



Communication Strategies and Online Political Attack: TikTok as a Global Electoral Battleground

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Abstract

This research examines the strategies and tactics of political campaigns on TikTok, a rapidly growing platform, highlighting both successful methods and the ethical challenges tied to violent and polarizing content. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study identifies key strategies in successful political campaigns, such as hashtags, challenges, influencer collaborations, targeted messaging, and content adaptation. Dominant themes include "issue awareness" and "policy explanation." The study links specific TikTok strategies to campaign success while noting the negative impact of unregulated content on political discourse. The research offers practical recommendations for campaign strategists to adopt responsible strategies and calls for continued research in this evolving area of digital political campaigns.

Keywords: Campaign strategists; Political attack; Political campaigns; Political polarization; TikTok.

1. Introduction

TikTok, a video social media platform introduced in 2017, has rapidly become one of the most well-known social networks worldwide. Young people who use the app to make, share, and watch short films make up most of its audience. The program has elements in many social media platforms, including user profiles, comments, and likes¹. However, there are various features and options, including a focus on spontaneity, simplicity, and collaboration; an algorithm on the site that customizes content

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recommendations based on user preferences; and intriguing short videos for the subject. These elements work together to create a unique digital media environment. Social media has grown in importance as a channel for marketing recently. Political activists and marketers frequently contact social media influencers to target diverse demographics with their messaging². Influencers follow celebrity marketing tradition, although occasionally regarded as a novel phenomenon. Due to their popularity, celebrities can boost a campaign's effectiveness³ and a product's legitimacy⁴. The creation of a media environment where, in theory, anyone can grow their following, and impact has been made possible by social media, which has offered regular individuals new and inventive opportunities to become online celebrities. More and more marketers and brands are looking to influencers for product recommendations because they have devoted fan bases⁵. These influencers are essential to advertisers because people view them as more credible and relevant than their conventional celebrity equivalents⁶. Influencer accounts promote and amplify messages on social media and sell things. Users must determine the reliability of such information in a networked communications environment because there are no typical information brokers or source authors⁷. People use heuristics to evaluate the veracity of information found online, including the reputation of the messenger (in this example, an influencer), to lessen the cognitive load of this activity. According to research, even if the information is inaccurate, it is regarded as more trustworthy when a celebrity someone trusts is associated with it⁸. Influencers can aid in disseminating messages on social media that contain conspiracy theories, extreme viewpoints, and false facts⁹. The relationship between influencers and politics has emerged as an essential field of study¹⁰. However, there needs to be more quality research in this area as influencers become increasingly active in political communication and campaigns, and politicians use their actions to their benefit¹¹. Conceptually, we added to the literature by introducing the phrase "politically active influencer," which describes content producers who support and endorse political and social causes to their audience. Unlike influencers in other

industries, they are eager to connect their online influence on political and social issues. The principal aim of the study is to examine the growing role and influence of the social media platform TikTok in the realm of political campaigns. This research explores the evolving digital landscape, where social media strategies increasingly complement traditional campaign methods, if not supplanted. Specifically, we are looking at TikTok, a platform known for its bite-sized videos and significant youth demographic, and how it is being harnessed for political purposes¹². The first objective of the research is to understand the scope and nature of TikTok's use in political campaigns. We are interested in investigating the frequency and intensity with which political activists use TikTok compared to other social media platforms, aiming to discover the specific features of TikTok they leverage and the types of content they create or promote on the platform. The second objective is to analyze the strategies and tactics employed by campaign promoters on TikTok. The goal is to identify common themes and approaches in the use of TikTok for political campaigns, highlighting successful tactics, innovative uses of the platform, and patterns in the types of content that garner the most engagement. The third objective is to evaluate the impact of political campaigns on TikTok on the platform's users. We aim to explore how TikTok users engage with political content, how this content influences their political opinions and behaviors, and how they perceive political campaigns on TikTok. This part of the study seeks to shed light on TikTok's effectiveness as a platform for political engagement and influence. Finally, we will also focus on the violent and aggressive content that often surfaces during election campaigns on TikTok. We will examine how this content spreads, its effects on political discourse, and how it influences the general perception of election campaigns. This aspect is crucial for understanding not only the platform's potential but also the risks associated with its use in political contexts.

2.Characteristics and Centrality in the Social, Political, and Communicative Context.

Recapping, this research aims to address several key questions, including the prevalence of TikTok usage in political campaigns, the most employed strategies and tactics by political promoters on TikTok, and how TikTok users engage with and perceive political content on the platform. Additionally, the research examines the overall impact of TikTok on political discourse and campaign outcomes, with particular attention to the spread of violent and aggressive content and its effect on the quality of political debate and public perception of electoral campaigns. Before delving into the issue, it is worth taking a few steps back and clarifying a few things about the platform. Let's start by saying that in 2016, Beijing-based ByteDance introduced this short video app initially called Douyin for Chinese audiences. The company did not introduce TikTok, the international counterpart of Douyin, until the following year. Since then, ByteDance has maintained two versions of the software¹³. Then, ByteDance bought Musical.ly, a lip-syncing app quite popular among teens and later combined with Douyin and TikTok. Since its release, TikTok has experienced enormous growth and is now the most downloaded app worldwide¹⁴. The platform's key feature is the capacity to upload, watch, and share brief 15-second videos. One can combine these 15-second videos to make longer ones that last up to 60 seconds. Users of numerous social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, can access a "feed" or a continuous stream of written or visual content. On the other hand, TikTok plays videos one after the other, and users can swipe up to see the next one or swipe down to return to the one they just finished watching. The platform has several elements common to social media, including user profiles, the option to "follow" other accounts, and the opportunity to post comments and likes¹⁵. In addition, TikTok offers a variety of distinctive features to customize user engagement and experience, setting it apart from other social networks as a unique digital media ecosystem. I will briefly discuss the platform's three unique features here, the *recommendation algorithm* on TikTok studies previous user behavior and adjusts to shifts in user preferences and interaction styles. It monitors popular content and provides users with a live video stream. On the For

You page, these videos come one after the other. Based on user choices, prior involvement, location, and other factors, each "For You" page is custom designed. It is safe to claim that app recommendation algorithms play a significant role in determining user experience, engagement, and interactions on the platform, given the importance of the For You feature¹⁶. According to Vazquez-Herrero et al. (2020)¹⁷, TikTok offers a variety of *editing tools*, including overlays, stickers, text elements, transitions, and visual effects. It enables the alteration of unprocessed videos on the site to produce quick videos enhanced with recognizable text features. Additionally, the platform enables one to supplement your current visual material with quick audio clips and sound effects. Particularly well-liked features include lip-syncing apps that let users combine original visual content with brief song excerpts¹⁸. As a result, users of TikTok can sing, dance, or both to a song. The finished video often includes audio, video, and text components. Additionally, it means that TikTok provides a digital setting where users may immediately produce compelling short videos without using outside software. This, in turn, guarantees user interaction and platform functionality. Users have more options for *interacting* with content on the platform than liking and commenting. Users can respond to a video, for instance, with their video. They can also combine videos from various users to produce original material. Additionally, they can collaborate to perform a duet, which entails two or more users doing the same dance motion, song, or other action in unison. Since many user's sing duets with well-known celebrities on TikTok, this function has significantly helped the app gain popularity¹⁹. These features work together to create a very immersive environment where users are encouraged to stay on the platform for extended periods and watch and engage with an unending stream of video material. Some media pundits have warned that the app is addictive, and that usage should be restricted²⁰. The above characteristics also convey that virtually any video can go viral. The company's approach to fostering and sustaining user engagement is centered on immersion and virality²¹. These components work together to create a digital environment resembling established social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram,

Twitter, and Snapchat, giving millions of users worldwide a fresh social media experience.

3. Theoretical background between possibilities and memetic composition of TikTok

Thus, after the debut of Douyin in China in 2016, TikTok quickly gained global popularity in 2017, merging the following year with the lip-syncing app Musical.ly. TikTok had over one billion users as of October 2022; the app has more than 100 million users in the US and is becoming more and more well-known in North America²². TikTok has distinct characteristics and capabilities. TikTok's default "For You" tab displays "algorithmic" content based on people's particular interests, users, and previous browsing data rather than enticing users to sign up for the network so they can keep up with what their friends and family are up to²³. The creation of an original or distinctive image that was validated by a sizable following was formerly promoted by visual social media such as Instagram²⁴. The TikTok platform's dynamics instead push users to create performance videos to include memes or other viral aspects to become and remain famous on the platform²⁵. Videos from TikTok show the influence of memes and memetic texts in digital culture, how simple it is to create intertextual objects, and how common they are in the media landscape. This encourages users to work together to influence the dynamics of public and political discourse²⁶. Due to platform features, including music choice, lip-syncing, split screen, duets, filters, and audio montage, the format has evolved to reflect technological advancements in mobile media and is a well-liked method of self-expression on TikTok²⁷. TikTok's interactive elements, technological usability, and user behaviors all generate a "popular platform"²⁸. This singular communication medium promotes content production on subjects like social justice, fragility, irony, and the performance of sexuality²⁹. According to Medina Serrano et al. (2020)³⁰, it is argued that TikTok users can be seen as artists who utilize audiovisual media to express their personal political views, resulting in a more interactive form of political communication compared to platforms such as

YouTube or Instagram. According to Johansson and Scaramuzzino (2019)³¹, TikTok is a type of digital propaganda used to support or criticize a specific cause, measure, or point of view in a political discussion. It provides activists a forum to collaborate and more directly shape public opinion than ever—organization and local campaigns³². As a result, TikTok videos are very interactive texts for cultural memory that let viewers join in on local, national, and global protests and social movements that tackle issues like racial injustice, class conflict, police brutality, and climate action³³. These contents not only serve as tools for mobilization and awareness but also contribute to the construction of a collective consciousness and the spread of alternative narratives that can challenge traditional media narratives. However, it is crucial to delve deeper into the issue of content that incites hate and violence online, as this represents a darker side of TikTok's use, especially during election campaigns. In these periods, the platform can become fertile ground for the spread of divisive and aggressive messages, which not only further polarize political debate but can also exacerbate social tensions and fuel violent behaviors. It is essential to examine how these contents spread, which groups or individuals are promoting them, and what the consequences are for the health of democratic discourse. Delving into this dimension is crucial to fully understanding TikTok's potential impact on society, as well as developing effective strategies to counter disinformation and online hate speech. Along these lines of reasoning, political communication experts have adopted the concept of authenticity as an ideal that communicates a politician's 'authentic' identity to compete for strategic advantage³⁴. While it is not new for voters to want politicians to act honestly to win their support, social media offers political leaders a dynamic environment "where authenticity is promised, demanded, and challenged"³⁵. Close relationships between politicians and their followers are encouraged by using social networks for political communication, such as exchanging private messages and images³⁶. Enley (2015)³⁷ described the performance of authenticity as three-step strategy politicians use to increase their credibility with their inner selves by making spontaneous, personal, and ongoing appearances on social media as

part of a public effort to win the trust of their supporters³⁸. Populist leaders frequently use this strategy because their "outsider" position, which questions the ruling party's dominance, increases their legitimacy and power³⁹. Political credibility is defined by Luebke (2021)⁴⁰ as a process that is "produced, communicated, and constitutes a multidimensional" social construction of learning and perception. He draws attention to the interdependence of the media, politicians, and the general public. These elements impact public perception by influencing how the media assesses the representation of actual political identities on social networks (Luebke, 2021)⁴¹. According to Seratio (2015)⁴², politicians result from skilled communication. In order to obfuscate the labor required to produce accurate representations of political candidates, we study the role of political consultants in the selling of brand images of political candidates. Social media platforms aid in shaping the well-known political phenomenon⁴³ (Street, 2018). The act of authenticity and style, or "political appeal," according to Street (2018)⁴⁴, is crucial to how well-known politicians engage with their following on social media. Visual social media reduce the distance between well-known politicians and voters, and posting images that convey genuine "authenticity" enables politicians to develop their social capital for political reasons⁴⁵. The acceptance of "influencers" who become somewhat famous on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok by producing material for their followers largely depends on their authenticity⁴⁶. However, politicians' influence is severely weakened⁴⁷. The investigation of powerful politicians primarily reveals two themes. The first discusses how people utilize social media sites like TikTok to spread information, get noticed by the media, sway public opinion, and advance social movements⁴⁸. According to Lewis (2019)⁴⁹, these influencers frequently have institutional ties, which are purposefully downplayed to highlight their significance. Politicians' use of social media to broaden their influence is discussed differently⁵⁰. Politics on TikTok is a neglected area.

4. Material and Methods

This research's findings were aimed at several key groups, each with a vested interest in understanding the role of TikTok in political campaigns. This includes political campaigners looking to leverage social media for their campaigns, social media strategists interested in TikTok as a political platform, academic researchers studying the interplay between politics and social media, and policymakers concerned with regulating social media's role in political discourse and electoral processes. The crux of this research lies in a mixed-methods approach, merging the precise and quantifiable nature of quantitative research with the rich, contextual insights offered by qualitative research. Integrating these two forms of inquiry allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how TikTok is used in political campaigns, combining measurable facts with subjective experiences. This design choice came from the understanding that TikTok's role in political campaigns extends beyond mere numerical data. While knowing the number of likes, shares, or comments a campaign receives is crucial, these figures become more meaningful when supplemented with qualitative insights about why users engage with specific content and how they perceive various campaign strategies. A key element of the research was framing the political scene both at the international level and within a defined temporal context, in order to ensure an adequate and relevant interpretation of the analysis. The investigation was conducted over the period from August 1, 2023, to August 1, 2024, a highly representative time frame for monitoring the development of political strategies on TikTok in correspondence with significant political events on a global, national, and local scale. During this period, key moments were considered, which generated important discussions on social media, including TikTok. At the same time, the specificity of political responses and strategies in individual national contexts was examined, highlighting how political leaders and parties adapted their messages and approaches based on the peculiarities of local audiences and cultural contexts. Establishing this time frame allowed us to create an updated picture of emerging trends and political communication strategies, following campaigns that developed during a year marked by rapid changes in digital technologies and the use of social media. This

temporal context enabled a deeper analysis not only of the strategies adopted by political campaigns but also of users' reactions, engagement levels, and the evolution of TikTok's role as a platform for political participation. Thanks to this temporal framework, the research was also able to compare how international and local events influenced trends and communication strategies on TikTok, providing a multidimensional and contextualized analysis of the phenomenon. Participant selection was a crucial phase of the research process, as it ensured the data collected was relevant and provided meaningful insights. The participants were categorized into three distinct groups:

- **Political campaigners:** This group comprised individuals directly involved in designing and running political campaigns on TikTok. Their insights were invaluable in understanding the rationale behind choosing TikTok as a campaign platform, the strategies adopted, the benefits realized, and the challenges encountered.
- **Social media experts:** Participants from this group provided a broader perspective on social media trends, political communication, and TikTok's place within this landscape. Their expert commentary on how TikTok's algorithm influences the visibility and impact of political content enriched the study's findings.
- **TikTok users:** As the primary audience and participants in political TikTok campaigns, these users offered unique insights into their engagement patterns, attitudes towards political content on TikTok, and their perception of the platform's influence on their political opinions and actions. Data collection was a multi-pronged process designed to capture a wide array of information about TikTok's role in political campaigns:
- **Survey:** A structured questionnaire was administered to 1,000 TikTok users. This survey aimed to collect quantitative data about user demographics and their engagement with political TikToks, such as watching, liking, commenting, sharing, and creating their political content.

- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with political campaigners and social media experts were conducted. The open-ended nature of these interviews allowed for in-depth discussions about the strategic use of TikTok in political campaigns, the effectiveness of different tactics, and the challenges faced.
- **TikTok Video Analysis:** In addition to survey data and interview responses, a content analysis of a random sample of 500 political TikTok videos was conducted. This analysis involved watching each video and categorizing it based on its primary themes, such as policy explanation, issue awareness, political attack, personal life, or fundraising.

Data analysis was a crucial stage in the research process, as it transformed raw data into meaningful findings. This was achieved through a quantitative analysis, using statistical software to analyse the survey data. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of user engagement with political TikToks. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analyses, were used to identify potential relationships between different types of user engagement and demographic characteristics. The qualitative data, on the other hand, were derived from the semi-structured interviews and the analysis of the TikTok videos were analysed thematically. Initial coding was conducted to identify key themes, followed by an in-depth review to refine them and explore their interrelationships. This process helped shed light on the strategies and tactics employed in political TikTok campaigns, their perceived effectiveness, and the challenges encountered.

5. Results and Discussion

The age distribution data from Table 1 offers a rich tapestry of understanding the demographic foundation of TikTok. It is imperative to observe that the heaviest concentration of respondents falls within the 25-34 age range. This is not an isolated incidence but rather an authentic reflection of TikTok's user base, which predominantly attracts younger internet users. These age groups represent an active, digitally native segment of the population, a crucial target audience for political campaigns⁵¹.

Table 1. Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

No.	Age Group	Number of Users
1	Age 18-24	317
2	Age 25-34	458
3	Age 35-44	155
4	Age 45 and above	70

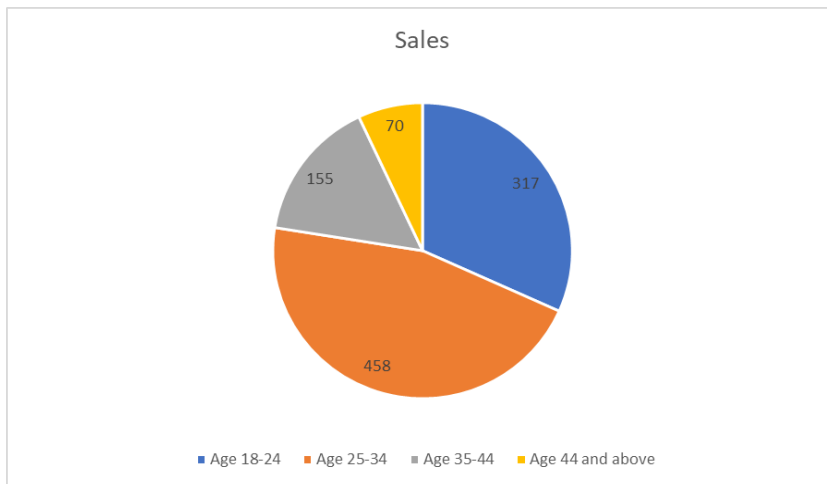


Figure 1. Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

As shown in Figure 1, with 31.7% of the respondents falling within the 18-24 age bracket and 45.8% in the 25-34 age bracket, we have compelling evidence to understand the powerful gravitational pull TikTok holds over the younger generations. As political campaigners aim to engage the youth, these statistics become invaluable. They inform us about who is receiving political messages on TikTok and shed light on the platform's efficacy as a tool for youth-focused political campaigning. Table 2 invites us to delve deeper into the demographic fabric of the survey respondents by offering insights into the gender distribution among the users. The data points to the more significant representation of males (60.5%) compared to females (34.3%). This disparity can be interpreted in various ways. Male users are more likely to engage with political content on TikTok, which

could be due to the nature of the content, the platform's dynamics, or broader social and cultural factors influencing the behavior of different genders. The 5.2% who preferred not to specify their gender further highlights the diverse user base and the importance of respecting privacy preferences on social media platforms like TikTok.

Table 2. Gender Distribution of Survey Respondents

No.	Gender	Number of Users
1	Male	605
2	Female	343
3	Prefer not to answer	52

However, as shown in Figure 2, another possibility is that male users were more receptive to participating in the survey, leading to the 60.5% representation. Regardless, this data underscores an intriguing gender-based pattern that warrants further exploration during the data analysis phase. The proportion of respondents who chose not to disclose their gender (5.2%) may appear smaller in comparison, but it is vital. Recognizing this percentage is essential for maintaining an inclusive research framework, emphasizing the importance of accommodating the complexity and sensitivity surrounding gender identity. As we delve deeper into the analysis, this gender-based data will be pivotal in extracting nuanced interpretations and insights.

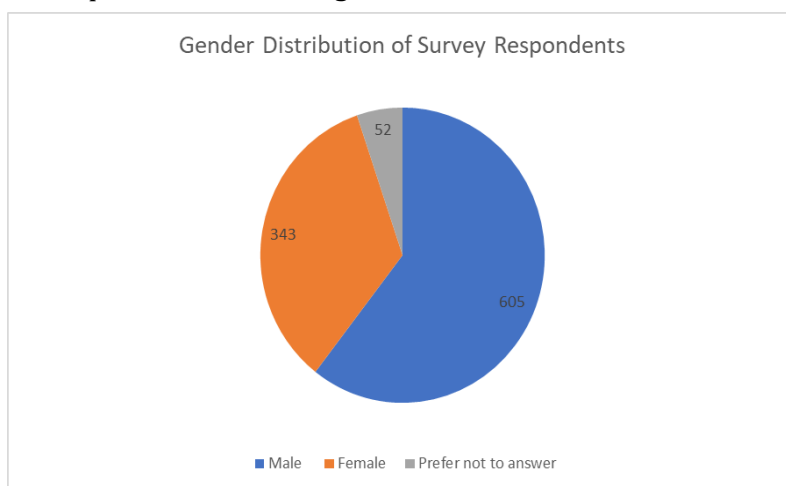


Figure 2. Gender Distribution of Survey Respondents

As we shift our attention to Table 3, we begin to understand the depth and variety of respondents' interactions with political content on TikTok. The data reveals a hierarchy in the levels of engagement. A vast majority, 85.5% of respondents, have watched political TikTok's, signifying an immense exposure to political content among the TikTok user base. This high viewership lays the foundation for more active forms of engagement, such as liking, commenting, sharing, or even creating their political content. The detailed breakdown helps to contextualize the extent to which political messages permeate and resonate within the TikTok community.

Table 3. Respondents' Engagement with Political TikToks

No.	Engagement Type	Number of Users
1	Watched	855
2	Liked	603
3	Commented	397
4	Shared	198
5	Created their political TikToks	101

Digging deeper into the data, Figure 3 illustrates that 60.3% of respondents have liked political content on TikTok, denoting a shift from mere passive viewing to a more proactive form of engagement. This behavior suggests that these users are not just passive consumers but engaged participants, actively showing appreciation or agreement with specific political messages. The act of commenting, undertaken by 39.7% of the respondents, and sharing, done by 19.8%, both depict elevated levels of engagement. These actions, especially commenting, require not just passive viewing but an investment of time and thought. Most intriguingly, the 10.1% of respondents who have ventured into creating their political TikTok's represent a niche but a highly significant group⁵². These individuals are not just consumers but active contributors, shaping the political discourse on the platform.

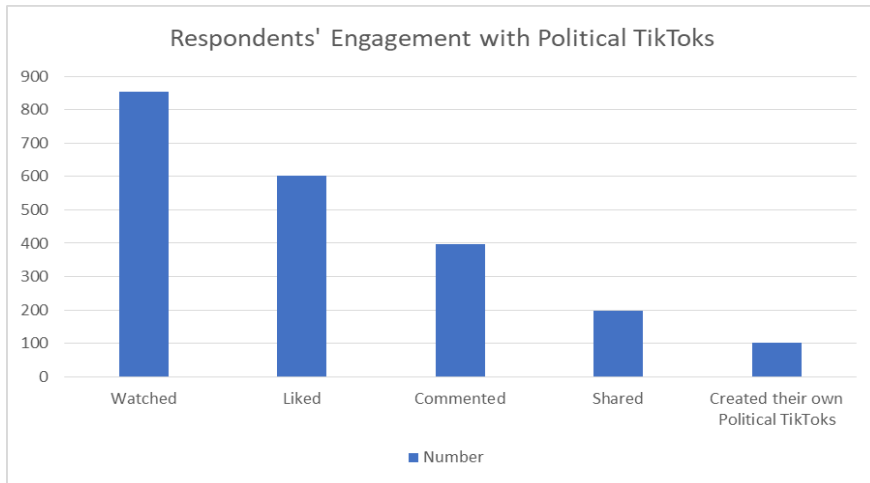


Figure 3. Respondents' Engagement with Political TikToks

The exploration of dominant themes within political TikTok videos, as delineated in Table 4, offers vital perspectives about the character and tactical approach of political content on the platform. The prevalent frequency of 'Issue awareness' and 'Policy explanation' themes, observed in 157 and 123 videos respectively, implies that TikTok serves as an influential medium for disseminating essential political issues and clarifying policy nuances in a digestible, engaging manner. This trend showcases the platform's potential in facilitating informed decision-making among its vast user base.

Table 4. Popular Themes in Political TikTok Videos (Based on 500 videos sampled)

No.	Themes	Number of Videos
1	Policy explanation	123
2	Issue awareness	157
3	Political attack	99
4	Personal life	71
5	Fundraising	50

In contrast, the presence of the theme 'Political Attack', reported in 99 videos, reveals a different dimension of political campaigning on TikTok, which revolves around criticism, violent social confrontation. The sporadic themes of 'Personal life' and 'Fundraising', detected in 71 and 50 videos

respectively, suggest their diminished prevalence or efficacy⁵³. It could be inferred that TikTok users gravitate towards more meaningful political content, valuing issue-centric discussions over negative campaigns or intimate glimpses into a candidate's personal life. This thematic analysis, as presented in Figure 4, is essential for understanding political campaign strategies on TikTok. It can help political campaigners identify what types of content resonate most with TikTok users, enabling them to tailor their strategies for maximum impact. The prominence of specific themes over others can offer campaign strategists a clear roadmap to designing engaging and effective TikTok content.

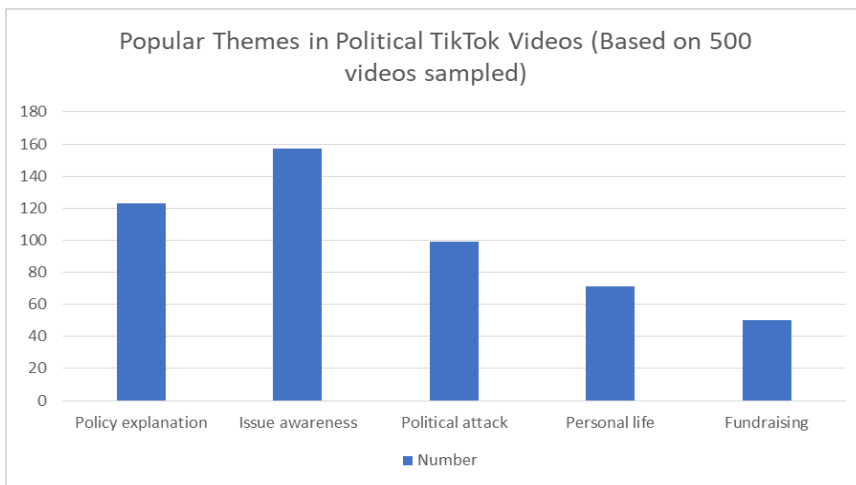


Figure 4. Popular Themes in Political TikTok Videos (Based on 500 videos sampled)

This research's findings facilitate a detailed discussion of TikTok's burgeoning role in the landscape of political campaigns. Our results significantly correspond with the existing literature on the influence of social media on political engagement, particularly with the younger demographics⁵⁴. The demographics data suggests that TikTok could be an effective platform for political campaigns to engage the elusive 18-34-year-olds, a group often deemed challenging to reach via traditional political platforms⁵⁵. The observed slight predominance of male users interacting with political content on TikTok may point to broader social or cultural factors that might influence the behavior of different genders on social media platforms, a phenomenon that has been discussed in previous

studies⁵⁶. This offers an exciting prospect for future research to delve into gender-based differences and how they could impact the tailoring of political content to resonate more effectively with different genders. The engagement analysis on TikTok parallels the theory of multi-tiered engagement in online political participation⁵⁷. While many TikTok users have watched and liked political content, indicating a level of passive interaction, a smaller yet notable percentage of users engage more actively by commenting, sharing, or creating political content. This finding illuminates the varying degrees of engagement and offers insights into how political campaigns could optimize their strategies to foster different types of user interaction⁵⁸. Finally, our content analysis emphasizes TikTok's role as a platform for political education, in line with Thorson's (2014)⁵⁹ findings on social media as an information-sharing platform. The dominance of 'issue awareness' and 'policy explanation' themes, contrasted with the presence of 'political attack' themes, reveals TikTok's complex role in political discourse. Interestingly, the less common themes of 'personal life' and 'fundraising' suggest a user preference for substantive political content over personal stories or monetary appeals, a dimension that merits further exploration⁶⁰. Overall, this discussion of TikTok's potential in shaping the future of political campaigns, particularly its role in engaging younger demographics, facilitating varied types of user interaction, and presenting diverse thematic content. As the digital landscape evolves, these insights will become increasingly vital for political strategists seeking to optimize their campaign strategies.

6. The Spiral of Digital Aggression and Its Impact

Susan Herbst's observation in her 2010 book *Rude Democracy*, which analysed the climate of verbal and physical aggression during the political transition of the Obama presidency, remains a relevant reflection for today's context. Herbst warned against the degradation of social relations, which not only underpin civil coexistence but also serve as the foundation of democracy itself. The spiral of violence, which begins with verbal aggression and extends to physical attacks and assaults on institutions, is a phenomenon that has raised concerns and sparked questions about the

health of public discourse and democratic practices. This deterioration in modes of engagement, from civil to violent, appears to be amplified and accelerated in the era of social media, where platforms become powerful vehicles for the spread of extremist and polarizing rhetoric⁶¹. TikTok, like many other social platforms, is not immune to this trend. Although the platform actively promotes respectful behaviour and encourages users to limit harmful content and actions, its algorithmic structure can sometimes exacerbate the spread of divisive and uncivil content. As mentioned, its architecture, designed to maximize engagement, often prioritizes content that elicits strong emotional reactions, including anger or outrage, which can fuel aggressive behaviours. This dynamic represents an internal contradiction for the platform, which seeks to maintain a safe community while simultaneously fostering dynamics that may encourage polarization and incivility. Communicative practices deemed uncivil, ranging from verbal insults to threats, have therefore become a growing area of focus in the social sciences, particularly concerning their impact on public discourse and the quality of democracy. In an environment like TikTok, where videos are consumed rapidly and often without deep reflection, such content can achieve visibility and diffusion that would be difficult in more traditional contexts. The platform's viral nature, combined with the ease of creation and sharing, has given rise to a new form of political participation that, while democratizing access to public discourse, has also heightened conflict and discredit between political factions, undermining the possibility of civil dialogue. This also raises crucial questions about the regulation of social platforms, particularly about how to balance freedom of expression with the need to protect the integrity of political discourse⁶². Although TikTok officially strives to limit harmful content, the effectiveness of these policies remains contentious, especially when the platform's algorithm rewards content that generates strong and polarizing reactions. Therefore, analysing uncivil practices on TikTok should be part of a broader reflection on the role of digital platforms in promoting a healthy and respectful political culture. Considering these developments, it is worth highlighting some of

the content expressed in the form of personal attacks and violent rhetoric, particularly those of a viral nature.

A particularly emblematic case illustrating this ambiguous correlation is the approach adopted by the re-elected U.S. president. Trump has distinguished himself as a pioneer in the extensive use of social media in the political sphere, developing a strategy that has redefined the modes of interaction between political leaders and their electorate⁶³. Trump's unfiltered, immediate, and often provocative communication became a central element of his political narrative, giving rise to what can be termed digital Trumpism. This mode describes a distinctive combination of communication strategies characterized by intensive use of social platforms, direct language, polarizing tones, and a strong personalization of messages⁶⁴. This approach allowed Trump to bypass traditional media channels, communicating directly with the public. On TikTok, where he surpassed 14 million followers, his communication mixed *politainment*—content combining political messages with entertainment elements—and direct statements often marked by strongly critical and provocative tones. This strategy not only enabled him to consolidate an extremely loyal base of supporters but also amplified his message through the debates and polarizing reactions his content generated. Supporters used TikTok and other platforms to further disseminate his messages, creating a unique political narrative ecosystem deeply embedded in the mechanisms of digital engagement. One of the central themes of Trump's communication on TikTok concerns immigration policy. Through incisive and sometimes extreme posts, he reiterated hardline positions on immigration, such as building the wall along the Mexican border. These posts were often marked by provocative statements, occasionally venturing into negative generalizations about immigrants. A striking example is his claim that “in Springfield, migrants are eating dogs and cats,” a statement that, while emerging after the analysed timeframe, highlights the extent of the strongly polarizing language adopted by Trump. In addition to the immigration issue, another significant aspect of Trump's TikTok communication involved frequent personal attacks against political figures, institutions, and

public personalities. These attacks often manifested as derogatory epithets or provocative comments, contributing to political polarization and intensifying a climate of negative rhetoric. Key targets included the European Union, accused of robbing the United States; Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, described as a supporter of his political opponent; and entertainment figures like Taylor Swift, criticized for her endorsement of Kamala Harris. Harris herself, Trump's political challenger, was labelled with derogatory epithets, described as a "wreck that destroys everything she encounters." Trump's use of personal attacks and polarizing statements has significantly impacted political discourse, exacerbated ideological divisions and transformed public debate into an increasingly contentious arena. The combination of algorithms favouring high-emotion content and his communication style has made TikTok fertile ground for the spread of divisive content, increasing engagement while fostering a climate of confrontation. This dynamic has highlighted not only the limitations of social platforms in moderating potentially harmful content but also raised questions about the quality of democratic discourse in the digital age⁶⁵. Trump's case underscores how TikTok, while representing a powerful tool for political communication, can foster extreme polarization when used to promote divisive rhetoric and personal attacks. The analysis of Trump's communication strategies on TikTok highlights the need for more effective regulation of political content on digital platforms, balancing freedom of expression with the responsibility to maintain constructive public discourse⁶⁶. This case serves as a starting point for further research aimed at exploring the impact of polarizing communication practices on political participation, public opinion formation, and the health of democracy.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research has thoroughly examined the relationship between the popular social media platform TikTok and its burgeoning use as a tool for political campaigning. By closely analyzing the demographic distribution of TikTok users engaged in political content, their specific types of engagement, and the prominent themes in political TikTok videos, the study has painted a comprehensive picture of the platform's role and

potential in political discourse and campaigning. The age and gender distribution analysis has highlighted the predominance of younger users, specifically those aged 18-34, which aligns with TikTok's broad user demographic. This youthful user base represents an active, socially aware, and digitally fluent audience, presenting a unique opportunity for political campaigns aiming to influence and mobilize younger voters. The slight male skew in the demographic might point towards gender-based behavioral differences in consuming and engaging with political content. This is an exciting facet for future research and strategy development. The research also delved into various engagement levels with political content, revealing that many users watch and like political TikTok's while commenting, sharing, and creating political content representing lower yet effective forms of engagement. This gradient of engagement provides valuable insights for campaigners to gauge the effectiveness of their content and strategize the call-to-action elements. The content analysis of political TikTok's, which focused on the prevalent themes, showcased an exciting mix of issue awareness, policy explanation, political attacks, personal life stories, and fundraising appeals. The dominance of issue awareness and policy explanation themes underscores TikTok's role as an information-sharing platform, while the presence of attack themes, personal life, and fundraising content adds dimensions of critique, personalization, and resource mobilization. This study's findings have underscored TikTok's role as a potent tool for political campaigning, particularly effective for reaching and engaging younger demographics. Understanding platforms like TikTok become increasingly essential as the digital landscape shapes political discourse and campaigning. The insights from this research will contribute to more effective and engaging political campaign strategies and open new avenues for further research in social media and political communication. But the presence of the "Political Attack" theme, highlighted in 99 videos, reveals a distinct and complex dimension of political campaigning on TikTok. This dimension extends beyond the simple dissemination of information or raising awareness on specific issues to encompass forms of critique and confrontation, often characterized by violent and aggressive

tones. This theme, which emerges with a certain frequency among the analyzed content, highlights a crucial aspect of contemporary political discourse on the platform: the use of direct attacks as a strategy to delegitimize political opponents and polarize public opinion⁶⁷. The use of political attacks on TikTok not only amplifies the tensions already present in the context of electoral campaigns but also contributes to a climate of violent social confrontation, where political debate tends to transform into a clash of extreme ideas rather than a constructive dialogue. This dynamic reflects a broader trend in digital campaigns, where user engagement is often driven by content that evokes strong emotional reactions, whether of support or indignation. In this scenario, TikTok, with its ability to quickly spread viral content, becomes fertile ground for the proliferation of divisive rhetoric, which can significantly impact not only public perception of candidates and their platforms but also the overall quality of political discourse. Therefore, the inclusion and prevalence of political violence in TikTok videos represent a critical element to consider in fully understanding the platform's role in modern political campaigns. This phenomenon suggests the need for further research to explore how such content influences electoral dynamics, voter decisions, and, more broadly, the health of democratic discourse in an era where digital platforms play an increasingly central role. Moreover, the growing presence of political incivility, as analyzed by Bentivegna and Rega (2022)⁶⁸, is significantly intertwined with the theme of "Political Attacks" found in TikTok videos. This phenomenon of incivility, characterized by aggressive language, personal delegitimization, and behavior that exceeds the norms of civil discourse, finds a fertile context for its spread on the platform. The viral nature and algorithmic structure of TikTok further amplify content that polarizes and provokes strong reactions, thus contributing to an increasingly divisive political environment. Consequently, the analysis of political videos on TikTok that contain aggressive attacks must be placed within a broader framework, where political incivility becomes a lens through which to understand the dynamics of modern political discourse and its impact on democracy. This connection underscores the urgency of

developing strategies aimed at mitigating such online behaviors and promoting a more constructive and respectful political dialogue, both on TikTok and in other spheres of political communication.

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