these strategies. In contrast, *pathos* was primarily linked to a negative tone (57.63%), with only 38.98% of emotionally driven posts conveying a positive tone.

Persuasive strategies also varied in relation to technical and content-related affordances. Videos without music were most frequently associated with *ethos* strategies (48.53%), while those featuring music predominantly employed *pathos*-driven appeals (37.7%), a significant trend ($\chi^2 = 10.19$, $p = 1.70e-2$). The spatial context further shaped rhetorical choices: *ethos* was dominant in videos set within media and public spaces (65.79% and 55.88%, respectively), whereas *pathos* was more prevalent in political and institutional settings (57.89%) ($\chi^2 = 71.66$, $p = 2.25e-9$).

Engagement analysis revealed that posts employing *ethos* achieved the highest metrics across all categories. *Ethos*-based posts received a median of 3,988 likes, outperforming *pathos* (1,115) and *logos* (173). In terms of views, *ethos* posts led with 71,100, followed by *pathos* (11,400) and *logos* (3,896). *Ethos* posts also generated the most comments, with a median of 172, compared to 62 for *pathos* and 15 for *logos*. Similarly, shares were highest for *ethos*-driven posts (251), compared to 75 for *pathos* and 8 for *logos*. The Kruskal-Wallis test confirmed that these differences were statistically significant across all engagement metrics: likes ($H = 31.71$, $p = 6.02e-7$), views ($H = 25.85$, $p = 1.03e-5$), comments ($H = 26.93$, $p = 6.10e-6$), and shares ($H = 27.95$, $p = 3.73e-6$).

The relationship between candidates and rhetorical strategy also revealed significant distinctions ($\chi^2 = 164.21$, $p = 1.25e-25$). The *logos* strategy, which prioritises logical arguments and evidence, was overwhelmingly utilised by Buxadé, who based 97.06% of his posts on this approach. *Ethos*, which highlights credibility and authority, was the dominant strategy for Alvis Pérez (76.92%), Meloni (70%), and Orbán (68.18%), all of whom crafted their messaging to emphasise reliability as leaders. *Pathos*, which relies on emotional engagement, was most frequently used by Vandendriessche, who incorporated it in 69.09% of his posts. Other candidates, such as Bardella, balanced *ethos* (43.33%) and *logos* (30%) to combine credibility and logical reasoning, while Vilimsky adopted a similar balance between *logos* (43.75%) and *ethos* (31.25%), reflecting a mix of logic and authority in his communication.

RQ2: What kind of visual affective polarization strategies were more effective to engage voters?

4.4. Visual Affective Polarization

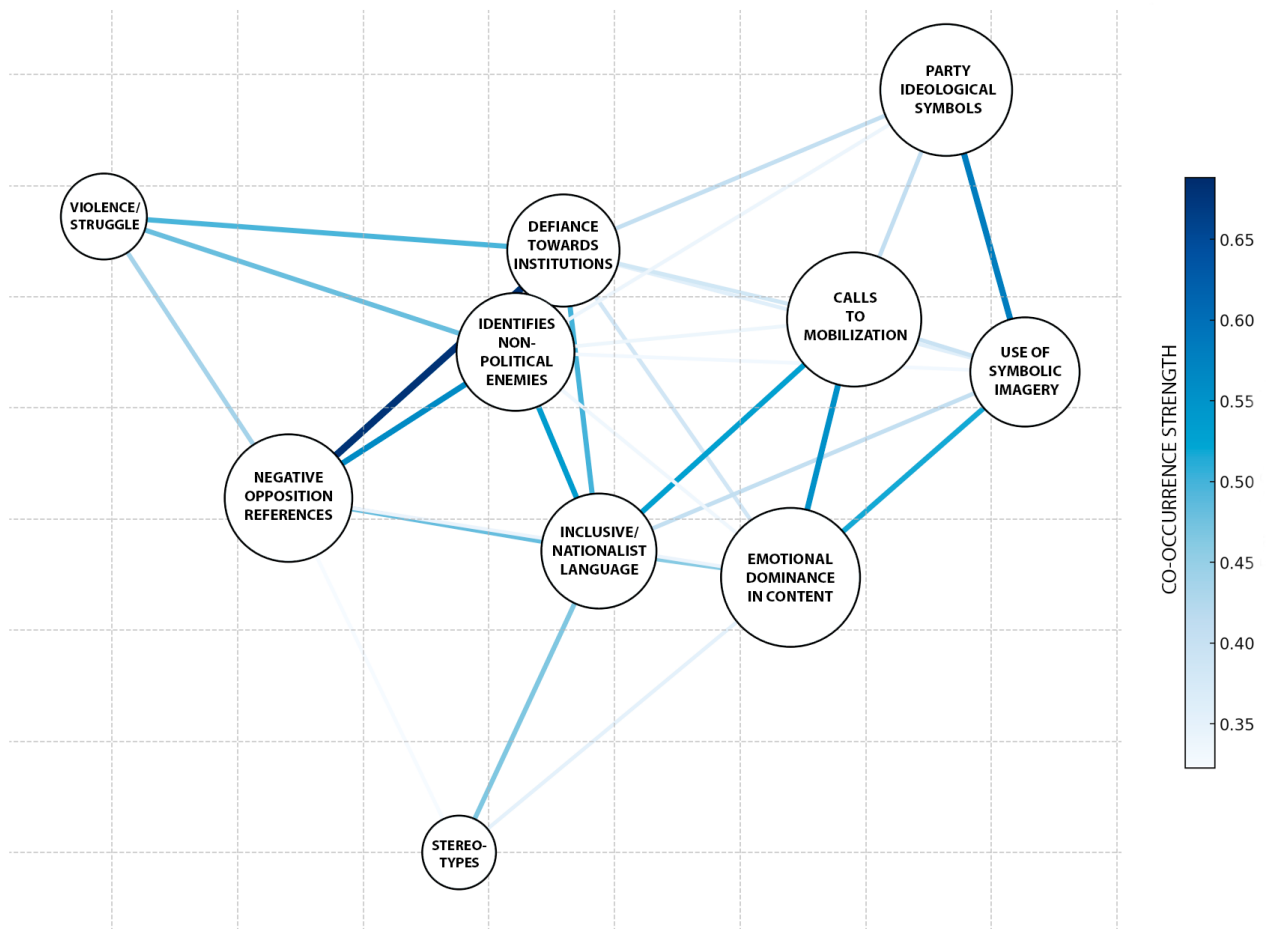
Emotional charge was the most frequently employed affective polarization strategy, appearing in 46.84% of the analyzed posts. This was followed by calls for social or political mobilization (43.68%) and the dissemination of the party's ideological symbols (42.11%). Other common strategies included negative references to other leaders or political groups (39.47%) and inclusive “us versus them” language (32.11%). Less frequently used approaches involved defiant attitudes toward institutions (30.53%) and the representation of patriotic or military symbols (28.95%). Mentions of violence or struggle and the use of stereotypes were rare, occurring in 17.89% and 13.16% of posts, respectively.

Significant differences were observed among candidates in their use of affective polarization strategies. Viktor Orbán and Tom Vandendriessche relied most heavily on the dissemination of ideological party symbols, with these strategies featuring prominently in 26.5% and 25.3% of their posts, respectively. In contrast, Giorgia Meloni and Jorge Buxadé favored inclusive “us versus them” language, which characterized 19.2% and 12.5% of their posts, respectively. Emotional appeals were most prevalent in Jordan Bardella's posts (25.8%), followed by those of Alvis Pérez (18.6%) and Harald Vilimsky (16.1%). The relationship between candidates and affective polarization strategies was statistically significant across all variables, with the strongest relationship observed in the use of inclusive “us versus them” language ($\chi^2 = 95.15$, $p = 2.6e^{-16}$) and the weakest in the use of stereotypes ($\chi^2 = 22.72$, $p = 8.96e^{-4}$).

A Phi correlation analysis of the dichotomous variables for affective polarization revealed several significant relationships. Among the highest correlations (greater than 0.5), a defiant attitude toward institutions was strongly associated with identifying non-political enemies ($\Phi = 0.688$) and making negative references to the opposition ($\Phi = 0.681$). High correlations were also observed between non-political enemies and negative references to the opposition ($\Phi = 0.564$), as well as between inclusive/nationalist language and non-political enemies ($\Phi = 0.536$). Emotional charge and calls for mobilization showed a moderate correlation ($\Phi = 0.555$), while the representation of patriotic symbols correlated significantly with emotional charge ($\Phi = 0.517$) and the dissemination of ideological symbols ($\Phi = 0.584$). Among moderate correlations (0.4–0.5), noteworthy relationships included inclusive/nationalist language with a defiant attitude toward institutions ($\Phi = 0.499$) and with negative references to the opposition ($\Phi = 0.483$).

A co-occurrence network visualization (Figure 1) was developed to illustrate the relationships between affective polarization strategies. For this network, only correlations exceeding a threshold of 0.3 were included, ensuring the visualized relationships reflected meaningful associations. In this visualization, nodes represent the elements of affective polarization identified in the analysis, with their size indicating their centrality and significance within the network. The proximity of nodes reflects the frequency of their co-occurrence in the dataset, and the edges connecting nodes represent the strength of their relationships. Edge thickness corresponds to the frequency of co-occurrence, while the color gradient—ranging from light blue to dark blue—indicates the intensity of the relationship, with darker shades representing stronger connections.

Figure 1. Co-occurrence network of affective polarization strategies in TikTok videos analyzed.



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The Mann-Whitney test applied to affective polarization variables in relation to engagement metrics on TikTok revealed several noteworthy findings. A defiant attitude toward institutions demonstrated a significant relationship with views ($U = 2863.0$, $p = .0057$). For the use of patriotic or military symbols, moderate significance was observed for both likes ($U = 4452.5$, $p = .0315$) and shares ($U = 4491.5$, $p = .0235$). References to violence or struggle exhibited a highly significant relationship with views ($U = 1639.0$, $p = .0005$), while interactions such as likes, comments, and shares also showed moderate significance.

The inclusion of ideological party symbols revealed moderate significance for likes ($U = 3608.0$, $p = .0344$) and a significant relationship with views ($U = 3219.0$, $p = .0016$). Finally, the predominant emotional tone of posts displayed highly significant associations across all engagement metrics: likes ($U = 5924.5$, $p = .00016$), views ($U = 5564.0$, $p = .0047$), comments ($U = 5879.5$, $p = .00025$), and shares ($U = 5809.5$, $p = .00051$). These results indicate a strong relationship between the emotional tone of the posts and audience interaction.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this study partially confirm hypothesis *H1*, which suggested that European populist far-right candidates would leverage TikTok's unique affordances to mobilize younger audiences through emotionally resonant and highly shareable content. While the candidates demonstrated strategic use of certain technical features, messages, and persuasive strategies, the data reveal notable limitations in their utilization of the platform's participatory affordances. Instead, European radical and far-right candidates exhibited a clear preference for simple formats, such as videos incorporating effects, text, and music, which align with strategies aimed at capturing attention within a fragmented, entertainment-driven media landscape (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2022; Cervi et al., 2023). The use of

music and visual symbols was particularly effective in simplifying complex political messages for younger users (Cervi et al., 2023; González-Aguilar et al., 2023).

These findings suggest that, although radical and far-right candidates have adopted strategies that partially exploit TikTok's affordances to promote emotional and polarizing messages, their approach remains strongly influenced by conventional political communication objectives. This reflects an adaptive, rather than transformative, integration of TikTok into their broader communication strategies (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). Notably, these candidates avoided participatory campaign formats, such as duets or challenges, and made limited use of interactive elements like emojis or polls. This conservative approach to TikTok's participatory potential (Bonansinga, 2024; Widholm et al., 2024) may indicate a deliberate effort to maintain control over the narrative and ensure the integrity of their messaging.

In terms of content, the candidates prioritized self-promotion and opposition, focusing on constructing an image of individual leadership and credibility (*ethos*) to distinguish themselves from their political rivals. This approach aligns with the broader trend of humanizing candidates on social media to make them more accessible and relatable, as noted in previous studies (Barragán-Romero et al., 2024; Cervi et al., 2023). Additionally, persuasive strategies relied heavily on emotional appeal (*pathos*) to reinforce group identities and promote polarizing narratives. However, the limited emphasis on mobilization and deliberation posts reflects a reduced exploitation of TikTok's participatory affordances, which could otherwise foster activism or visual debate (Weimann & Masri, 2020).

The persuasive strategies combined *ethos* and *pathos*, with a predominant use of positive tones to reinforce leadership narratives and strengthen connections with younger audiences (Oskolkov et al., 2024; Widmann, 2020). These findings partially confirm H2, which assumed that most European radical and far-right candidates would adopt emotional narratives, incorporating negative references to opponents and employing ideological symbols to mobilize social support. The results highlight that emotional charge emerged as the most frequently employed affective polarization strategy, underscoring its central role in reinforcing group identities and driving engagement. Additionally, calls for social or political mobilization and the dissemination of ideological symbols were recurrent tactics, reflecting their strategic importance in shaping polarized narratives. Negative references to political opponents and the use of inclusive 'us versus them' language further amplified the polarizing discourse, consolidating in-group solidarity while demonizing perceived adversaries.

While negative tones played a significant role in amplifying perceptions of crisis and opposition—contributing to the polarizing nature of their discourse (Engesser et al., 2017; Rifesser, 2023)—the interplay between positive and negative emotions highlights a dual strategy. This strategy, typical of radical and far-right movements, aims to polarize public debate while simultaneously projecting a modernized and accessible image that facilitates the “de-demonization” of their ideologies (Bonansinga, 2024; Chadwick, 2017; Heyna, 2024; Mudde, 1995). These visual narrative tactics effectively strengthened group identity while intensifying negative attitudes toward opponents and perceived “others.”

This approach integrates defiant attitudes toward institutions and the representation of patriotic or military symbols, reinforcing nationalist sentiments and anti-establishment narratives. Despite the presence of more extreme elements, such as mentions of violence or stereotypes, these were less frequently utilized, suggesting a selective approach to affective polarization aimed at maximizing resonance without overtly alienating broader audiences.

Humorous and dramatic posts, which leveraged *pathos*, achieved the highest levels of engagement, confirming that simplified and emotionally charged messages are most effective at maximizing engagement on TikTok (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023; Fernández Arriola, 2023). Conversely, posts centered on deliberation generated low interaction rates, reinforcing the notion that TikTok serves more as a platform for spectacle than a space for substantive political debate (Battista, 2023). Nonetheless, *ethos* emerged as a central factor in fostering emotional connections with voters, underscoring the leader's credibility as a cornerstone of persuasive strategies (Heyna, 2024).

In conclusion, European populist far-right candidates leveraged TikTok to de-demonize their ideologies, projecting a more polished and relatable image as political leaders while maintaining a polarizing, anti-establishment discourse targeting both perceived “otherness” and opposition parties. This trend highlights how platforms like TikTok contribute to the polarization of narratives,

undermine social cohesion, and amplify the spread of misinformation. These challenges are further exacerbated by recommendation algorithms, which often funnel users toward increasingly extremist content.

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