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Beyond anger: the populist radical right on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

The video streaming app TikTok is increasingly deployed by political actors to reach younger voters, and this includes populist radical right (PRR) parties. In this study, our expectation is that longstanding PRR parties will be more likely than new PRR challengers to try to de-demonise their image as they land on the platform, in order to counteract years of negative coverage. To test this argument, we use a novel theoretical framework that captures visual de-demonisation and eudaimonic appeals, applying it to the study of strategic communication on TikTok by a combination of established and novel radical right parties and leaders. Our selection includes Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini on the one hand, and Eric Zemmour and Vox Spain on the other. We find that - contrary to widespread assumptions linking radical communication with toxic rhetoric and the spreading of fear - positive and optimistic appeals including inspirational cues that foster hope and communicate values and virtues play a significant role in how PRR actors adjusts their communication to the needs of the medium. Moreover, long standing PRR parties are found to be less likely than new PRR challengers to focus mainly on negative content.

KEYWORDS

TikTok; populist radical right; strategic communication; de-demonisation

1. Introduction

TikTok, a visual platform with a considerably young audience, has grown exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the app was conceived to provide users with music and dialogue options with which they could easily produce videos featuring people dancing and lip syncing to famous tunes, it is now increasingly deployed by political actors. An advantage of using the platform is that it allows the speaker to reach audiences that are, on average, rather young. If the app was initially regarded as being mostly suited to children, it is clearly time for political scientists to start taking notice. The reason why more and more parties, and/or leaders, are opening accounts on the platform is easily grasped: only launched in 2016, TikTok has recently hit a significant milestone after attracting its one billionth monthly user (see Table 1).

TikTok is now available in 154 countries worldwide (and in 75 different languages). While its user base may be somewhat smaller than that of the likes of Facebook and YouTube, it keeps growing, and fast. A country in which the app has literally boomed during the pandemic is the USA, which has always been an avant-garde in the adoption of new social media. As of March 2022, there are over 138 million active users in the USA (i.e. circa 40% of the population, a majority of whom are young, see Figure 1).

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Table 1. Monthly active users of major social media platforms (8 March 2022).

Users
2.9 Billion
2.2 Billion
1.4 Billion
1 Billion
500 Million
480 Million
397 Million

Source: Doyle (2022).

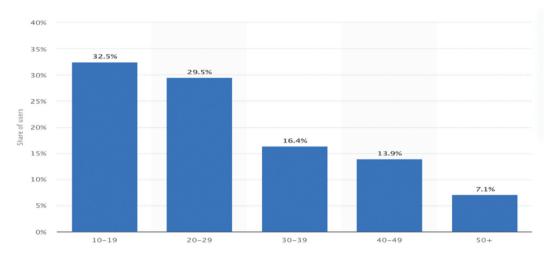


Figure 1. US TikTok users by age group (in %), 8 March 2022. Source: Doyle (2022).

It is also worth keeping in mind that – whatever the official data may suggest – it is in fact impossible to reach firm conclusions concerning the exact number of children using TikTok, as underage people have a huge incentive to lie about their age when dealing with the platform. Not only there are countries (e.g. the UK), in which a minimum age is required even simply to open an account, but the platform has always restricted the kind of experience available to the under 13s. This provides a further incentive not to be honest about one's real age, whenever this happens to be below such threshold. And lying is not exactly difficult, as at the time of writing TikTok is not using any age verification tools when new users sign up. Hence in 2020 TikTok itself estimated that as much as one third of its US users were under 14 (Simonite 2022), suggesting that the official data presented in Figure 1 may in fact underestimate the number of very young children who are uploading videos on the platform (or, at least, watching the content it offers). When we consider the three countries that we have selected as our case studies (cfr. Section 3), we can clearly see that the platform is a favourite of young users in Europe, too.

In light of this data, it is not surprising to find that political parties and leaders are re-assessing the opportunities TikTok can offer to shape people's views and opinions as they reach adulthood and start voting, or even before then. Generally speaking, talking to young audiences has posed a challenge to political leaders (Quintelier 2007, 169). And yet adolescence is the time when individuals firm up ideas about their identities and start developing their opinions about society.

Many interactions by younger people take place at school and at home, but contact with peers and adults via the social media is obviously very important, too (Bucknell Bossen and Kottasz 2020).

In line with one of the key objectives of this special issue – to consider the drivers and frames of radicalisation via the social media (see, for instance, Robert and Kaya 2023) - our article contributes to a fresh understanding of how populist radical right (PRR) parties have adapted their communication to the 'rules' of TikTok in order to reach younger audiences. Specifically, our article answers three research questions:

(RQ1): To what extent does the PRR use negative content on TikTok? (RQ2): To what extent does the PRR use positive (i.e. 'hedonic', 'eudaimonic', and 'connecting and caring') content on TikTok? (RQ3): Do established PRR parties and leaders use more 'hedonic', 'eudaimonic', and 'connecting and caring' content on TikTok, compared to new challengers? These questions will be answered via an analysis of PRR communication. After this introduction, we present our theoretical framework, and show how we have built on current research in order to devise the categories eventually adopted in our analysis (Section 2). The next steps are then to discuss and justify our methodology (Section 3), analyse the data (Section 4), and conclude (Section 5).

2. Theoretical framework

As with any other social media, TikTok offers specific *affordances*, that is, relational structures that enable or constrain the behaviour of its users in the virtual space (Bossetta 2018; Cervi and Marin Lladò 2021; Evans et al. 2017). These are: a) the focus on *replication*, which empowers users to visualise and then (re)create videos that are similar, or even *respond to* the ones they have been exposed to (Cervi and Marin Lladò 2021), as in the case of 'duet' performances. Secondly: b) *virality*, as the audience of the original video being replicated may well show interest in its 'reinterpretation' and 're-invention' by different users. And finally: c) *prolonged engagement*, through the medium's focus on entertaining and gratifying its users, without the need for them to undertake extensive training before they can themselves produce their own videos (Kennedy 2020).

Although little is known about how TikTok works, due to its unwillingness to open up to external scrutiny (Simonite 2022), the platform's algorithms are considered particularly efficient in personalising content. Hence the app's 'For You' function, which highlights and makes available to users the videos that it judges to be compatible with their likings and views, has the potential to play a role in reinforcing what users *already* think and believe. After all, the apparent aim of 'For You' is precisely to make sure that users *continue* to be exposed mainly, if not exclusively, to content they are already expected to like and agree with.

Characterised by a combination of populism, nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007), the PRR has a strategic interest in using the platform as a tool to socialise youngsters to its ideas and policy proposals. Like all social media, TikTok allows parties, including radical ones, to bypass the traditional media (which may be providing unfavourable coverage of their initiatives) and bring their message unfiltered to their target audiences. The added advantage specifically of TikTok, however, is that such audiences are in large part young. Despite this, research on the use of TikTok as a tool for political communication is still in its infancy, as its huge potentialities have only recently been 'discovered' by political actors.

Preliminary studies on radicalism via TikTok have predominantly engaged with the circulation of harmful content, such as hate speech and antisemitism (O'Connor 2021; Weimann and Masri 2021; Weimann and Masri 2020), with the exception of some work done on climate activism (Hautea et al. 2021). To date, only very few studies have started considering how left and right wing populists communicate on the platform, with a focus on the case of Spain (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021; Cervi, Tejedor and Marín Lladó 2021). This preliminary evidence shows that, in terms of strategies, populists in Spain use TikTok in the same way as other social media channels, that is, to *broadcast* issues, *promote* candidates and *mobilise* audiences (Filimonov et al 2016; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019).

While the strategic aspect of populist radical right communication on TikTok is important, no systematic analyses of the content disseminated by parties via the platform exists to date. In this article, we argue - in line with interdisciplinary studies within the tradition of social psychology and political communication (e.g. Frischlich 2021) - that content other than the negativity which is usually assumed to be dominant in this kind of communication (see Widmann 2021) in fact plays a very significant role in the way the PRR has adjusted to the communication dynamics of TikTok. It is our claim that, in order to better exploit the affordances of the medium in terms of providing entertainment and gratification, the PRR has shown an interest in disseminating a combination of hedonic, eudaimonic and connecting and caring content that risks being missed when focusing exclusively on the negative aspects of their communication.

Drawing on Frischlich's (2021) work, therefore, we see hedonic entertainment as light entertainment 'associated with emotions of pleasure, suspense, or fun' (p. 556). Moreover, in this article we define as eudaimonic content 'meaningful and inspirational content appealing to, or showing appreciation for, morality, virtue and positive values'. Eudaimonic content is also conceptualised as a form of 'self-transcendent media content' because, unlike most other emotional experiences centring on the self, it directs attention outward, to others and greater causes (Dale et al. 2020) and can 'inspire human behaviour for the sake of others' (Frischlich, 2021: 556). Finally, we define content as connecting and caring when messages display one or more of the following features: friendliness, associating with others, authenticity and approachability. As TikTok posts 'seem to be more successful when parties and political actors incorporate styles, narratives, and staging of the world of spectacle and entertainment into their communicative repertoire' (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021: 12), we argue that parties, including PRR parties, have a strategic interest in engaging with hedonic and inspirational content, as well as emphasising connection and approachability, in order to be successful.

Generally speaking, the relevance of positive sentiment in the communication of radical actors has been remarked by scholars of media violence research, who argue that a mere focus on aggression cannot capture the complexity of radical content (Bartsch et al. 2016). This point finds resonance in the literature on populism and emotions. This takes a psychological and multidisciplinary perspective on the study of populism as scholars argue that appeals to hope, pride and other forms of positive affectivity are part of the populist emotional repertoire alongside fear and anger (Bonansinga 2022a; Kazlauskaitė and Salmela 2022; Verbalyte et al. 2022; Wirz 2018; for a review, see Bonansinga 2020). Although populists have been found to appeal to negative emotions more often than the mainstream (Widmann 2021), their construction of the struggle of the people vs. the elite builds on a positive sense of belonging to the ingroup (Bonansinga 2019) and elicits positive feelings in relation to the leader's alleged qualities (Bracciale and Martella 2017). Furthermore, their social media communication brings together a combination of emotional appeals (Martella and Bracciale 2022), including complex and ambivalent feelings, such as nostalgia (Kenny 2017; Szabó and Kiss 2022). Hence, as mentioned, our first research question (RQ1) will be the following: To what extent does the PRR use negative content on TikTok? This question immediately elicits a complementary one, as follows: (RQ2) To what extent does the PRR use positive (i.e. 'hedonic', 'eudaimonic', and 'connecting and caring') content on TikTok?

Research on the mainstreaming of the populist radical right suggests that it has moved away from the margins of the system in terms of both its ability to take part in coalition governments and to influence the policies of other actors (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Albertazzi and Vampa eds. 2021). While it is true that centre-left and centre-right actors have increasingly started to co-opt proposals and policies of the radical right, the latter has also embarked on a parallel process of 'dedemonisation', at least in some countries (Akkerman et al. 2016). In line with Dumitrescu (2017), we suggest that, in addition to studying the policy and discursive domains, visual strategies should also be taken into account to better understand how the PRR is modernising its image, attempting to diversify its electorate and trying to overcome the perception that it may still be 'too extreme'. Visuals such as images and videos are powerful communication tools because they carry important

social information, but convey it in an easy-to-process manner (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019). In other words, 'it is important to take populists' visual communication seriously' (Moffitt 2022: 18), as the conveyor of important meaning. Images communicate politicians' attributes based, for instance, on their non-verbal behaviour, the kind of people they associate with and their postures and clothes. Ultimately, they provide messages characterised by multiple layers of information (Dumitrescu 2016). Hence a predominantly visual platform such as TikTok can become the ideal setting for the PRR not only to reach the newer generations, but also to de-demonise its image in their eyes, by presenting its ideas and candidates as trendy, likeable, relatable and inspirational.

For all these reasons, thinking of TikTok as a platform where PRR parties merely 'radicalise' young audiences by exposing them to aggressive and toxic rhetoric is, at best, reductive (for a discussion on the meaning of the term 'radicalisation', see Peels 2023 in this issue). As skilful communicators, PRR parties and leaders are actually reaching young users via positive and entertaining content, too, so as to come across as 'ordinary', 'legitimate' and 'caring' political actors. Moving beyond the issue of whether young people may be radicalised via the platform, this paper explores an alternative angle, by paying as much attention to the performance of visual de-demonisation and the relevance of positive content in communication.

Our hypothesis, therefore, is that the incentive to use TikTok strategically as part of a dedemonisation strategy is likely to be *stronger* for established PRR parties than for newcomers, as the former need to address what is often quite longstanding negative coverage by the traditional media and deep-seated suspicion in the minds of some voters. Hence our third research question (RQ3) asks: *Do established PRR parties and leaders use more 'hedonic', 'eudaimonic' and 'connecting and caring' content on TikTok than new PRR challengers do?*

We answer these questions on the basis of a content analysis of TikTok posts, and by integrating this with a qualitative analysis of a selection of the same. The following sections will therefore justify our methodology, discuss the findings of both our quantitative and qualitative study, and finally consider further avenues of research on a topic that remains vastly unexplored. We will see that the communication of the leaders and parties under investigation defies expectations, as it offers a richer set of themes and messages than observers have come to expect from PRR parties.

3. Methodology

To answer our research questions, we have carried out a conceptual content analysis (Krippendorff 2018), by developing a codebook that draws from existing studies of *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* content on social media (Dale *et al* 2017; 2020), as well as politicians' positive self-presentations via visual platforms (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019) to capture *connecting and caring* content. Since these categories could co-exist or overlap, the codebook was carefully developed via the completion of three pilot studies (based on a sample of TikTok posts). The final codebook, provided in the appendix, yielded a 97% agreement between the two coders.

Based on the definitions provided in the previous section, we identified as *hedonic* the videos expressing sarcasm, resorting to parody, or memes, and featuring laughs and jokes, either with the expressed aim of making fun of politics, or as an end in itself (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019). *Eudaimonic* content was captured in relation to one or more of three main variables: appreciation of beauty and excellence (ABE); the expression of hope; appeals to religiousness/spirituality. ABE was adjusted to the PRR rhetoric and coded as the appreciation of the beauty and excellence *of the nation*, with reference to: national accomplishments, i.e. superior skills and abilities; high culture, such as music, art and architecture; popular culture, such as the celebration of traditional food, clothes and festivities; and nature. The expression of hope captured some videos' positive orientation towards the future in light of an unfavourable present (Bonansinga 2022a), for example via the symbolism of political change. Finally, appeals to religiousness/spirituality referred to a focus on faith, religious traditions and symbols.

We also captured the leaders' self-presentations as friendly, approachable and authentic individuals via two variables relating to *connecting and caring* content. The first set included glimpses of the leaders' lives, such as the showcase of family and pets, food and drinks, watching or practising sports, and, more generally, their hobbies. A second variable referred to the showcase of crowds of supporters, encounters with members of the public, and acts of compassion and caring. We also coded for the presence of negative content, which is the focus of RQ1. This category refers to the spreading of hostility via the targeting of the elites and/or outgroups, for instance migrants, feminists, LGBTQ+ people, and environmentalists.²

A last set of variables was used to better understand how PRR leaders use the platform. We coded for the accounts' personalisation (i.e. to what extent the leader is shown in the videos), and the features they use (filters, songs and video style).

The sample of PRR actors included a combination of established and novel radical right parties and leaders: Marine Le Pen (mlp.officiel) and Matteo Salvini (matteosalviniufficiale) on the one hand, and Eric Zemmour (zemmour eric) and Vox Spain (vox espana) on the other.³ For the Spanish case, we used the party account since Santiago Abascal, the Vox leader, does not have a personal account on TikTok at the time of writing. As we will see below, this does not stop the account from focusing to a very large extent on the party leader himself, in fact more so than some of the accounts of other actors considered here do (e.g. Salvini's). Within our sample, Salvini and Le Pen give us the opportunity to focus on some well-established leaders, while Zemmour and Vox Spain, although substantially affecting political debates in their countries, are much more recent and still emerging actors. When the analysis was conducted (July and August 2022) Vox was attracting 14% of the vote in the polls for national elections (https:// www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/spain/), while Zemmour had relatively recently (i.e. in April 2022) gained 7% in the first round of the French Presidential election. For comparison, Le Pen reached the second round of the French Presidential election in April 2022, and gained 41.45% of the vote, while Salvini's League got 8.9% in the Italian national election held in September 2022 (https://elezioni.repubblica.it/2022/elezioni-politiche). The League and Rassemblement National (National Rally – NR) are among the oldest PRR parties in Western Europe (Albertazzi and Vampa 2021, 11), having been founded in 1991 and 1972, respectively.

These actors have all landed on TikTok at different times. The dates of their first post (in chronological order) are: Matteo Salvini, 12 November 2019; Vox Spain, 13 February 2020; Eric Zemmour, 13 April 2021; and Marine Le Pen, 7 October 2021. However, by focusing on the period preceding the start of our research (i.e. from 1 January 2021 to 31 March 2022) we were able to collect a sample that yielded very good comparability. Therefore, in the cases of Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Vox Spain we proceeded to analyse all videos posted on TikTok during the selected time frame, as the total number coincided: Le Pen: 25; Salvini: 23; Vox Spain: 26. As Eric Zemmour had posted a considerably higher number of videos during the same months (168), here we selected a random sample of 25 videos. The final sample analysed included 99 TikTok videos overall and contained a similar sample size for the four actors. The data was collected manually, due to the absence of an API for TikTok at the time of the research, and was analysed online.

After presenting and discussing the quantitative findings emerging from this study, we offer a qualitative analysis of a selection of TikToks posted by Vox and Marine Le Pen. These videos were selected as 'cases in point' of two diverging strategies employed by PRR actors as they communicate via the platform: we have defined these strategies as those of the 'angry motivator' and the 'serious, responsible and caring leader' (see below). In section 5 we focus on Vox and Le Pen, respectively, as the embodiment of these two strategies, while arguing that Zemmour and Salvini sit somewhere in the middle of these ideal-typical categories.



4. Comparative findings

The analysis yielded a rich amount of data (see Figure 3), revealing a complex picture that confirmed some of our expectations and challenged others. In answering our first and second research questions: 'To what extent does the PRR use negative content on TikTok?', and: 'To what extent does the PRR use positive (i.e. 'hedonic', 'eudaimonic', and 'connecting and caring') content on TikTok?' we note the existence of a very good balance between negative and positive content within our sample.

Marine Le Pen and Vox stand out as they embody very different, even opposing strategies. Interestingly, Le Pen never entertains, but also rarely attacks. Content focused on personal qualities and connecting with people dominates her profile and scores as the highest within our sample (see Table 2). On the contrary, Vox shows the highest combination of negative and eudaimonic content. In other words, it certainly does not refrain from targeting its opponents, however it does so with an eye to inspiring political change and celebrating the alleged virtues of the nation. We will discuss both accounts in more detail in the next section, as these are the accounts that can be said to embody two very distinct communicative strategies.

Table 2. Distribution of cate	egories (freguency).
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		Connecting and caring content				Eudaimonic content							
	Negative content	Leader's life				Nationalist ABE							
		Family & pets	Food	Sport	Hobbies	Human connection	National excellence	High culture	Popular culture	National nature	Норе	Religiousne ss	Hedonic content
Salvini N=23	11	2	0	1	0	13	4	0	2	1	3	0	5
Le Pen N=25	7	2	0	0	1	16	2	1	3	0	4	1	0
Zemmour N=25	19	1	0	0	1	9	3	0	4	1	2	0	5
Vox <i>N</i> =26	19	0	0	0	0	9	3	2	7	1	6	0	9

Salvini and Zemmour sit in the middle, so to say, as their communication relies on a more balanced selection of negative and positive appeals. Indeed, Salvini seems to like variety on the platform, which is in line with his use of Instagram (Bast 2021). On TikTok, this includes posting videos that do not feature him at all, such as movie and documentary excerpts, reposting from other accounts and creating video collages that celebrate Italian excellence. Salvini's approach is reflected in the low score of his account as far as personalisation is concerned, despite this being his personal account, while Marine Le Pen for instance features in 100% of her posts.

While content in Zemmour's account appears to be similarly mixed, the timing of such distribution is rather peculiar. Negativity dominated his account throughout the year 2021 but only until October, after which we can observe a clear shift, with the posting of some positive, inspirational and hedonic content (before this date, no content of this kind appeared in his account at all). Given that Zemmour announced in November 2021 that he was running for the 2022 French presidential elections, we can speculate that his communication strategy on TikTok was adjusted when the decision to run was taken to offer some positive and inspirational content to his youngest audiences from then on. However, we cannot offer hard evidence that this was an explicit decision on his part, not to mention that negativity remains high in his account even after this date. This is in line with Zemmour positioning himself on the right of Le Pen, exploiting the latter's attempt to establish herself as a more mainstream and 'responsible' leader (see analysis below).

In summary, we find that – contrary to widespread assumptions linking radical communication *exclusively* with negative rhetoric and the spreading of fear – positive and inspiring content play

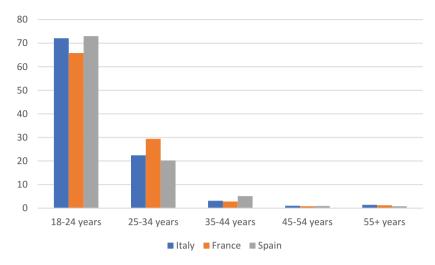


Figure 2. TikTok users by age group in Italy, France and Spain (in %), August 2022. Source: Start.io. 1

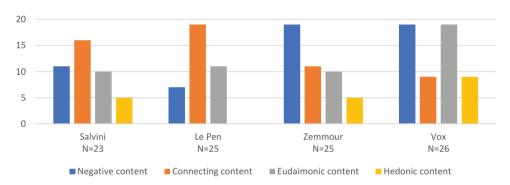


Figure 3. Content Distribution per account (frequency).

a significant role in how PRR actors adjust their communication to the needs and audiences of the platform. These audiences, as shown in Figure 2, are overwhelmingly young.

Answering our third research question ('Do established PRR parties and leaders use more 'hedonic', 'eudaimonic', and 'connecting and caring' communication on TikTok, compared to new challengers?'), our analysis shows that the leaders of more established parties do appear less keen than new PRR challengers to rely mainly on negative content. This choice possibly reveals a willingness on their part to de-demonise their images to counteract years of negative coverage. As Figure 3 shows, Eric Zemmour and Vox, which are relatively new populist actors in their countries' political scene, share a large amount of negative content, compared to Salvini and Le Pen, who lead longstanding PRR parties. However, it is also true that a party like Vox, although adopting negativity in most of its videos, also conveys a considerable amount of inspirational messages, and it is the keenest of all on

Table 3. Number of posts combining negative and positive content (frequency).

	Salvini	Le Pen	Zemmour	Vox
Negative/Connecting	6	4	2	6
Negative/Eudaimonic	1	2	2	8
Negative/Hedonic	2	0	0	5

hedonic content. In other words, we observe a quite complex picture, whereby newer parties can afford to attack more and more often, but without forgetting the features of the medium that is hosting them. In this sense, and besides the attacks, even newer actors rely on much else besides negativity, and also wish to inspire and entertain (see Figure 3). In particular, Vox Spain is the keenest of all when it comes to eudaimonic content. Also, importantly (see Table 3) it is the keenest of all to attack while inspiring its audience, for instance by celebrating the beauty and alleged strengths of the nation while, at the same time, pointing the finger at those (political, cultural and media elites) that are said to have forgotten its greatness and to have robbed ordinary people of a chance to enjoy it.

It would indeed be wrong to conceive of our categories as necessarily being mutually exclusive. If Vox can attack while entertaining (for instance by mocking its targets and turning them into figures of fun), Salvini can attack while connecting, insofar as he criticises some people, but he is also seen to link up to ordinary folks.

In order to provide a more sophisticated discussion of how communication works via TikTok, the next section discusses the findings of a qualitative analysis carried out on a selection of videos posted by Vox and Le Pen. We claim that these two actors exemplify two distinctive and very different strategies, respectively that of the 'the angry motivator' and that of 'the serious, responsible and caring leader'. Since Zemmour and Salvini sit somewhere in the middle combining elements of both, our analysis of their communication will be limited to the discussion of quantitative data we have offered in this section of the article.

5. Vox and Le Pen on TikTok: a qualitative analysis

In this section, we describe and analyse two distinctive strategies adopted by different PRR actors. As we will claim in the conclusions, we suggest that future comparative work exploring a broader sample of PRR accounts should check the extent to which PRR actors adopt one strategy or the other, according to their need to establish themselves as new radical challengers or credible and 'main-stream' actors. The first of this strategy, we have defined as that of 'the angry motivator'. We find this strategy perfectly embodied by the way Vox Spain communicates on TikTok.

Vox as 'the angry motivator'

As we have seen in the previous section, Vox is very keen to attack the 'political elites', and also, although less frequently, a wide variety of 'enemies' of the Spanish people. However, in most cases, these attacks appear alongside positive, and especially eudaimonic, messages and appeals (see Table 3). The interesting feature of this style of communication is the fact that negative and positive content do not *alternate* according to the video in question, but rather *co-exist* within the same videos, and even the same excerpt of a video. This results in content that disseminates the party's key oppositional messages (such as anti-elitist, anti-government and anti-immigration content), but does so by exploiting the features of the platform in full, that is by entertaining the (largely young) audience, and/or inspiring it.

As an example of mixing attacks with hedonic content, we can refer to the remake of the viral EuroCup video of the high-profile Real Madrid player, Cristiano Ronaldo (see Figure 4, Left). In the original video from 15 June 2021, Ronaldo is seen removing some bottles of Coca Cola that have been positioned in front of him before the start of a press conference, and inviting those in attendance to drink water instead. Only two days later Vox posted a TikTok in which it photoshopped the scene, by inserting Spanish political leaders in place of the bottles of Coke being removed, and their party leader, Santiago Abascal, in place of the water that gets praised by the football star. The final product is an entertaining video featuring a renowned international figure clearing the Spanish establishment from the table in front of him and choosing Vox in their place. This gives the clear impression that Ronaldo endorses the Vox leader. As TikTok centres on replication and virality,



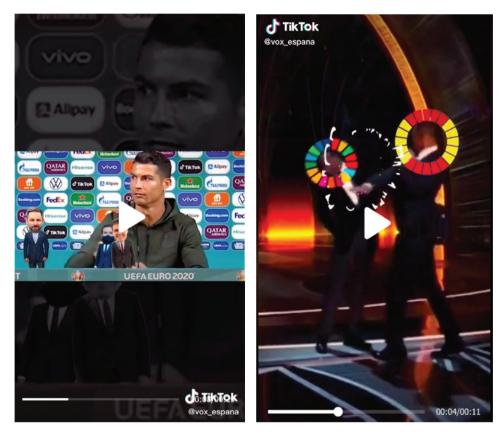


Figure 4. (On the left) TikTok video (vox_espana), posted on 17 June 2021⁴(on the right) TikTok video (vox_espana), posted on 28 March 2022⁵.

editing already known content and repackaging it, particularly when it features such a high profile personality, demonstrates an excellent understanding of the logic of the platform.

Generally speaking, Vox targets opponents by making them look ridiculous and deficient, rather than evil. The focus is on either entertaining or inspiring the audience, while criticising people. For instance, in a TikTok posted on 11 March 2022 titled: 'Hay que echarlos!' (You have to kick them out!), the party picks the catchy theme song of the popular 1990s TV show Friends, 'I'll be there for you', as the soundtrack for its video, in order to stress how they aim to stand by the Spanish people and get rid of various members of the Spanish political establishment on their behalf. Known political figures, given nicknames such as 'The Liar', 'The Feminazi', 'The Terrorist' and 'The Communist', are shown in the video as being about to be 'kicked out' by voters. In the end, a targeted attack against a series of 'undesirables' comes across as entertaining high school banter.

Another emblematic example of 'angry hedonism' is proposed by Vox following the controversial Oscars ceremony of March 2022 in which actor Will Smith slapped the presenter on stage, allegedly for insulting his wife (see Figure 4, Right). On this occasion (28 March 2022), in another photoshopped video, the manifesto of Vox 'Agenda España' is superimposed to Mr Smith's face and is seen 'slapping' 'Agenda 2030' – a document published by the United Nations. By exploiting an event that is already trending online (hence has a good chance to elicit virality on TikTok, too) Vox therefore 'suggests' that its ideas are preferable to an agenda imposed by 'foreign elites' that the party alleges to be too driven by environmental concerns.

If Vox thrives to entertain, it also wants to inspire and motivate its viewers. As we have seen in Figure 3, eudaimonic content is in fact even more common than its hedonic counterpart in the



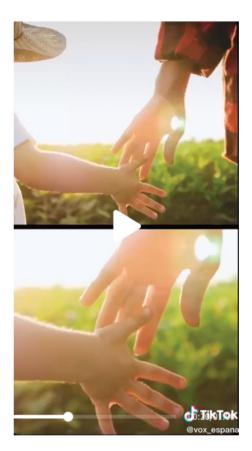




Figure 5. (On the left) TikTok video (vox_espana), posted on 7 July 2021⁶(on the right) TikTok video (vox_espana), posted on 17 March 2022⁷.

party's communication. For instance, a video published on 7 July 2021 starts off with the Vox's leader Abascal addressing other MPs and accusing the Spanish 'nefarious government' of having 'destroyed' too many positive features of the Spanish way of life. However, this is immediately followed by a light-hearted portrayal of families sticking together (see Figure 5, Left) and people enjoying their local traditions that inspires the viewer to also appreciate what Spain has to offer. In other words, despite the situation being critical, not all is lost, and Spain's 'greatness' can still be regained by supporting Vox (Recuperemos España – 'Let's get Spain back', one of the captions of the video says). In a similar fashion, a nostalgic video from 17 March 2022 features a mix of images from a time in which Spain is said to have been 'happy', before its beauty and greatness were 'taken away' by the elites (La España que no has robado - 'The Spain that was stolen from us', as one of the captions says). The video is a celebration of the country's success in sporting and traditional events, which ultimately aims to uplift and celebrate the nation's achievements (see Figure 5, Right). Celebratory videos of this kind are not just common in Vox's TikTok account, but are also deployed by other PRR parties and leaders. These include Salvini (see the TikToks published on August 7th and 9th 2022, which celebrate Italy's accomplishments at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics). The crucial difference between these examples is that, in Vox's case, the celebration of greatness often goes hand in hand with attacks against those who are accused of weakening the country - for instance the Spanish government (particularly its members from the Socialist party), environmentalists, feminists or LGBTQ+ communities. Hence, while Vox wants to motivate and inspire its audience, its signature feature is to be an 'angry motivator'.

A final feature of Vox's strategy of communication worth stressing is its attention for the young generations. Conscious of the appeal of the platform for young people, the party dedicates several videos to their problems, from high unemployment to precarity. Hence, by making explicit references to conspiracy theories, some videos (e.g. 10 November 2021; 14 December 2021) accuse the elites of consciously 'importing young Africans to substitute [young Spaniards]'. Others (e.g. 17 October 2021) claim that the current government has made it impossible for young people to start a family and achieve security and stability in life. While we cannot know to what extent Vox is being successful in convincing young voters that it cares about them, it is certainly making an attempt, and arguably via the right channels.

Having considered this relatively new party, the final analysis before the conclusions focuses on the extent to which Le Pen differs from Vox in her communication. We will see that her need to come across as 'moderate', 'responsible' and 'Presidential' shines through very brightly as one watches her TikToks.

Marine Le Pen: 'the serious, responsible and caring leader'

If Vox is relentless in its attacks against the elites and various 'enemies of the people', Marine Le Pen sits squarely on the other end of the spectrum. Le Pen's relentless work to de-demonise her image and that of her party has been commented upon by scholars for many years (an early example being Mayer, 2013). Hence it may not be entirely surprising if, on TikTok, the former National Rally's (NR) leader appears to be engaged in *visual* de-demonisation.

Le Pen's TikToks showcase her qualities as an approachable, caring and kind individual by providing glimpses into her private life (see for example the videos published on March 4th and 15th 2022, in which she answers questions about her hobbies and her experience of raising young children). Posts also project an aura of professionalism by showing her engaging in international trips, official meetings and media interviews, hence visually establishing the leader's legitimacy as a respected, experienced and competent politician. Finally, Le Pen's videos feature a wide variety of topics (from talking about overseas territories to her proposals for young people), suggesting that her policy platform goes beyond the themes that the PRR usually owns, such as, for instance, immigration and law and order. Hence, with its focus on showcasing Le Pen's positive and reassuring qualities, allegedly respected profile and specific plans to address the problems of the country, this way of communicating helps Le Pen to counter the perception that she should be regarded as 'extreme'. It also helps her establish her credibility – which is always more of a challenge for a female candidate for high office.8 Hence Le Pen's account features minimal hostility – but also no entertainment whatsoever. As we have mentioned, we see this as a clear sign that she wishes to be seen as 'serious' and 'responsible', talking about positive and inspirational content, with none of the 'teenage excesses' typical of Vox.

We define Le Pen's strategy as that of the 'serious, responsible and caring leader'. Her willingness to 'perform' closeness with the people, by showing understanding of the problems of ordinary folks, but also compassion and approachability, is shown by her high score in the category 'connecting and caring' (the highest in the sample, as we have seen in Figure 3). This sits alongside a focus on being seen as being on top of her brief on policy matters. In this section, we illustrate a few of her TikToks embodying this logic.

The first video under discussion was published on 7 January 2022. It shows Le Pen being handed flowers by a child (an event likely to have been staged, given that the camera is placed strategically so that it can perfectly capture the reaction of the approaching leader to the gift being offered; see Figure 6, Left). Once approached, Le Pen expresses surprise, asks whether the flowers are really meant for her, and directs words of affection and gratefulness to the little girl in guestion. In the second video under discussion, published on 15 December 2021, we find the then NR's leader relaxing at home, and playing with her cat, who is hiding underneath her Christmas tree (see Figure 6, Right). A popular Christmas song plays in the background, as Le Pen addresses her pet





Figure 6. (On the left) TikTok video (mlp.Officiel), posted on 7 January 2022⁹(on the right) TikTok video (mlp.Officiel), posted on 15 December 2021¹⁰.

with words of affection. In these cases, children and pets are 'stand-ins' for tenderness, purity and cuteness, allowing Le Pen to come across as approachable, affectionate and caring. It is however important that, particularly a woman-candidate going for the top executive job in the country, i.e. the President, does not overplay her hand when it comes to gentleness, sensitivity and kindness. It is worth remembering that one of the most embarassing episodes in Le Pen's failed bid to the Presidency in 2017 occured during a TV debate with Macron on 3 May 2017 when her opponent exposed her as unprepared on economic matters. Hence it is crucial that Le Pen also portrays 'masculine' qualities such as credibility, preparedness and professionalism. We find a series of TikToks in her account that aim to achieve this.

Hence, a video published on 17 January 2022, which is emblematic of Le Pen's focus on coming across as well briefed and pragmatic, shows her attending an interview on television, interacting respectfully with her host and laying out very detailed plans to help the French youth (see Figure 7, Left). Like Vox, Le Pen also pays considerable attention to the challenges faced by the new generations and wishes to come across as the candidate for the young. For instance, in a video posted on 19 February 2022, Le Pen is shown dancing in the backstage of what is probably a public event, while the caption reads: 'Dance if you're going to make young people the priority of the next presidency'. After all, landing on the platform on 7 October 2021, a smiling Le Pen tells her audience that she knows 'TikTok is young people' and that she has plenty of proposals centring on them.

Finally, we also draw the reader's attention to a second video, published on 2 November 2021, in which the radical right leader is seen visiting a nuclear plant and interacting with workers, while the



Figure 7. (On the left) TikTok video (mlp.Officiel), posted on 17 January 2022¹¹(on the right) TikTok video (mlp.Officiel), posted on 22 November 2021¹².

video's caption praises the excellence of the nation (see Figure 7, Right). This is perfectly in line with Le Pen's visual self-promotion on Instagram, which focuses predominantly on projecting 'statesmanship', while also offering what look like intimate glimpses of her life (Bast, 2021). This kind of videos project complex appeals: first, they show Le Pen as a 'mature' and respected leader, far from the incendiary profile of her father; second, they visually cue her commitment to an ample policy platform that goes well beyond anti-immigration proposals; finally, together with legitimacy and competence, they also communicate hope and pride, by drawing on the symbolism of political renewal and the celebration of French 'greatness'. Hence, as opposed to a new populist challenger like Vox, Le Pen's use of TikTok is much more strategically oriented towards positive sentiments, coming closest to what can be considered an ideal-typical example of visual de-demonisation.

6. Conclusion

By challenging the assumption that the PRR is radicalising audiences by necessarily putting across negative content, this article has shown that hedonic, eudaimonic and connecting messages play an equally vital role in reaching out to voters, and specifically younger generations. In other words, this article has demonstrated that, while PRR parties do rely on negative content on TikTok (RQ1), positive messages that are able to inspire the public, celebrate the alleged virtues of the nation and provide an optimistic vision of the future are also a common staple of this kind of communication (RQ2). On this basis, conceiving of the PRR strategy of communication via TikTok exclusively in terms of the spreading of fear and anger means only partially understanding what is happening online today. For

political actors such as Marine Le Pen, who still have lot of work to do to de-demonise their image in the eyes of the general public, speaking to younger people who may not have turned against them as yet makes perfect sense. Hence our study has found that the leaders of more established PRR parties do appear less keen than new challengers to adopt negative content (RQ3), coming across as approachable, informal, relaxed, but also determined to address the issues affecting their audiences. By entertaining and inspiring viewers, radical parties can make sure that their videos are more likely to become part of the great 'conversation' taking place on TikTok. The clearest example of this is Vox's ability to reinterpret videos and memes that have already gone viral, as the video featuring Ronaldo shows, and use those to shape conversations about who should lead Spain today.

While our research on radicalisation and political mobilisation via a still relatively new platform (TikTok) is still in its infancy, we suggest two ways in which it could be developed further. Firstly, when focusing on the PRR, we need to investigate the extent to which strategies such as the ones we have identified in this article can be effectively deployed on other platforms, too. In other words, are PRR leaders and parties sticking to the same 'version of themselves' on Instagram, Facebook etc, or are they fine-tuning their communication according to the needs, affordances and audiences offered by each one of them? This is important to understand the level of sophistication of PRR actors (and/ or their social media teams) when grasping the opportunities offered by different apps to reach partially different audiences, and communicate effectively through them.

Secondly, there is no reason why we should not also study other political families on TikTok, by considering to what extent they use the medium to send polarising and divisive messages. After all, as Donatella Bonansinga (2022a, 2022b) has shown, left wing populists can also engage with discourses of insecurity and crisis, by crafting polarising narratives against those they perceive to be the real 'enemies of the people'. In other words, the PRR is obviously not the only political family looking at new technologies and new platforms to reach out to potential audiences. Ultimately, whatever one thinks of TikTok and other social media apps, it has become blindingly obvious that they are anything but child's play today. The specific affordances they provide to reach a vast public now need to be unpacked, if we are to understand newer drivers and frames of radicalisation via the social media today.

Notes

- 1. Italy data: https://www.start.io/audience/tiktok-users-in-italy; France data: https://www.start.io/audience/tiktokusers-in-france; Spain data: https://www.start.io/audience/tiktok-users-in-spain; (accessed 30 August 2022).
- 2. We do not wish to suggest that this list is exhaustive, nor that these groups are all necessarily targeted by the PRR in each country and to the same extent. In the text we provide examples of possible 'outgroups', however there is an argument that opposition to LGBTQ+ people, for instance, varies considerably among the PRR, according to location and national culture (Kaya 2020; Moffitt 2017).
- 3. In November 2022, as this article was being reviewed, Le Pen stepped down as leader of her party to be replaced by Jordan Bardella.
- 4. https://www.tiktok.com/@vox_espana/video/6974879638271184134?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.
- 5. https://www.tiktok.com/@vox_espana/video/7080161898951494917?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.
- 6. https://www.tiktok.com/@vox_espana/video/6982287412609191170?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.
- 7. https://www.tiktok.com/@vox_espana/video/7076109818351619334?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.
- 8. We owe this suggestion to one of the participants at the 7th Prague Populism Conference held in May 2022, in which forum we presented the preliminary findings of our research.
- 9. https://www.tiktok.com/@mlp.officiel/video/7050561936399912197?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.
- 10. https://www.tiktok.com/@mlp.officiel/video/7041964613700750598?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.
- 11. https://www.tiktok.com/@mlp.officiel/video/7054261824283233541?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.
- 12. https://www.tiktok.com/@mlp.officiel/video/7033439479083879685?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

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