Populist Radical Right Communication on TikTok: The Case of Reform UK in the 2024 General Election

La comunicación de la derecha radical populista en TikTok: el caso de Reform UK en las elecciones generales de 2024

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Abstract

This article examines Reform UK's use of TikTok during the 2024 United Kingdom general election, focusing on platform affordances, populist radical right (PRR) communication features, and audience engagement. Based on a qualitative content analysis of all TikTok posts published during the official campaign, the study analyzes how an underexplored PRR party operated on a platform commonly associated with participatory and vernacular political communication. The findings reveal a highly controlled strategy characterized by professionalized production, limited interactivity, and strong leadership centrality. Despite TikTok's participatory affordances, Reform UK primarily used the platform as a broadcast channel, reproducing communication logics identified in previous research on PRR digital campaigning. Patterns of audience engagement suggest that this limited adaptation to TikTok's specific affordances may reflect a form of selective non-adaptation that can constitute a strategically coherent communication logic, challenging platform-deterministic assumptions and highlighting the enduring influence of ideological and organizational factors in political communication on emerging platforms.

Keywords

TikTok*;* Reform UK*;* radical right populism*;* political communication*;* social media*;* election campaign.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el uso de TikTok por parte de Reform UK durante las elecciones generales del Reino Unido de 2024, centrándose en las affordances de la plataforma, los rasgos comunicativos de la derecha radical populista (PRR) y el engagement de la audiencia. A partir de un análisis de contenido cualitativo de todas las publicaciones difundidas durante el periodo oficial de campaña, el estudio analiza cómo un partido PRR poco explorado académicamente operó en una plataforma habitualmente asociada a formas de comunicación política participativas y vernaculares. Los resultados muestran una estrategia comunicativa altamente controlada, caracterizada por una producción profesionalizada, un bajo nivel de interactividad y una fuerte centralidad del liderazgo. A pesar de las affordances participativas de TikTok, Reform UK utilizó la plataforma principalmente como un canal de difusión unidireccional, reproduciendo lógicas comunicativas ya identificadas en la literatura sobre campaña digital de la PRR. Los patrones de engagement sugieren que esta limitada adaptación a las affordances específicas de TikTok puede responder a una forma de no adaptación selectiva que puede constituir una lógica comunicativa estratégicamente coherente, lo que cuestiona los supuestos deterministas sobre las plataformas y pone de relieve la influencia persistente de factores ideológicos y organizativos en la comunicación política en entornos digitales emergentes.

Palabras clave

TikTok; Reform UK; populismo radical de derecha; comunicación política; redes sociales; campaña electoral.

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1. Introduction

The rise of TikTok as a political communication platform has transformed digital campaign strategies and expanded scholarly interest in how political actors adapt to emerging media environments. Unlike earlier platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, TikTok is characterized by short-form video, algorithmic virality, and an emphasis on entertainment-driven, affective, and participatory content (Cervi, 2021; Zamora-Medina *et al.*, 2023). These features have led scholars to question whether TikTok encourages new forms of political communication that differ substantively from the broadcast-orien-ted logics historically associated with institutional politics.

This question is particularly relevant for populist radical right (PRR) parties. Existing research has extensively documented how PRR actors use digital media to bypass traditional gatekeepers, reinforce leader-centered personalization, and disseminate antagonistic narratives through largely unidirectional communication strategies (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2017; Ernst *et al.*, 2017, 2019). However, this body of work has focused primarily on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, where such communication styles align relatively well with platform affordances. Whether these established PRR communication logics persist on TikTok remains underexplored.

Recent studies on political communication on TikTok suggest the existence of a tension between the platform's affordances and the practices of institutional political actors. While TikTok offers opportunities for humor, vernacular expression, and user interaction, research indicates that political parties and candidates often underutilize these features, instead reproducing traditional campaign formats (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Cervi *et al.*, 2021, 2023; Montúfar-Calle *et al.*, 2022). In the context of PRR communication, some scholars highlight the platform's potential for spectacularization, personalization, and emotional engagement (González-Aguilar *et al.*, 2023; Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024), while others point to a continued reliance on controlled, leader-centric messaging.

This article intervenes in this debate by challenging the implicit assumption that limited adaptation to TikTok's participatory affordances necessarily reflects communicative weakness or digital incompetence. Instead, it advances the argument that, for PRR actors, selective non-adaptation may constitute a strategic and ideologically coherent choice. By prioritizing message discipline, leadership visibility, and agenda control, PRR parties may use TikTok instrumentally, as a channel for amplification rather than interaction, while remaining consistent with their broader populist communication style (Engesser *et al.*, 2017; Moffitt, 2016).

Empirically, the study focuses on Reform UK's use of TikTok during the 2024 United Kingdom general election. Despite its electoral relevance and exceptional visibility on TikTok, Reform UK remains largely absent from the literature on digital populism and platform-based campaigning. As a relatively new and electorally volatile PRR party operating within a majoritarian system, Reform UK represents an underexplored but analytically valuable case for examining how contemporary PRR actors navigate emerging platforms in high-stakes electoral contexts.

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Using a qualitative content analysis of all TikTok posts published by Reform UK during the official campaign period, the study addresses three main research questions: (1) which TikTok-specific affordances are employed, (2) which elements of PRR communication style are present, and (3) which types of content generate the highest engagement. By doing so, the article contributes to the literature on digital populism by showing that high visibility and engagement on TikTok can be achieved without embracing participatory or interactive communication, thereby highlighting the continued relevance of ideological and organizational logics in shaping platform use.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Populist Radical Right Political Communication

Populist radical right (PRR) parties have been gaining political traction across Europe and beyond since the 1980s. Scholars have identified PRR parties as a subset of far-right movements that reject outright extremism while maintaining a deeply oppositional stance toward liberal democracy and multiculturalism (Mudde, 2007; Golder, 2016). Their ideological framework is centered on an exclusionary vision of «the people,» often constructed in opposition to political elites, the mainstream media, and marginalized groups such as immigrants or ethnic minorities (Bonikowski, 2017). Their success has been attributed to both demand-side factors, such as public grievances over immigration, economic insecurity, and cultural transformation, and supply-side factors like effective leadership, media strategies, and political opportunity structures (Golder, 2016; Rydgren, 2018).

The PRR political style is heavily influenced by populist discourse, which frames society as divided between «the pure people» and «the corrupt elite» (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This discourse is often coupled with nativist ideology, where the nation's perceived cultural homogeneity is positioned as under threat from both external (immigration, globalization) and internal (progressive elites, media) forces (Mudde, 2007). This exclusionary form of populism contrasts with left-wing populism, which typically constructs «the people» along socio-economic lines rather than ethnic or national ones (March, 2007, 2017).

The advent of digital media has amplified PRR communication strategies, enabling them to bypass traditional media filters and directly engage with supporters (Postill, 2018). Research on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter has consistently shown that PRR parties employ a predominantly unidirectional communication style, rely heavily on leadership personalization, and prioritize agenda control over deliberative interaction (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2017; Ernst *et al.*, 2017, 2019). Importantly, these patterns have often been interpreted as evidence of strategic effectiveness within digital environments, rather than as communicative limitations.

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This observation is central to the present study. If controlled, leader-centred, and largely one-directional communication has been understood as a functional and ideologically coherent strategy on earlier platforms, its persistence on TikTok raises theoretical questions that cannot be reduced to a narrative of technological inadequacy. Instead, it invites a reassessment of how PRR communication logics interact with platform-specific affordances.

2.2. The rise of TikTok

The rapid ascent of TikTok as a dominant social media platform has reshaped the political communication landscape, particularly among younger demographics (Medina-Serrano *et al.*, 2020). With over one billion active users worldwide, TikTok has surpassed traditional platforms in engagement levels, fostering new modes of political expression that rely heavily on short-form video content, algorithmic virality, and participatory culture (Cervi, 2021). Unlike Twitter and Facebook, where text and direct interaction with followers are crucial, TikTok prioritizes visually engaging, emotionally resonant, and entertainment-driven content (Zamora-Medina *et al.*, 2023).

From a political communication perspective, TikTok represents a hybrid space where traditional political messaging intersects with digital subcultures, meme culture, and performative activism (Weimann & Masri, 2020). This has had significant implications for PRR communication strategies, forcing parties to adapt their rhetoric and delivery style to match the platform's aesthetic norms (González-Aguilar *et al.*, 2023). Unlike the confrontational and overtly ideological content often found on Twitter, TikTok fosters a «casual politicking» approach, where political messages are embedded within humorous skits, reaction videos, and viral challenges (Gekker, 2019; Medina-Serrano *et al.*, 2020; Vijay & Gekker, 2021).

Research shows that PRR actors have been able to capitalize on TikTok's affective and entertainment-driven architecture to optimize engagement. One central strategy has been the spectacularization of politics, where dramatic editing techniques, fast-paced visuals, and meme culture reshape political discourse into a form of entertainment (González-Aguilar *et al.*, 2023; Zulli & Zulli, 2022; AlAfnan, 2025). This transformation, often referred to as «politainment» (Nieland, 2008), enables PRR actors to appear more relatable while reinforcing ideological points in a manner that resonates with younger audiences (Cervi *et al.*, 2023; Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024). Additionally, TikTok fosters a level of personalization that allows PRR leaders to craft charismatic digital personas, interact directly with followers, and leverage viral trends to humanize their political messaging (Zamora-Medina *et al.*, 2023). This approach aligns with broader trends in populist communication, where political leaders actively embrace TikTok's vernacular and participatory logic (Moir, 2023), making authenticity and direct engagement with the audience central to their strategy (Engesser *et al.*, 2017).

A second relevant way to increase engagement employed by PRR parties has been the strategic use of humor. While previous research has emphasized the role of anger and fear-based messaging in PRR mobilization, TikTok appears to favor a more playful, charismatic, and meme-driven form of out-

reach (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024). This does not mean that PRR actors abandon their ideological core; rather, they repackage their exclusionary and anti-elite narratives into more digestible and shareable formats (González-Aguilar *et al.*, 2023). For instance, studies show that PRR politicians on Tik-Tok frequently use irony, sarcasm, and parody to delegitimize opponents while simultaneously positioning themselves as anti-establishment truth-tellers (Weimann & Masri, 2020).

Additionally, PRR parties on TikTok have tailored their communication to appeal to younger, politically disengaged demographics, particularly young men with low institutional trust (Tukiainen *et al.*, 2024). This group often feels alienated from traditional political discourse and institutions (Cammae-rts *et al.*, 2015), making them more likely to engage with content that presents itself as rebellious, anti-establishment, or humorous (Kaur & Puyok, 2021). PRR actors capitalize on this by combining positive emotions that inspire optimism and belonging with negative emotions that emphasise threats and crises in order to mobilize their audience (Cartes-Barroso *et al.*, 2025). Rather than functioning as a space for ideological conversion, TikTok primarily reinforces and mobilizes pre-existing PRR support bases among the younger generations (Zamora-Medina *et al.*, 2023).

Moreover, given that TikTok's algorithm-driven content dissemination prioritizes engagement over factual accuracy, PRR actors can achieve dis-proportionate visibility even without a large follower base (Cervi, 2021). This algorithmic advantage makes it easier for PRR narratives to go viral, enter mainstream discourse, and influence public opinion (Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025), particularly among younger voters who might not otherwise engage with traditional news sources (Lipiński, 2024). However, this also raises con-cerns about the potential normalization of far-right rhetoric, as the platform's entertainment-driven culture may obscure the ideological nature of PRR messaging (Moffitt, 2016).

Nonetheless, although PRR parties have been able to reach a wider audience thanks to TikTok, some research also points out the fact that, in general, parties do not seem to take full advantage of the platform's affor-dances (Cervi *et al.*, 2021, 2023; Battista, 2023; Zurovac, 2022). In fact, it looks like most of the parties and candidates tend to employ TikTok to use it as a unilateral tool for promotion and, thus, they do not fully exploit the affordances of this social media (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Montúfar-Calle *et al.*, 2022; Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022; Morejón-Llamas, 2023). As a result, political communication on TikTok is largely characterized by the predominance of unidirectional strategies and limited evidence of sustained interaction between political actors and their audiences (Morejón-Llamas *et al.*, 2024).

This tension between TikTok's participatory architecture and the persis-tence of broadcast-style political communication constitutes a key theoreti-cal issue for this article. While limited adaptation is frequently framed as a weakness or a failure to exploit the platform's potential, such interpretations often overlook the ideological and organizational logics that shape political communication strategies. In the case of PRR parties, whose communication

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style prioritizes leadership centrality, message discipline, and antagonistic framing, limited interactivity may reflect continuity rather than deficiency.

2.3. The case of Reform UK

Reform UK, formerly known as the Brexit Party, plays a significant role in the United Kingdom's political landscape as a right-wing, national-populist party. Initially founded in 2018 to advocate for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, it has since evolved into a broader right-wing party promoting economic reform, strict immigration policies, and opposition to what it perceives as establishment politics (Lowe & Skalli-Housseini, 2024). In the most recent UK General Election, the party secured over 4 million votes, making it the third most-voted party in the country (Heath *et al.*, 2025).

A key component of Reform UK's campaign was its use of social media. The party has amassed hundreds of thousands of followers across its various platforms and posts frequently. Among these, Twitter was the largest following, with nearly 500,000 followers. However, TikTok was its second-largest platform, with nearly 400,000 followers. Notably, Reform UK was by far the most-followed UK political party on TikTok, even though Labour and the Conservatives surpassed it on other social media platforms. This makes the party's use of TikTok as a political communication tool particularly worthy of analysis. Accordingly, this article aims to examine how Reform UK leveraged TikTok during the 2024 UK General Election.

As discussed earlier, TikTok offers specific affordances that political parties can exploit, and PRR parties have demonstrated an ability to adapt their messaging effectively across different social media platforms. However, research suggests that political parties generally do not fully utilize TikTok's unique features (Cervi *et al.*, 2021, 2023). Therefore, we will assess the extent to which Reform UK takes advantage of TikTok's affordances. This leads to our first research question:

RQ1: Which TikTok-specific affordances are employed in Reform UK's TikTok posts?

Beyond technical affordances, the communicative style of PRR parties is central to understanding their digital presence. Characterized by a populist narrative that pits «the pure people» against «the corrupt elite,» PRR discourse often includes nativist themes, depicting national identity as threatened by both external forces (e.g., immigration, globalization) and internal actors (e.g., progressive elites, mainstream media). To explore whether Reform UK's content reflects this political style, we pose a second research question:

RQ2: Which elements of PRR's communication style appear in Reform UK's TikTok posts?

Finally, understanding which types of content resonate most with audiences can shed light on the effectiveness of PRR strategies on TikTok. By analyzing engagement metrics, such as likes, comments, and shares, we

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aim to identify patterns in audience responsiveness. This leads to our third research question:

RQ3: Which Reform UK's TikTok posts received the highest engagement?

3. Methodology

To answer these questions, the research adopts a qualitative content analysis of the TikTok post of Reform UK during the UK 2024 election campaign. This method is widely used in political communication research because it enables the systematic collection, interpretation, and evaluation of messages disseminated through different media platforms (Gómez-Escalonilla, 2021). In the case of political content analysis, it is evident that this is a well-established method, widely employed across numerous studies (e.g., D'Adamo *et al.*, 2020; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Sánchez-Marañón & Rodríguez-Virgili, 2024, 2026; Valenzuela-Tábora *et al.*, 2023). Recently, it has also been employed to analyze content posted by political parties in TikTok (e.g., Albertazzi & Bonansiaga, 2024; Cartes-Barroso *et al.*, 2025; Cervi *et al.*, 2021, 2023; Medina-Serrano *et al.*, 2020; Zamora-Medina *et al.*, 2023).

Although the research design is primarily qualitative, the study also incorporates a descriptive examination of engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments, and views). This combination does not aim to establish causal relationships or statistically generalizable effects, but rather to contextualize patterns of visibility and resonance within the qualitative interpretation of communication strategies. In this sense, engagement indicators are used analytically and exploratorily, in line with previous research on political communication on TikTok, where such metrics are understood as indicators of platform visibility rather than direct measures of persuasion or impact.

This study adopts a single-case study design focused on Reform UK during the 2024 UK General Election. While this approach limits statistical generalizability, it allows for an in-depth and systematic examination of communication strategies within a specific electoral and platform context. The sample includes all TikTok's post published by Reform UK on their official account (@reformparty_uk) during the 2024 general election campaign period, from the official announcement of the election (May 22) to election day (July 4). A total of 103 posts were analyzed. Posts were manually collected from TikTok due to the lack of an accessible public API. The unit of analysis was defined as each individual TikTok post, comprising the video content, accompanying music, visual effects, and on-screen text, while excluding user comments. This approach ensured full coverage of Reform's campaign communication on TikTok within the selected timeframe and allowed for a systematic assessment of both stylistic and thematic dimensions.

The coding scheme was adopted following the existing previous research in the area (the full coding scheme is in the Appendix). The first section of the code focuses on the main affordances of TikTok. Thus, it examines the genre, source, format, type of recording and type and role of the music. All of this

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seeks to capture if the content produced by Reform made use of the specific affordances provided by this social media.

Then, the second section of variables examines the content of Reform's posts. Following Cervi (2023) and Cervi and Marín-Lladó, (2021), we examine the main topic of the post, differentiating between political, personal, and entertainment content. The Political category includes all explicitly political TikToks and distinguishes content based on how politics is framed. Specifically, it differentiates between the issue frame, which focuses on political issues and concrete proposals, and the game frame, which portrays politics as a competition, battle, or war. Within the game frame, there is a distinction between content dedicated to praising the candidate or attacking the opponent. Additionally, posts related to the campaign, such as those featuring campaign events, promotional videos, and similar content, have been categorized as campaign issues (Zamora-Medina *et al.*, 2023). The Personal category includes only what Metz *et al.* (2020) describe as «private personalization», referring to content that highlights the candidate's personal life, such as family, hobbies, or individual traits. Lastly, the Entertainment category encompasses all TikToks shared primarily for their entertainment value.

The main and secondary characters in each post, along with the location, have been considered due to their relevance in shaping the narrative and constructing the political message. Since messages shared during an electoral campaign are expected to involve persuasive discourse, the persuasive strategy has been analyzed following the classical Aristotelian categories of logos, ethos, and pathos, in line with the approach of Zamora-Medina *et al.* (2023).

Additionally, to assess whether the candidate fosters interaction with the audience and the nature of that interaction, the scale proposed by Lilleker and Vedel (2013) has been applied. At the most basic level, interaction occurs when social media is used solely for disseminating information. A higher level of engagement is achieved when the candidate encourages discussion by asking or responding to questions. The most interactive stage is reached when the candidate actively promotes citizen participation, either online, by motivating users to share or create content, or offline, by encouraging involvement in events, volunteering, and other forms of activism.

Then, the third section of the code focuses mainly on the PRR political communication features. Adapting the work of Valenzuela Tábora *et al.* (2023), we examined the presence of different populist characteristics, specifically, the reference to the leader's qualities and attributes, as well as appeals to the people, the common sense, the elites and the media in Reform's posts. Additionally, based on the work of O'Connor (2021), we add some categories addressing the specific characteristics of radical right populism, mainly anti-migrant, anti-LGBT and misogynistic discourse.

Moreover, for each post, we also collected metadata related to the post engagement, such as the number of likes, shares, comments and views, along with other data like the day of publication and the length (in seconds) of the videos.

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Finally, to ensure the reliability of the coding process, inter-coder agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa (κ) on a randomly selected subset of 20% of the dataset. The analysis yielded a kappa value of κ = 0.88, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 and indicating substantial agreement between coders. This step was critical in mitigating potential biases stemming from subjective interpretations of the content. These measures ensured that the analytical process was both systematic and replicable.

4. Results

The analysis of Reform's TikTok activity reveals a communication strategy that combined professionally produced content with a limited use of platform affordances. In terms of origin, 49.5% of the posts were produced specifically for TikTok, while 37.9% were cross-posted from other platforms, and 12.6% consisted of extracts from media content, such as television appearances or news clips.

The vast majority of the content (98.1%) consisted of videos, while only 2 of the posts were static images with text. Multi-format videos were common: 20.4% combined video, text, effects, and music, and another 20.4% included only video and text. Unadorned video formats were also frequent, comprising 36.9% of the sample, while other combinations, such as video with effects or music, were each used in 3.9% of the posts. The length of the videos ranged from 4 to 139 seconds, with an average duration of 43.6 seconds and a median of 36 seconds, indicating a preference for short- to mid-length formats in line with typical TikTok norms. Music was absent from 68.0% of the videos; when present, it served as background accompaniment and was always original rather than drawn from viral or trending TikTok sounds. Professional recordings dominated the visual style of the content, accounting for 82.5% of the posts. Edited clips were found in 10.7% of the sample, and 6.8% were still images (some of them brought to video by adding text or effects to them).

Altogether, these patterns indicate a selective and cautious adoption of TikTok's affordances. Although nearly half of the content was produced specifically for the platform, its formal characteristics largely replicate traditional campaign formats rather than TikTok-native or vernacular styles. The predominance of professional recordings, the marginal role of music, and the absence of viral sounds suggest that TikTok was approached primarily as a controlled distribution channel rather than as a space for creative or participatory experimentation. This reveals an initial tension between the platform's affordance structure and Reform UK's preference for message discipline and production control.

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Figure 1. Examples of public rally clips from a Reform UK's TikTok.

A closer look at the content reveals distinct formats and production contexts. A significant portion consisted of unedited clips from public rallies, typically drawn from livestreams on party channels. These featured wide-angle shots of candidates addressing crowds with minimal editing or on-screen text (see Figure 1). Another recurring format involved excerpts from televised interviews or press appearances, often showing candidates in studio settings or split-screen formats with visible channel branding (see Figure 2). Additionally, several posts consisted of videos recorded in dedicated studio environments, where candidates delivered scripted messages to camera against neutral or branded backdrops, in a style reminiscent of news presenters (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Examples of media interview extracts from Reform UK TikTok.

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A small number of professionally edited campaign spots were also present, incorporating music, transitions, and stylized visual effects similar to traditional political advertisements (see Figure 4). Some content took a more informal approach, particularly in meme-style videos that used parody, remix culture, or pop references to inject humor into the campaign message. These stood out for their alignment with TikTok's entertainment-driven design (see Figure 5). Finally, a handful of posts from the final days of the campaign featured Nigel Farage in public spaces interacting with citizens, shaking hands, taking selfies, or soliciting votes in the street, emphasizing a populist image of proximity and accessibility (see Figure 6).

Despite the coexistence of multiple formats, the overall distribution points to a strong continuity with legacy media logics. Rally footage, media interviews, and studio-recorded messages dominate the sample, while meme-style or informal videos remain relatively marginal. Even content that visually signals proximity to «ordinary people» tends to be carefully staged and leader-centered rather than dialogical. This combination suggests that Reform UK selectively incorporates visual cues associated with TikTok culture while preserving a predominantly broadcast-oriented narrative structure.

Figure 3. Examples of studio-recorded messages from Reform UK's TikTok.

Thematic content across the sample was predominantly political. Issue-based framing was the most frequent, appearing in 39.8% of the videos. Attack-oriented posts targeting political opponents accounted for 33.0%, while campaign-related updates, including event coverage and calls to vote, represented 26.2%. Only one post (1.0%) conveyed positive messages or praise, directed toward members of the Reform Party. In terms of actor representation, Nigel Farage appeared as the main protagonist in 47.6% of posts, followed by Richard Tice (18.4%), other Reform UK candidates (15.5%), and oponent candidates (13.6%). Citizens were central in just one video (1.0%), and four posts (3.9%) lacked a clearly defined main actor. Secondary figures were absent in most videos (80.6%), but when present, included Farage (6.8%), Tice (4.9%), citizens (3.9%), and other candidates (1.9%). Most videos were set in media-style environments (44.7%) or public spaces (32.0%), with fewer set in undefined (17.5%), private (3,9%), or institutional (1.9%) settings.

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These patterns underscore a communication strategy structured around leadership centrality and political confrontation. The predominance of issue-based and attack-oriented frames, combined with the marginal presence of citizens as political actors, reinforces a top-down narrative logic. Although TikTok enables relational storytelling and peer-to-peer visibility, such possibilities were largely sidelined in favor of a leader-driven and adversarial campaign style. Public settings, when used, functioned more as symbolic backdrops than as spaces for interaction.

Figure 4. Examples of edited campaign spots from Reform UK's TikTok.

In terms of persuasive strategy, ethos-based appeals, highlighting credibility and character, were the most common, appearing in 53.4% of the sample. Emotional appeals (pathos) appeared in 35.9% of the posts, while logical or policy-based reasoning (logos) was used in 8.7%. In 1.9% of cases, the type of appeal was not clearly identifiable. Most of the posts followed a one-way, broadcast-style communication model. Informational or promotional videos represented 94.2% of the content, while participatory or mobilizing content, such as direct appeals for interaction, engagement, or action, were found in only 5.8% of cases.

The dominance of ethos- and pathos-based appeals aligns with a communication strategy oriented toward emotional resonance and leader credibility rather than deliberative persuasion. The extremely limited presence of participatory or mobilizing content further reinforces the prevalence of broadcast logic. This highlights a structural contradiction: while TikTok is designed to reward interaction and user participation, Reform UK systematically avoided communicative practices that might weaken narrative control or ideological coherence.

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Figure 5. Examples of meme-style videos from Reform UK's TikTok.

Populist radical-right (PRR) themes featured prominently in Reform UK's TikTok content, though their intensity and distribution varied. The most recurrent motif was migration, referenced in 41.7% of the posts, by far the most salient ideological theme. These references typically framed immigration as a threat to national identity, public services, or border control, aligning with the exclusionary nationalism characteristic of PRR discourse. Appeals to «the people» appeared in 21.4% of the content, often constructed in opposition to perceived political elites or establishment parties. Anti-elite rhetoric was present in 15.5% of posts, targeting mainstream politicians, bureaucratic institutions, or the political consensus on immigration and governance. Other PRR markers were less frequent but still noteworthy. References to leader attributes, such as honesty, courage, or outsider status, and invocations of «common sense» politics each appeared in 5.8% of the videos, reinforcing the party's populist identity through personalization and anti-intellectualism. Meanwhile, explicit critiques of the media and anti-LGBTQ+ messaging were marginal, each present in only 1.0% of the posts. Notably, no content in the dataset included misogynistic discourse; the only references to women's rights appeared in the context of being threatened by immigration or Islam, reinforcing a nativist frame rather than a commitment to gender equality. Overall, the PRR themes employed by Reform UK were consistent with a broader pattern of exclusionary, anti-establishment communication, but largely avoided overtly discriminatory or transgressive content.

This distribution of PRR themes suggests a calibrated ideological strategy aimed at maximizing resonance while limiting reputational risk. Rather than exploiting TikTok to push overtly transgressive or extreme discourse, Reform UK relied on repetition of core populist frames (especially immigration and elite opposition) embedded within professional and emotionally controlled formats. This indicates an instrumental use of the platform to normalize populist narratives rather than radicalize them.

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Figure 6. Examples of street-level interactions from Reform UK's TikTok.

Engagement with the content varies substantially. Views ranged from approximately 15,300 to 994,500, with a median of 60,000 and a mean of 135,600. Likes ranged from 422 to 91,700 (median = 2,601; mean = 9,108), and comments ranged from 11 to 2,599 (median = 181; mean = 439.5). These patterns show a highly skewed distribution, driven by a small number of highly viral posts.

A closer examination of the most engaging posts suggests that visibility and interaction were unevenly distributed across formats, narrative styles, and thematic emphases. The most engaging posts in terms of views and likes tended to share a strong focus on Nigel Farage and relied on concise, emotionally charged messaging rather than participatory or dialogical formats. Notably, none of the most viral posts employed TikTok's interactive affordances, such as duets, challenges, or direct calls for user engagement.

There were three videos that obtained more than 900,000 views and more than 50,000 likes. The most liked post (6 June), which received 91,700 likes and 902,400 views, was an 18-second video with a distinctly meme-like structure. It began with a clip of Rishi Sunak stating that «a vote for any candidate who is not a Conservative is ultimately a vote for Keir Starmer in office,» followed by a rapid transition to a presenter who remarked, «he is scared of Nigel Farage, isn't he?» The video then shifted to a friendly, upbeat montage of Farage images set to energetic background music (see Figure 7).

The most viewed post (26 May), which garnered 994,500 views and 62,800 likes, featured a 12-second excerpt from a Sky News interview (see Figure 8) in which Farage delivered a pointed statement on immigration: «If you want mass immigration, vote Conservative. If you want mass immigration, vote Labour. If you want a proper debate about why this is the most impactful policy on everyone's life in this country, then we're the people to talk to, in Reform.»

Finally, the other highly viral post (975,100 views, 74,000 likes) consisted of a six-image carousel of stylized campaign posters (see Figure 9). Each image paired a professional photograph of Farage with bold policy slogans, such as «Freeze immigration» or «Stop the boats».

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Taken together, these patterns indicate that engagement on TikTok was closely associated with specific combinations of format, narrative style, and thematic focus. Short duration, leader-centered personalization, emotionally charged antagonism, and salient populist issues (particularly immigration) were consistently present in the most visible posts. By contrast, participatory formats and interactive strategies did not coincide with higher engagement levels in this case. This suggests that, for Reform UK, communicative efficacy on TikTok appears to have been linked less to adapting to the platform's participatory affordances than to aligning controlled, ideologically coherent messages with the platform's algorithmic preference for concise and emotionally resonant content.
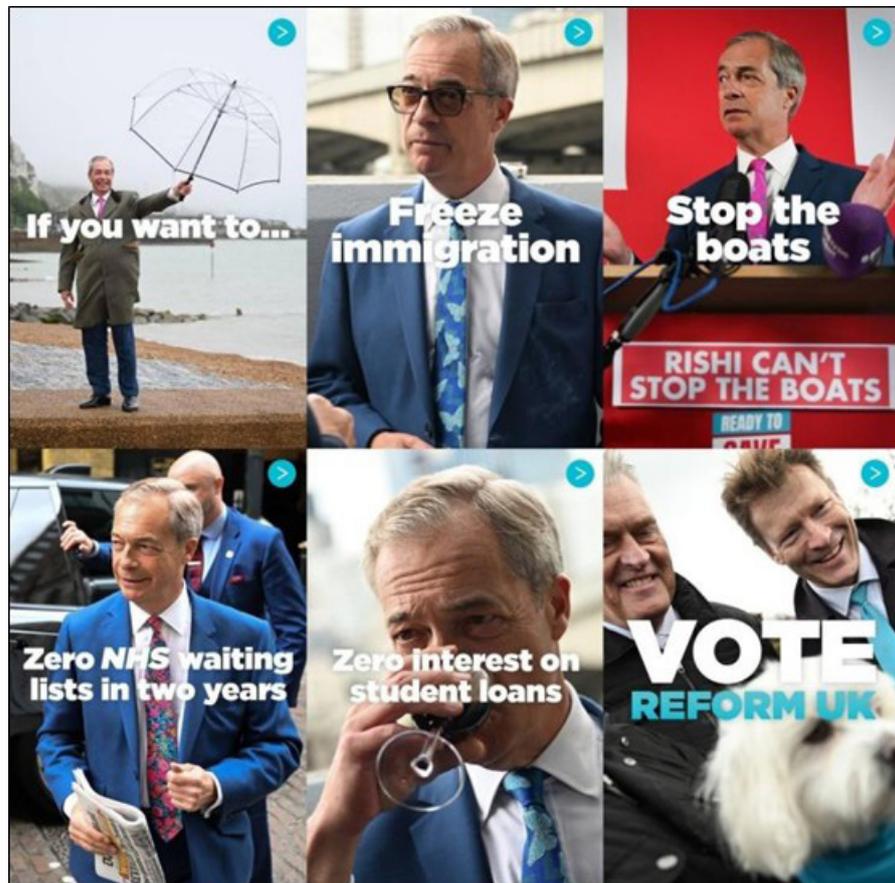
Figure 7. Screenshots of the most liked post of Reform UK's TikTok.

Figure 8. Screenshots of the most viewed post of Reform UK's TikTok.

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Figure 9. Viral post of Reform UK's TikTok.

5. Conclusions

This article examined how Reform UK used TikTok during the 2024 United Kingdom general election, focusing on platform affordances, populist radical right (PRR) communication features, and patterns of audience engagement. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of all campaign-related TikTok posts, the study provides systematic evidence on how an underexplored PRR party operated within a platform commonly associated with participatory, creative, and vernacular political communication (Cervi, 2021; Cervi *et al.*, 2023).

The findings show that Reform UK achieved high visibility and engagement on TikTok while largely maintaining a leader-centered, broadcast-style communication strategy. Consistent with earlier research on populist digital communication (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2017; Ernst *et al.*, 2017, 2019), content was predominantly professionalized, unidirectional, and focused on leadership personalization, emotional appeal, and political antagonism. Engagement metrics indicate that communicative efficacy on TikTok was associated primarily with short duration, simplified slogans, meme-like sequencing, and the centrality of Nigel Farage, rather than with participatory or interactive formats.

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Taken together, these findings contribute to debates on digital populism and platform adaptation by challenging platform-deterministic assumptions. Rather than forcing participatory transformation, TikTok appears to be strategically instrumentalized by PRR actors to reinforce existing communication logics (Engesser *et al.*, 2017; González-Aguilar *et al.*, 2023). For PRR parties, this means using TikTok primarily for message amplification rather than transformation. Reform UK's strategy exemplifies how ideological coherence and leader-centric branding take precedence over vernacular adaptation, even on platforms designed for creative participation. Thus, this may help to understand the predominance of unidirectional strategies and the weak relationship between interaction and adaptation to the platform's multimodal affordances that has been observed recently (Morejón-Llamas *et al.*, 2024).

By focusing on Reform UK, an electorally significant but underexamined party operating within a majoritarian system, the article also offers an empirical contribution that complements existing research centered on continental European cases. The findings highlight how emerging or electorally volatile PRR actors may leverage digital platforms for rapid visibility while preserving message discipline and leadership dominance.

Nonetheless, our single-case design restricts broader generalization, and it does not account for cross-platform dynamics or audience reception. Future research should adopt comparative and longitudinal designs to assess whether selective non-adaptation is a broader pattern among PRR actors and to examine how evolving platform norms and algorithmic changes shape political communication strategies over time.

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Appendix: Coding Scheme

Format-related variables						
Genre						
Video	Duet			Challenge	Stitch	Other
Source						
Original	Cross-posted			Media	Creators	Other
Format						
Only video	Video + effects	Video + music	Video + text	Video + effects & music	Video + effects & text	Video + effect, text & music
Type of recording						
Selfie		Professional			POV	
Music (Type)						
Original		TikTok's viral trends			Other	
Music (Role)						
Accompaniment		Main role			Other	

Content-related variables							
Main topic							
Political			Personal			Entertainment	
Campaign	Issue frame	Game Frame		Professional	Intimacy	Pure	Politically charged
		Praise	Attack				
Main actors							
Richard Tice		Nigel Farage	Other Reform candidates	Opponent candidates	Citizens	Journalists	Celebrities
Secondary actors							
Richard Tice		Nigel Farage	Other Reform candidates	Opponent candidates	Citizens	Journalists	Celebrities
Location							
Public		Private		Institutional	Media		
Persuasive appeal							
Ethos		Logos			Pathos		
Interaction							
Information and promotion		Deliberation and discussion			Participation and mobilization		

PRR-related variables	
Reference to the leader qualities	
Yes	No
Reference to "the people"	
Yes	No
Reference to elites/politicians	
Yes	No
Reference to journalists/media	
Yes	No
Presence of Common-sense discourse	

Yes	No
Presence of Anti-migrant/refugee discourse	
Yes	No
Presence of Anti-LGBTQ+ discourse	
Yes	No
Presence of Misogynist discourse	
Yes	No

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