A Populist's Playground: How Reform UK candidates used TikTok to appeal to the people.

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'I believe in luck, the harder I work, the more of it I seem to have'
– Everald Arthurton Barrett (1907-2002)

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To my dear friends, who held my hand throughout my final year and over the finish line.

And finally, to our beautiful Grace, forever 22.

Abstract

In an era of anti-politics and declining political efficacy, the study of political communications is more pertinent than ever. This dissertation contributes to the fields of populist political communications, digital campaigning and the presentation of the self. While scholars have extensively studied digital campaigns and the adoption of social media networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, the rapidly evolving nature of social media has created gaps in research covering political communications on emerging and ever-evolving social media platforms. This dissertation addresses one such gap by examining the recent rise of the British Reform Party, Reform UK, and its notable ascent on TikTok. Using quantitative content analysis, this study explores how Reform UK candidates used TikTok to appeal to voters during their general election campaign, answering the question: How did Reform UK candidates use TikTok to appeal to the people in their general election campaign? Drawing from political communication theory, the research analyses the degrees of personalisation and populism in Reform party candidate posts and correlates these with engagement metrics.

Keywords: TikTok, populist political communication, personalisation, digital campaigning

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1. Introduction

A notable decline in political efficacy and participation has been documented since the mid-1990s, with academics noting a 10% decrease in global satisfaction with democracy in the last twenty-five years (Foa et al., 2020). Traditional organisations of social solidarity, such as clubs, churches and parties, have declined, giving way to a new form of 'lifestyle' politics (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). Scholars have argued that this post-material political culture has emerged as a product of the affordances of digital media (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016, p.286). In the face of declining political participation, some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that the internet 'possesses a vulnerable potential to revitalise our flagging political communication', especially for what it offers the relationship between citizens and those who represent them (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, p.10). This statement is a key driver for this dissertation and its investigation into how modern political actors use social media platforms to communicate and engage with citizens.

As we enter this 'fourth age' of political communication (Blumler, 2016), many scholars have been brought to consider this role that digital media plays in shaping citizenship, political participation and efficacy more broadly (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Bimber, B., 2012; Jones and Mitchell, 2016; Hintz et al., 2018). Research has revealed generational differences in citizen behaviours, with digital media fostering the 'engagement-based values' among young citizens (Dalton, 2008 cited in Bimber, B., 2012, p.121). This new 'engagement' generation, a new style of civic participation, has formed, coined by Ekman as a more 'latent' form of political participation (Ekman and Amnå, 2012, pp.287-289). These forms of participation pair well with the architectures and vernaculars of social media platforms, allowing users to self-express their political identities (Bimber, B., 2012, p.121). This raises questions about how political actors target this engagement generation and the communication strategies used to drive political engagement and support. This draws one to examine a recent phenomenon in British politics.

The UK's 2024 general election marked the end of a fourteen-year Conservative Party rule, with the Labour Party winning by a landslide and gaining the largest government majority since 1997 (Kirk et al., 2024, p.425). Both the political and media landscapes have transformed dramatically since the UK election in 2019.

A particularly interesting occurrence in the 2024 election was the notable rise of Reform UK, led by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage. Though winning only five seats in parliament, the party's membership has since surpassed that of the conservative party's (Mason, 2024) ,

indicating a dramatic surge in political engagement. Whilst many political, social and economic factors have contributed to the success of this new party's campaign, this dissertation is concerned with the role that social media has played in their popularity.

Whilst there are a great number of platforms, such as Instagram, X (formally Twitter), Facebook and YouTube, which have provided an ideal environment for political communications to be disseminated and consumed, since their emergence in the early 2000s, scholars have since observed a decline in posting on theses 'legacy' social media sites (Fletcher, 2024). Whilst X remains the most popular platform for politicians (Fletcher, 2024), platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are declining, with the average number of Facebook posts per day across all UK parties having dropped by 42% since the 2019 general election (Fletcher, 2024).

With this decline, there is a need for scholars to look towards new and emerging platforms for political communications. Hence, the focus on TikTok.

Interestingly, TikTok, the video-based platform originally designed as a lip-synching dance video app, has emerged as a new platform for political communications, having been used for the first time in the UK's 2024 general election (Fletcher, 2024). The platform now reaches 34% of the UK's adult population and 74% of 18–24-year-olds, just 6% behind Instagram. This indicates a growing demand for the field of political communications to engage with this new platform.

It is clear that TikTok was a key player in social media campaigning in the general election. The Reform party leader, Nigel Farage, consistently outperformed all other parties and candidates on TikTok, beating Labour on a 'per-video basis by 30%, and the Tories by more than double' (measured between 22nd May and 17th June) (Aguilar-García et al., 2024).

TikTok is also a key platform when it comes to studying populist political communication and campaigning within the UK, especially when considering the new engagement generation, as the platform provides access to the most disengaged voting group: 18-24-year-olds. As Fletcher asserts, 'TikTok is an important platform for political campaigns seeking to engage a predominantly younger audience through digital advocacy' (2024).

This dissertation intends to study this explosive social media presence and seeks to understand how Reform UK brought their campaign to TikTok, a platform used for the first time in a British general election, to drive voter engagement and garner this momentous support. It aims to answer this core research question: How did Reform UK candidates use TikTok to appeal to the people in their general election campaign?

2. Literature Review

This chapter situates my research in the field of political communications. It begins by examining democracy in the digital age, exploring the relationship between digital media and political campaigning, and the implications for political participation and civic engagement.

This chapter proceeds to address scholarly debates around defining populism, developing a definition that incorporates both normative and theoretical perspectives adopted by political communication scholars. This framework can be utilised to identify populist political communication on social media networks and begins to identify the communication strategy behind Reform UK's recent rise on the video-based social media platform, TikTok.

Finally, I explore politics as a performance, discussing how scholarship has understood politicians' communication techniques in the age of anti-politics and draw conclusions about how the media landscape has impacted political actors' communicative style, leading to self-representation and performed authenticity.

This literature review, spanning three key areas of political communications, integrates the study of digital campaigning and social media with the analysis of populist political communication style and self-representation theory.

2.1 Digital Campaigning

The study of 'voting and persuading others to vote is arguably the most fundamental form of political engagement' (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016, p.284). Thus, election campaigns have been a rich area of study for political communication scholars since the 1980s (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020, p.596). This dissertation intends to contribute to this literature, observing and analysing political communications within the context of a political campaign. More specifically, I intend to examine how political communication is performed online, examining Reform UK's recent campaign for the 2024 General Election. One must first inspect what is known about digital campaigning more broadly, before zooming in on the communication styles and strategies that populist political actors may use.

Naturally, political actors have been drawn towards social media platforms as direct insight into their voters' identities and behaviours and to gain a 'personality-based understanding' of the electorate (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020). Observing the evolution of political campaigning, Roemmele and Gibson (2020) note how social media platforms allow for a new type of non-professionalised, peer-to-peer conglomeration of citizens, whose motivations overlap at strategically important moments' (p.600), creating a new territory for personalised and targeted campaigning. From as early as 2012, platforms such as X

(formerly, and shall be referred to from now onwards as Twitter) and Facebook have been used to extract valuable information on voters and inform behavioural modelling for targeted campaigning (Bimber, B, 2014, p.142), graduating political campaigning from a reliance on public voting records and simple demographic intelligence.

Whilst valuable for learning about the electorate, just as crucially, these platforms serve as a 'semi-public semi-private space' for politicians to participate in 'self-presentation' (Graham et al., 2017, p.93), and communicate directly to citizens. This newfound agency allows political actors to present themselves to the electorate in new and informal ways, ultimately leading to less of a reliance on the 'intensified professionalisation of political advocacy' which dominated political communication in the 90s (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999, p.209). In this new age of political communication, one must question what the affordances of new and architecturally divergent platforms offer to political actors and the strategies that are used by political actors to engage with citizens online and garner their votes.

Roemmele and Gibson mark the dawn of the data-driven fourth era, characterising it by four key adaptations: digital technology dependence, networked communication, micro-targeting and internationalisation (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020). They identify two distinctive campaign approaches that have emerged in the fourth age of political communication: the scientific and the subversive (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020, pp.600-604). Interestingly, the subversive approach, characterised by its covert reliance on digital technology and data and its emphasis on emotion, and the 'authentic' personality of the leader, often with their 'guru-like' understanding of people (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020, p.603) is an insightful mapping of how political actors, and particular populist leaders, utilise the affordances of social media to connect with the electorate. Accordingly, this dissertation is particularly interested in the 'communicative strategies' that political candidates use and therefore looks to document the 'spontaneous and direct communication from leader to followers' (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020, pp. 601-606) that platforms such as TikTok facilitate.

Jungher goes further in their study of digital campaigning, distinguishing how the use of digital media in politics varies greatly depending on campaign contexts and country (2023). It will therefore be important to consider the context of the campaign and the political landscape of post-Brexit Britain, where Reform UK's campaign took place, when examining their digital political communication strategy. The party's populist identity is particularly vital to consider, this will be discussed in section 2.2.

The scholar goes on to identify four functions or roles that digital media plays in modern campaigning: how parties and campaigns are organised and function, the collection and allocation of resources, the dissemination and reach of political messages and finally its performative role, symbolising a party or candidates 'professionalism and innovativeness' (Jungherr, 2023, pp.449-456). Of these four categories, this report is concerned with how political actors share and perform political messages and the symbolic role that social media vernaculars and architecture play in the delivery of these messages.

Chadwick and Stromer-Galley note how 'social media serves as an important bridging platform between parties and the public' and suggest that 'those who are not party members are more likely to engage in party-related activities on social media' (2016, p.290). With citizens more likely to engage with party-related activity online, digital platforms become a vital tool for targeting both the undecided and swing voters. It is interesting to consider how the architecture of different social media sites may positively or negatively affect these party-public relations during campaign periods.

Digital media platforms have and continue to play an important role in political campaigning. Political communication scholars have studied communications on platforms as cases for documenting and measuring political engagement and efficacy. In particular, of the social media sites used for political campaigning in the last quarter century, Twitter has provided a rich case study for the study of online deliberation (Graham et al., 2016; Jungherr, 2016) and politicians' self-communication techniques (e.g. personalisation) more broadly (Graham et al., 2017).

Notably, Populists have relied on social media platforms, such as Twitter, as an essential tool for communicating with their voters (Schmuck and Hameleers, 2020). Most commonly among these leaders, they position themselves as the 'voice of the people' (Brubaker, 2017, p.362) whilst vilifying their opponents and anyone who disagrees with their politics. Donald Trump's use of Twitter is an excellent example of the role social media platforms play in allowing politicians to self-communicate and circumvent mainstream media to set their political agenda (Engesser et al., 2017). In turn, mainstream media often re-mediate these messages as they fit the affective media logic (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

As emphasised by Junger, it is important to consider context when examining a digital campaign (2023). Hence, I will now explore populism as an ideological concept and as a communicative style, to unpack the theoretical foundations of Reform UK's political communication style, which will serve as an informant for the methodological approach to documenting and analysing their digital campaign strategy.

2.2 Populism

Populism is on the rise in democracies across the world. In the last decade, Western Europe has seen a notable upsurge in charismatic right-wing leaders, including the likes of Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and most recently the resurgence of Nigel Farage in the UK. Political communication scholars have regarded social media platforms as a 'principal supply-side factor' in the rise of populism worldwide (Schmuck and Hameleers, 2020, p.4), relieving leaders from the constraints of the mass-media logic and facilitating direct communication with the people (Engesser et al., 2017, p.1123). This ascent calls for political communication scholars to classify populism in the digital age and investigate the role of social media in the performance of populist politics. This dissertation will contribute to this investigation.

Often described as 'chameleonic', (Hameleers, 2018, p.488) or malleable (Mudde, and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.6), and too often, 'vague and blurred' (JAGERS and WALGRAVE, 2007, p.321); populism is a heavily contested concept. With its shape-shifting nature, populism has been adopted by leaders across the political spectrum. This absence of a singular political ideology has led to a debate over how the term is defined, identified and performed (Weyland, 2001). It is necessary to first define populism as a concept and then discuss how the school of political communications scholars has operationalised this concept to examine how populism is communicated and performed.

Mudde and Kaltwasser outline the key approaches to defining populism, used across several academic disciplines: the ideational approach, the popular agency approach, the Laclauan approach, the socioeconomic approach, populism as a political strategy and finally populism as a style (2017, pp. 2-4). For social sciences, the more recently emerging ideational approach has been a useful concept which conceives populism as a discourse, ideology or worldview (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.5).

This ideational approach depicts populism as a normative concept; 'a thin-centred ideology', which portrays society as divided into two 'homogenous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' and carries the belief that 'politics should be an expression of the people' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.6). This definition is useful for understanding the concept as an incomplete political ideology that must be conjoined with a 'thick-centred' ideology, such as fascism or socialism, to become whole. We can therefore understand populism as a notion which is attached or even integrated within core political ideologies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.6).

It is generally accepted that populism has three core concepts: the people, the elite and the general will (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Whilst these concepts provide a useful starting point for identifying the core traits of populism, Mudde and Kaltwasser's ideological definition relies on a binary and normative ideal which, in turn, restricts one from identifying how populism is performed and communicated, and to what degree.

2.3 Populism as Style

The more omnipresent political populism and populist actors become across Europe, the more crucial it becomes to understand not only the sociopolitical factors which help make sense of the presence and influence that populism has across different nations, but also the 'strategies, tactics, styles and rhetoric of populist political communication' (Stayner et al., 2016, p.363). For this reason, political communication scholars have found it more suitable to take a purely theoretical approach to defining populism, identifying it as a political communication style (Moffitt, 2016) strategy to assert power (Weyland, 2001, p.1) or a discursive framework (Aslanidis, 2016).

Krämer (2014) shares this view, arguing that it is important to not only view populism as an ideology but as a political movement with a distinctive style and rhetoric (2014, p.45). The scholar posits that this style and rhetoric can be identified by the following main components: anti-institutionalism, charismatic assertion of power and emotional, moralist, plainspoken and sometimes aggressive style (Krämer, 2014, p.46). Whilst this may be useful for categorising some manifestations of the concept, Krämer's identification of populism is restrictive, and does not account for 'subtypes' of populism among political actors, which account for the 'occasional, tactical, and rather stylistic' adoption of populist rhetoric and performance (Krämer, 2014, p.48). I therefore must turn to literature that addresses the variable nature of populism and how it is performed. Crucially, recognising the stylistic trends of populism is essential for this study; I therefore turn to Moffit (2016) to first unpack political style more broadly, before exploring populist political communication style.

Moffit (2016) argues that to ignore political style, as many political scientists have chosen to do so, is to neglect a vital vein of political experience, whilst also failing to acknowledge the dynamic and variable landscape that is contemporary politics (p.36). Synthesising Hariman (1995), Ankersmit (1996) and Pels (2003)'s theoretical perspectives of political style, Moffit offers a new conceptual understanding:

> '[political style can be understood as] the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life' (Moffit, 2126, p. 38).

This definition is critical to understanding and identifying political style as a mediated performance, communicated performatively and symbolically. Having defined political style, one can now seek to define populism as a political communicative style that may be decoded through systematic analysis.

A focus on the communicative styles of populism can first be found in the works of Canovan (1999). Canovan (1999) focuses on populism as a style, taking the notion of appealing to the 'people' against the corrupt 'elite' and considering how this appeal is made (p.5). This moves away from simply examining *what* is being communicated to *how* it is being communicated. This work unveiled a new conception of populism, which inspired one of the foundational empirical studies of populism as a political communication style: Jager and Walgrave's (2007) study of populist political communication style in Belgian politics.

Jagers and Walgrave measure and divide populism into four key types; Complete Populism, which includes references and appeals to the people, anti-elitism and exclusion of outgroups, Excluding Populism, which includes only references and appeals to the people and exclusion of outgroups, Anti-elitist Populism, with references to the people and anti-elitism, and finally, Empty Populism, which only references and appeals to the people (JAGERS and WALGRAVE, 2007). This is a valuable approach, using a measurement of populism as a political style to present contemporary populism as a non-binary category, which acknowledges that political actors can be more or less populist at certain times (Moffitt, 2016, p.46). The scholar's measurement of references to 'the people', anti-elitism, and exclusion of outgroups is carefully outlined by their mutually exclusive coding categories (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, pp.348-343). This manual will be a useful starting point for this dissertation's methodological approach. A limitation of this study, however, is its sole focus on the 'linguistic or rhetorical dimension[s]' of populism, failing to distinguish differences between populism as a style and a discursive framework (Moffitt, 2016, p.31). Whilst language and rhetoric are important indicators of contemporary populism, embodied performance is equally important to be considered in order to capture the latent messages and symbols communicated by political actors.

De Vreese et al consider populism as a communication phenomenon; an expression of both political content and style (2018). The scholars argue that the communicative tools used

for sharing populist ideas are just as essential as the populist ideas themselves (De Vreese et al, 2018, pp.423-425). By considering populism in this way, it is possible to determine the degree to which populism is being performed. One of De Vreese et al.'s main criticisms of populist political communication literature so far are that the treatment of some political actors as populists and others as not. Informed by this, this dissertation intends to measure degrees of populism whilst looking for trends in the levels of populism to citizen engagement. De Vreese et al. also argue, that whilst we know 'social media are conductive to populism', there is little documented on 'key features such as the use of visuals (e.g. political memes) … [and] the patterns of sharing and liking' (De Vreese et al, 2018, P. 432). I intend to take this into consideration when designing my sampling and data collection.

Moffit's (2016) approach's to defining populist political communication is useful for considering these visual and semiotic aspects of political communication on a visual social media platform such as TikTok. Moffit defines populist political style as a political style that features an 'appeal to 'the people' versus the 'elite', bad manners and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat' (2016, p.46). This approach views populism as a 'gradational concept' (Moffit, 2016, p. 46), moving away from the ideological view of seeing populism as a binary phenomenon that is 'either present or absent in society' (Brubaker 2017, p.373). This concept of political style allows places the 'performative dimensions' of populism in the centre stage and allows one to reflect on the 'complex relationship between style and content' (Moffitt, 2016, p.50).

This concept will be fundamental for unpacking what degree of populism Reform UK candidates use in their social media campaigns.

2.4 Self-presentation and Personalisation

Finally, to understand how populist politicians self-present online, one must first examine how one presents offline. Goffman's theory of 'self' is a significant contribution to the field of Interpersonal Communications (1956). The scholar compared self-presentation in everyday life to the theatre, making a distinction between one's backstage self and frontstage self (Goffman, 1956). As Tseëlon explains, Goffman saw the 'self' not as 'an independent fixed entity which resides in the individual, but rather, it is a social process' (Tseëlon, 2016, p.115). Goffman breaks down this social process into performance elements, including 'face' (1956). 'Face' represents the positive image, or part of oneself, that one wishes to perform, to achieve the desired 'appearance' and 'manner' frontstage (Goffman, 1956, p.67). This 'facework' (Goffman, 1956) is a crucial concept for understanding impression management in political

communications. Moreover, the performance of one's 'face' mirrors self-communication on social media and helps to explain the strategic, and often subconscious, messages populist leaders may choose to convey through the way they represent themselves online.

In today's age of infotainment (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999, p.225), political actors use 'personalisation', bringing parts of their private lives to the front stage, to present a 'sense of authenticity' to citizens (McGregor, 2018, p.1142). Social media platforms allow politicians and candidates to have autonomy over their 'face', enabling them to design which elements of their backstage lives slip into their front stage lives, regaining control over their mediatisation, and giving rise to 'multidimensional impression management' (Blumler, 2016, p.27). These platforms allow candidates to bypass media gatekeepers and 'avoid critical confrontation from those who question them' (Roemmele, 2020, p.598).

McGregor explores how political actors employ self-personalisation techniques, using social media to self-represent and 'humanise' themselves (McGregor, 2018, p.1141). She identifies how social media is different from mainstream mass media in effect, allowing politicians to digitally construct relationships with voters whilst disseminating their manifestos in a manner that can be interpreted as 'personal and spontaneous' (2018, p.1141), and therefore more authentic. It is clear that personalisation is an important and strategic communication technique adopted by political actors and therefore shall be investigated when looking at Reform UK candidates' TikTok.

2.5 Empirical Research

Populism in mainstream media has been discussed theoretically (Krämer, 2014), and has been empirically studied (Block and Negrine, 2017, Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). Political communication on social networking sites and the use of personalisation has also been explored on a number of platforms (Graham, 2017, McGregor, 2018). However, as we settle into the age of 'infotainment' (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999, p.225), and politicians have to compete with the attention-economy of digital landscapes, it becomes even more integral to examine how political actors use the affordances of social media sites and adopt degrees of populist political communication styles and rhetoric to 'appeal to the people' (Canovan, (1999).

Graham et al.'s (2017) study of political actors personalised tweeting behaviours is particularly valuable for understanding where strategic self-presentation, performative authenticity and digital media meet in political communications. Graham et al, identify how the platform facilitates the seamless shift between the political and the personal and

‘encourages voters to develop an empathy with the political’ (Jackson and Lilleker cited in Graham et al., 2017, p.161).

Twitter has been considered a rich case study to study political communication and deliberation, due to its popularity with politicians, journalists and citizens alike. However, one could argue that the platform is primarily used by journalists and the already politically engaged to engage with politics and news, and instead Facebook, which has been a fruitful platform for the study of microtargeted, paid political advertisements and citizen engagement (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021) is a more useful example of a platform operated by ‘normal people’.

For this same reason, I intend to explore how political communication takes place on TikTok, a platform that attracts young citizens, who are a historically disengaged voting group in the UK.

Notably, Schmuck and Hameleers (2020) complete a comparative quantitative content analysis of Facebook and Twitter pre- and post-election posts from candidates in leading parties in Austria and the Netherlands. The scholars assert, that the study of modern populism calls for a broad framework which accommodates normative and theoretical concepts, supported by empirical findings (Schmuck and Hameleers, 2020, p.1534). They call for the use of the concept of populist political communication, which identifies the core content of populist communication to be rooted in Mudde’s ‘thin-centred ideology’, which divides society into two separate groups the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ (Schmuck and Hameleers, 2020, p.1534). The scholars argue, however, that Mudde’s core ideology is then strategically presented and communicated through stylistic elements by different political actors with divergent ambitions (Schmuck and Hameleers, 2020, p.1534).

The scholars adopt the populist political communication concept, working to define populism as a discursive framework (Aslanidis, 2016) and identifying the ‘manifest artefacts’, measuring populism as a matter of degree within a framework (Schmuck and Hameleers, 2020) rather than a ‘phenomenon which is either present or absent in society’ (Brubaker 2017, p.373).

Solely looking at the textual content of the Facebook and Twitter posts, the scholars code for context level predictors: social platform, party, time-period and country and stylistic predictors: emotions, tonality, us-versus-them rhetoric and common sense (Schmuck and Hameleers, 2020, pp.1535-1536). The study found that 13.7% of the 1,010 analysed posts contained a least one subframe of populist communication and among the three core subframes of populist communication, anti-elitism was the most prominent (7.6%), followed

closely by people-centrism (7.4%), while popular sovereignty was less prevalent (3.8%) (Schmuck and Hameleers, 2020, p.1541). This is a valuable piece of research, which offers a point of comparison for this study. One limitation, however, is the disregard of visual images when coding, as visual content offers an added layer of meaning to every post.

Some scholars have completed both visual and textual analysis of populism on social media. For example, Sonnevens and Kövensdi analysis of Viktor Orban's Facebook account unpacks his carefully constructed self-representation to gain an understanding of his charismatic appeal (2024). The scholars use the performative school of populism studies, which looks at populism as a 'public performance and political style' to identify the populist political communication style performed by Orban on social media (Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 2024, p.894). This is a useful study that exemplifies how the study of social media self-representation and the performative school of populism can work together to unpack the complex self-presentations of populist leaders online. Using a qualitative approach to content analysis, the study identified that Orban strategically used his charismatic image to present himself as a symbol of 'Hungarian-ness', using selfies and interactions with voters to present himself as 'relatable' (p.892).

Moir (2023) also uses qualitative content analysis, adopting the method to categorise data from of Canadian candidate Jagmeet Singh's TikTok videos and compare identified themes with news coverage of the candidate's TikTok activity (p.4). The study aims to examine how the politician used the platform to engage with voters and how journalists report on and frame this activity (Moir, 2023, p.4). The scholar identifies performed authenticity as a key affordance of TikTok. Moir identifies how Singh uses the platform to build his brand by performing authenticity and advocating for social justice issues (Moir, 2023). This research is a valuable contribution to the little-studied field of political communications on TikTok, offering insights into the platform's vernacular, which promotes interactivity and collective action through memes, memetic text and its unique architecture (Moir, 2023, p.2). A limitation of this study is that Moir consults little literature on populism and populist political communication, which, arguably, limits the study from having a three-dimensional view of the politician's political communication.

Bozdağ et al use qualitative content analysis to look at the relationship between populist dichotomies or fractures of populist styles of Turkish political actors, that drive user engagement on social media, specifically Twitter (2025). The scholars make the distinction between explicit and implicit populist styles and track the relationship between the use of the style in tweets and engagement scores, finding that explicit populism, a concept closer to

Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) 'thick populism' elicits the most user reactions (Utku Bozdağ et al., 2025, p.235). The report also looks at the relationship between political topic and populist style, with 'terrorism' and 'public/private appearance' being two topics that exhibited strong associations (Bozdağ et al, 2025, p.239). This will be an interesting factor to consider within the context of British politics, as well as the potential link between populist styles and personal topics.

Populism in Britain has also been studied through the lens of political communication, notably Block and Negrine (2017) complete a comparative study between the political communication styles of Nigel Farage, during his time as UKIP leader and Hugo Chávez, former Venezuelan President. The scholar's analysis of his strategic communication through the following three categories: identity, rhetoric and the media (Block and Negrine, 2017) offers a narrow view of populist political style in the British political context. Whilst useful for identifying some of the key communication methods used by Farage, such as his antagonization of the elite and use of 'abrasive', 'colloquial' and 'relatable, patriotic rhetoric' (Block and Negrine, 2017, p.189), the study neglects social media as a strategic form of media presence. Whilst this is study begins to establish Farage's use of populist style, this dissertation wishes to build on this further by examining populist political communication style and how it is adopted not only by leaders, but by party candidates on social media.

There are two evident gaps in the literature. Firstly, how methods of personalisation and performed authenticity required by today's political landscape blend or contrast with populist political communication styles and rhetoric. Secondly, is the studying of British populist party candidates and their use of social media, rather than a pure focus on their leader(s).

2.6 Research Focus and Aims

In light of the literature examined in this review, this dissertation seeks to study the political communication styles and techniques adopted by British party candidates from the Reform UK party. Whist the Reform Party is broadly accepted as 'populist', this research project is interested in *how* the party communicates through degrees of populist style and rhetoric and the levels of engagement this may drive. Informed by Moffit (2016), the party candidates will not be treated as 'populist' but rather as political actors who can perform and embody degrees of populism. Therefore, I will also aim to measure the political content and personal topics present in their campaign messaging, in order to treat the candidates as

neutral actors who may adopt alternative methods of appealing to the people and performing authenticity through personalisation.
The central research question of this dissertation is:

RQ: How did Reform UK candidates use TikTok to appeal to the people in their general election campaign?

To answer this question, a methodological approach will be designed to answer the following sub-questions:

RQ.1 What formats and vernaculars did Reform UK candidates use TikTok to self-represent?
RQ.2 What political and personal topics did Reform UK candidates cover in their TikTok posts?
RQ.3 What degree of populist style did candidates adopt?

In order to answer these questions and gain a perspective on how the candidates used TikTok to appeal and identify with the voters, I will look to whether there is a relationship, if any, between the formats and vernaculars, topics discussed and degree of populist style with engagement rates.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Strategy and Design

To explore how populist actors use political communication styles and techniques to self-communicate and campaign on TikTok, this dissertation adopts a cross-sectional design, exploring the campaign footprints of Reform UK candidates in the 2024 general election. The variables will include engagement, post type, TikTok vernacular, personal and political topics and finally, populist styles. To quantify and detect 'patterns of association' (Bryman et al, 2021, p.51) amongst these variables, I carry out a quantitative content analysis on the candidate's posts.

3.2 Sampling Criteria and Procedures

This research project is concerned with the communication styles of populist political candidates on social media platforms. With the decline of campaign posting on legacy social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook, there is a need for scholars to look towards new and emerging platforms for political communications (Fletcher, 2024). For this reason, I have chosen to examine party posting on TikTok.

The platform's short-form video-based architecture also allows for a unique style of communication. Analysing the visual aspects of this communication allows one to study how politicians perform through both their physicality and language. Hence, content analysis is an appropriate method for capturing the manifest discourse and latent visual content presented by the candidates.

The case sample will be taken between the 22nd of May 2024, the date on which PM Rishi Sunak announced that he had requested permission from King Charles to dissolve parliament, and the 4th of July 2024, the date of the general election (Paxton et al., 2024). This directs the focus on how the politicians and candidates choose to self-communicate within the campaign period, a period in politics where information and engagement surge.

A total of 609 Reform candidates ran in the general election, with just five successfully elected to represent their constituency. Of these 609, 111 have TikTok accounts, with 70 (N=70) of them having posted to their accounts during the election period; this is my primary sample. One must consider that some accounts may have been deleted, or videos could have been taken down between this period and the time of completing this research project, restricting the scope and the validity of the study.

My secondary sample is 30% of the total sample of active accounts. Using stratified and systematic probability sampling, I ranked the candidates by performance, calculated by their vote share from the 2024 general election results (Cracknell et al., 2024), as these results indicate the candidates' degrees of popularity, and created three strata, the top, median and bottom 10% of candidates. Stratification offers an 'extra element of precision' in the sampling process, as it 'eliminates a possible source of sampling error' (Bryman, 2021, p.175). This criterion for this stratification was assigned on the basis that there is a likely relationship between the share of votes (popularity), engagement and political communication style, informed by the findings from the empirical research discussed in the literature review. This pattern of association will be tested in the data analysis stage.

After ranking the candidates and splitting them into three strata, any candidate that posted less than 12 posts in the election period was redacted and replaced by the next suitable candidate in the list. Less than 12 posts indicates that the candidate did not manage to post a minimum of twice a week during the campaign period and therefore is not considered a frequent TikTok user. This study is most interested in the candidates who used the platform as a central communication platform, and therefore frequency of posting must be considered when selecting a sample.

Now, with three groups and a total of 21 accounts, I selected to take 12 posts from each account, amounting to a total of 252 posts scraped and coded. This sample size was discussed and approved by my dissertation supervisor and deemed appropriate for an undergraduate study. The 12 posts were selected using probability sampling by dividing the total number of posts in the campaign period by 12, rounding down to the nearest whole number, and then scraping every post that is a multiple of that number, until a total of 12 posts is reached.

For example: 55 posts / 12 = 4.5, round down to 4. I then take the 4^{th}, 8^{th}, 12^{th}, 16^{th}, 20^{th}, 24^{th}, 28^{th}, 32^{nd}, 36^{th}, 40^{th}, 44^{th}, 48^{th} posts from that account, ensuring an even distribution of posts over the campaign period. Where the number comes to less than 2, and is therefore rounded to 1 or 0, to avoid just sampling the first 12 posts from the account, I round upwards to 2 and scrape every second post. Once I come to the end of the posts that were published in the campaign period, I return to the first post and sample every second post that hasn't yet been sampled, until I reach a total of 12, again ensuring a wide distribution of posts over the time period. This is a logical sampling method as it eliminates temporal bias, which is important as the type of communication could change at different points in the run-up to the election. This sampling procedure favours an equal representation of candidate posts across

the campaign period, over proportionality to the total output of each candidate's account. One limitation of this procedure is that both a candidate who has posted 50 posts and one who has posted 12 will have 12 posts sampled, meaning that the number of posts sampled from each account is not proportional to their total raw output volume. Whilst acknowledging this as a limitation, this systematic selection ensures temporal representativeness for each included candidate's activity over the period, which is valuable for understanding their communication throughout the campaign.

3.3 Method of Data Collection

To calculate the total population of candidates with TikTok accounts, I began by searching each candidate's name in the TikTok search bar for '*candidate name'*, '*candidate name and 'reform uk',' candidate name and constituency name', 'constituency name and 'reform uk'*. If I could not identify an account after those three searches, I marked the candidate as 'no account'. The accounts found to have been posted during the election period were counted as the total population. From this total population, my sample was selected, following the sampling method outlined previously in this chapter. The selected accounts were then scraped using the scraping tool *SnapTik*, and the captions were manually scraped and saved in Excel. It is important to note that all posts, captions and primary data, such as number of likes and comments, were archived on 9th April 2025, and therefore these figures may have changed since the election period or since the time at which they were archived, and this dissertation is submitted. This is a limitation that could not have been avoided due to the required timeline of this project.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

Content analysis is a suitable method for analysing the party's communication strategy on TikTok as it allows for the objective and systematic identification of 'specified characteristics of messages' (Holsti 1969 cited in Bryman et al., 2021, p.p.652). Therefore, it is a suitable methodological approach for diagnosing the messages that Reform UK candidates wish to broadcast to appeal to the people and garner votes. Importantly, Holsti's approach to content analysis recognises the latent content 'that lies beneath indicators' (Bryman et al., 2021), accounting for the messages communicated implicitly through signs and symbols. This approach is necessary for interpreting and coding videos and images, as meaning often lies beyond what is just said and written. During the coding process, some meaning will need to be inferred from the political context or vernacular of the platform.

SPSS is used to code each post and process and analyse the data. I use bivariate analysis to measure the relationship between the following variables: personal topics and populist style, political topics and populist style, and TikTok vernacular and populist style. I will complete Person's R tests to review evidence of linear correlations (Bryman, 2021, p.335) between vote share, followers and number of videos posted. I will complete one-way ANOVA tests to compare the means of nominal variables (for example, Format/Vernacular), which indicate candidates' communication styles, with scale variables (likes and comments) which indicate the level of engagement the post received from the electorate. When completing significance tests, I shall be testing against a p-value of $p<0.05$, which is the typical threshold for social science research (Bryman, 2021, p.342).

3.5 Operationalisation

To 'categorise the phenomena of interest' (Bryman et al., 2021, p.p.667), my coding manual was constructed by building on both Graham et al.'s (2017) study of personalisation in MP tweets and Moffit's framework of populist political communication as communication style (2016). The coding manual adapted Graham et al categories to the architecture and vernaculars of TikTok and was designed to identify the manifest and latent coding units: visual content, spoken content and textual content. All coding was informed by the post's caption and hashtags. The captions and in-post text have been considered as supplementary indicators but not the focus of the study, as the most prominent and differentiating feature of TikTok is the visual and audio affordances of the app.

Firstly, to answer RQ1, the post Architecture (T1) is coded, recording the type of post (video, image or 'stitch). Using the manifest visual indicators within the videos and images, such as eye contact, proximity to the camera and editing style and number of people in the video/image, informs which Format or Vernacular (T2) the post adopts. These styles include, but are not exclusive to, piece-to-camera (PTC), Interview/Conversation/Vox pop, selfie (self-shot), documentary/montage/edit, and infographic/text and image. For example, where the image or video features the candidate's face or upper body, and at least one hand is out of shot, one would code this as a 'selfie' (for an extensive list of styles and descriptions see Appendix 1). These styles were constructed and refined through the pilot study phase and are identifiable through indicators such as the number of people visible or heard in the post, the music used, and the narrative of the video. These categories measure how the candidate's self-presentation is being framed through the style and genre of the post.

Secondly, to answer RQ2, the political and personal themes present in the posts shall be recorded. First, the presence of personal topics and political themes are coded (T4), followed by the detail of what these topics and themes are captured (T5 and T6). Personal themes include, 'Friends', 'Family/Home life' and 'Religion/Culture', and Political topics include 'Manifesto', 'Democracy' and 'Business and Economy' these each were adapted from Graham et al.'s coding manual and provide a useful categorisation of the common themes found in posts (2017) (for extensive list of themes and topics see Appendix 1).

Finally, to answer RQ3, Moffit's (2016) definition of Populism as style is operationalised to detect the following five key indicators of political populist communication in candidate posts: References to The People (T7), the Exclusion of Out Groups (T8), Anti Elitism (T9), Common Sense (T10) and Crisis/Threat (T11). The codes within these categories were also adapted from Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) coding manual to ensure the categories were expansive and reproducible for future studies.

Bad manners, an indicator which Moffit (2016) highlights in their definition, has been excluded from the coding manual as this is a highly subjective category. Common sense, whilst only a subtheme highlighted by Moffit, has been included as a category it captures the implementation of a rhetorical device to appeal to the people against the corrupt elite (p.44). For an extensive list of Populist Style indicators, as well as examples for each category, see Appendix 1.

3.6 Reliability and Validity

To inductively construct my coding manual, I conducted a pilot study of 10% of the material across the three strata (one post from each candidate in each strata). During this process, I adapted the coding categories, deleting and adding subcategories where necessary. The first draft of the manual included subcategory 'repost' under the Format and Vernacular code (T2) (see Appendix 1). However, during the pilot study, it quickly became clear that this subcategory was conflicting with the other categories. Coders found that 20% of the content was 'reposted' meaning that to have this coding subcategory within the format/vernacular category limited our ability to code the detail of the content style. Therefore, a decision was made for 'repost' to become its own stand-alone category (T3), (see Appendix 1). This process further improved the internal reliability of my coding categories.

After my pilot study was completed, I performed an Intra-reliability coding test of 10% of my total sample (25 posts). The results came back as a score of 92% accuracy. The

incorrect codes included the Manifesto and Democracy code (T6). These categories were then refined to improve reliability.

To further improve the inter-rater reliability of this study, I would train another coder and perform inter-coder reliability testing.

To improve the face validity of this study, I liaised with my academic supervisor, who is an Associate Professor of Political Communications, throughout the process of designing and carrying out this research project. To ensure strong construct validity, the method of analysis also operationalises coding manuals and theory constructed by established academics of whom have completed successful studies.

Nigel Farage, leader of the Reform UK party, has had his account selected to be part of the sample, however, the Reform UK TikTok has not been. Although this account is still managed by Farage's team, the account has been created to represent the party as a body rather than Farage as a leader. Whilst there are videos of Farage and other party members on the account, it is not valid to include them in the sample.

3.7 Limitations and Delimitations

The primary delimitation of this study is that, due to the constraints of an undergraduate dissertation, it is only possible to complete a small sample of posts from a select number of candidates. More time, resources and a larger sample size would facilitate the collection of proportionate data to the total population, with which more convincing assumptions and arguments could be made. Not only this, but due to the restraints of the undergraduate dissertation timeline, data was scraped six months after the election, meaning data could have since been edited, archived or deleted.

One limitation of the coding manual is that in (T5) when coding for Personal themes, coders are instructed to code for topics personal to the candidate. This, therefore, means there will be instances where candidates use other's personal stories strategically, but these will not be coded for. This is a limitation which should be addressed if this method were redesigned for a larger study.

4. Findings

4.1 Primary Sample

This section aims to make the first contribution to answering the central research question: How did Reform UK candidates use TikTok to appeal to the people in their general election campaign?

Of the total 609 Reform UK candidates who ran in the general election, 111 candidate TikTok accounts were found. Of these 111 accounts, 70 (N=70) accounts posted during the campaign period: 22nd May 2024 and 4th July 2024. The following variables were collected for the first data set; percentage of vote share, number of followers and number of posts made during the campaign period.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the primary sample. A great range between the minimum and maximum values for each variable indicates a greatly varied data set (Figure 1). Most strikingly, the standard deviation of the number of followers is SD=144253.77, demonstrating that the data is dispersed and not normally distributed. This is likely due to Nigel Farage, leader of the party, having 1.2 million followers, and the next most followed candidate, Graham Eardy, having 172,600 followers. This has an impact on the distribution of results.

Whilst one can make assumptions about why some candidates have the most followers, for example, Nigel Farage is the leader of the party and the longest-serving political actor in the sample, it is important to test the relationship between variables in order to investigate possible trends and relationships.

Figure 1: Statistics of active accounts.

All Active* Candidate Accounts

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
No. of Videos Posted	70	153.00	1.00	154.00	23.0429	26.41993
No. of Followers	70	1199984.00	16.00	1200000.00	22958.3286	144253.77688
Vote Share	70	.42	.04	.46	.1981	.07797
Valid N (listwise)	70					

*Active during the campaign period.

Figure 2 provides evidence of a moderate positive linear relationship between the number of followers the candidates have and the share of the votes they won in the general

election (r = 0.429) (See Figure 2 and Appendix 2, Figure A for the corresponding Scatter Graph). The correlation between these two variables is statistically significant at a p-value (Figure 2) of less than 0.01 ($p < 0.01$), which is even more stringent than the typical value of $p < 0.05$ (Bryman, 2021, p.342). This means one can assume that it is highly likely that there is a moderate association between the number of followers a candidate has on TikTok and their share of votes in the general election. Whilst this does not prove that one causes the other (Bryman, 2021, p.333), it does affirm the importance of studying digital campaigning and candidate activities on the social media platform, TikTok.

Figure 2: Correlation table showing the relationship between the number of followers a candidate has and the share of the vote they won in the 2024 general election.

Correlations between No. Followers and Vote Share

		Followers	Vote Share
Followers	Pearson Correlation	1	.429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	70	70
Vote Share	Pearson Correlation	.429**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	70	70

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

We next look at the relationship between the number of followers and the number of videos posted during the campaign period. Figure 3 shows that there is a weak positive linear relationship between the number of followers and the number of posts made during the campaign period (r = 0.152). As the number of followers increases, the number of videos tends to increase slightly, and vice versa. However, as the significance level of the correlation ($p = 0.210$) is greater than the required significance level for social research ($p < 0.05$) (Bryman, 2021, p.324), it means that the result is not statistically significant and therefore should not be used to draw conclusions about the relationship between the number of videos posted during the campaign period and the number of followers (See Appendix 2, Figure B for corresponding Scatter Graph).

Figure 3: Correlation table showing the relationship between the number of followers a candidate has and the number of videos they posted to TikTok between 22nd May 2024 and 4th July 2024

Correlations between No. Followers and Videos Posted

		Followers	Videos Posted
Followers	Pearson Correlation	1	.152
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.210
	N	70	70
Videos Posted	Pearson Correlation	.152	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.210	
	N	70	70

Finally, the relationship between vote share and number of videos posted was tested. Figure 4 demonstrates an extremely weak negative linear relationship (r=-0.019). As p 0.878, this indicates that these results are not statistically significant and therefore shall not be relied upon to make claims about the relationship between these two variables.

Figure 4: Correlation table showing the relationship between the share of the vote the candidates won in the 2024 general election and the number of videos they posted on TikTok

Correlations between Vote share and No. Videos Posted

		Vote Share	No. of Videos Posted
Vote Share	Pearson Correlation	1	-.019
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.878
	N	70	70
No. of Videos Posted	Pearson Correlation	-.019	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.878	
	N	70	70

Overall, these findings begin to paint a picture of how the party candidates used TikTok in their campaign. 70 out of 609 (11.49%) candidates posted to a TikTok page during the general election. The great variability in posting frequency over this campaign period indicates that there was not a universal strategy adopted by all candidates when it came to how regularly they uploaded posts. The moderate linear relationship between follower counts and vote share indicates a trend between how one performed in the election and how many followers they attracted on TikTok. Whilst the significance is weak, it is probable that the more frequently a candidate posts in the campaign period, the more followers they are likely to have. This could, however, be skewed by the outlier detected in Figure 1, which reveals the variance in number of followers, a variable category in which has been identified to be Nigel

Farage's being a significant outlier. Nigel Farage also achieved the highest vote share, which could skew the results of this test.

Finally, there is an extremely weak negative linear relationship indicating that as vote share increases, posting frequency decreases, but this is likely plausible due to random chance.

In conclusion, the primary sample documents some of the trends evident amongst the Reform Party candidates, their popularity in the election, popularity on the app and finally their posting behaviour. This provides context of the wider population, before diving deeper into the formats, content and political communication styles used by the candidates.

4.2 Secondary Sample

The analysis of this secondary sample is designed to answer the three sub-research questions, which work together to answer the central research question.

First, the 70 candidates with active accounts during the campaign period were ranked by their share of the vote in the general election. These candidates were then subdivided into three strata, whereby the top 10%, median 10% and bottom 10% of candidates were grouped (7 accounts per strata = 21 accounts). As seen in Figure 5, the average vote share of the Top strata is 0.33 (33%), the Middle is 0.19 (19%), and the Bottom is 0.091 (9.1%). With 12 posts systematically sampled from each account, the total sample is 252 (N=252).

The coefficient variation (CV = S/ $\bar{x}$), which demonstrates variance relevant to the sample size, indicates the variance between the vote share in each strata. Figure 5 shows that the Middle strata have the most consistent vote share relative to their average (CV=7.2%). Whereas, the Bottom strata have the least consistent vote share, or the highest degree of variance (CV=36.5%). The Top strata show a moderate level of relative variability. Overall, this indicates that the vote share is most stable in the Middle strata and makes clear that whilst grouping the candidates on vote share may be useful for detecting trends, one should be aware that the popularity of the candidates in the Top and Bottom strata is not consistent.

Figure 5: Ratio Statistics for Number of Followers per strata

Ratio Statistics for No. of Followers

Strata	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of Variation Mean Centered
Top	7	181602.714	449169.154	247.3%
Middle	7	3596.000	3174.938	88.3%
Bottom	7	3460.429	2909.205	84.1%
Overall	21	62886.381	260634.933	414.5%

Interestingly, Figure 6 shows that the average number of followers in the Middle and Bottom strata is relatively close. The top strata, however, have an average number of followers which is 50% greater than the average number in the Middle and Bottom strata. However, the coefficient variation of the Top group is 247.3%, almost three times as varied as the Middle (CV=88.3%) and Bottom (84.1%) strata, demonstrating the larger degree of dispersion across candidates in the Top strata. While the Top strata has significantly more followers on average, there is a much larger dispersion in follower counts among candidates, which is to be expected as this Top strata includes Nigel Farage, the leader of the Party. The Middle and Top strata are also demonstrating significant relative variability, but not to the extreme of the Top strata.

Figure 6: Ratio statistics for vote share

Ratio Statistics for Vote Share

Strata	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of Variation Mean Centered
Top	7	.330	.066	20.1%
Middle	7	.194	.014	7.2%
Bottom	7	.091	.033	36.5%
Overall	21	.205	.108	52.8%

Again, Figure 7 demonstrates the variance between a number of videos posted by candidates across each group. Interestingly, the Middle group demonstrates a greater degree of variance (100.3%), suggesting that there are less consistent posting patterns among the candidates in the Middle strata. The Bottom strata are considerably variable (78.1%), whilst the Top strata are only moderately variable (39.9%).

Figure 7: Ratio Statistics for Number of Videos Posted

Ratio Statistics for No. of Videos Posted

Strata	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of Variation Mean Centered
Top	7	31.143	12.415	39.9%
Middle	7	52.143	52.299	100.3%
Bottom	7	45.143	35.249	78.1%
Overall	21	42.810	36.326	84.9%

Overall, these results further demonstrate the great degree of variance between each of the candidate accounts, within each strata. The Top strata are moderately variable in vote share and videos posted, and extremely variable in number of followers, indicating voting

share and number of videos posted are more consistent across the candidates in this strata than their follow count. The Middle strata demonstrate the most consistency in both share and follower count, indicating a relatively consistent trend in popularity in the election and number of followers, but the least consistency in posting frequency, suggesting there is no trend in posting strategy in this group. Finally, the Bottom strata are highly variable in voting share and voting count, and less so in the frequency of posting.

Whilst the data analysis is designed to group candidates by vote share, on the assumption that the candidates may have similar communication strategies or engagement results, this analysis unveils the differences in the candidates within these groups. This will be important to consider when concluding possible trends amongst groups.

RQ1. What formats and vernaculars did Reform UK candidates use TikTok to self-represent?

Firstly, as one can see from Figure 8, most candidate posts, across the three strata, were videos (76%). Video architecture was most popular with candidates in the Top strata, making up 85.7% of their posts, which is closely followed by the Bottom strata, where 82.1% of their posts were videos. The Image slide show/single image architecture was most popular with the Middle strata, making up 38.1% of their posts. No candidates used the stitch/side by side feature. This indicates that most of the candidates favoured the affordances of video-style content to talk to followers and potential voters.

Figure 8: Distribution of post architecture across strata

Architecture of Candidate Posts

		Video		Image slide show/single image		Stitch/Side by sid	
		Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Strata	Top	72	85.7%	12	14.3%	0	0.0
	Middle	52	61.9%	32	38.1%	0	0.0
	Bottom	69	82.1%	15	17.9%	0	0.0
	Total	193	76.6%	59	23.4%	0	0.0

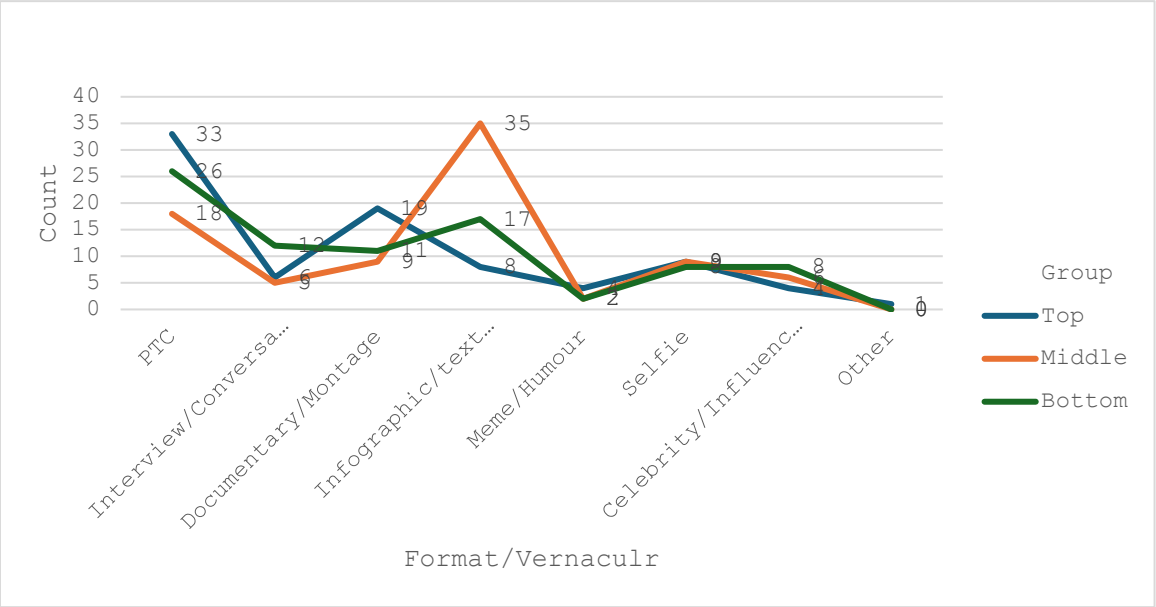
Figure 9 demonstrates that out of the Format/Vernacular category, the PTC (Piece to Camera) format was favoured by the Top and Bottom strata, whereas the Middle strata favoured infographic/ text and image posts (See Appendix 2, Figure C for more detailed statistics). The second most popular format was Infographic/Text and Image posts. The third

most popular was the Documentary/Montage format, with just under half (46.2%) of these posts being reposted content.

Figure 9: Top three most popular Format/Vernacular across strata, and the percentage of which they are reposted content from another account or external media source

Strata	PTC		Infographic/Text and Image		Documentary/Montage	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Top	33	42.9%	8	13.3%	19	48.7%
Middle	18	23.4%	35	58.3%	9	23.1%
Bottom	26	33.8%	17	28.2%	11	28.2%
Reposted content	*10*	*13%*	*9*	*15.0%*	*18*	*46.2%*

Figure 10:Count of post format/vernaculars.



The following ANOVA tests in Figures 11 and 13, the null hypothesis (H0) that all group means will be equal.

The results of the ANOVA test, in Figure 11, show that f = 1.23 and p = 0.282; therefore, there is no statistical significance between the number of likes and post format and vernacular, failing to reject the null hypothesis. This indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between the means of each format and vernacular codes and the number of likes they receive. The means plot, in Figure 12, demonstrates that PTC videos received the highest mean of likes, followed by documentary and montage, and in third place,

Meme/Humour, but the test indicates that one cannot be certain that these assumptions are valid. The lack of statistical significance may be because the data is non-normally distributed and has a small sample size.

Similarly, the ANOVA test, in Figure 13, fails to reject the null hypothesis as there is statistical significance between the number of comments and post format and vernacular as f=1.48 and p = 0.175. This is likely because the data is not normally distributed and has a small sample size. However, it is interesting to consider that the Selfie format was the second greatest driver for comments (see Figure 14), which is inconsistent with the amount of likes it captured (Figure 12).

Overall, this data demonstrates that the PTC, Infographic/Text and Image and Documentary were the popular formats and vernaculars adopted by candidates to self-represent. Whilst these were most popular to post, the means plot (Figures 12 and 14) indicates that a PTC, Documentary/Montage and Meme/Humour garner the most likes. Whereas PTC, Selfie and Celebrity/Influencer/Endorsement posts attract the most comments.

It is important to note, however, that the statistical tests conclude that these results non-statistically significant.

Figure 11: One way ANOVA test for relationship between Format/Vernacular and Likes

ANOVA

Likes

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1420224473.709	7	202889210.530	1.238	.282
Within Groups	39985218236.144	244	163873845.230		
Total	41405442709.853	251			

Figure 12: Means plot - Format/Vernacular and Likes

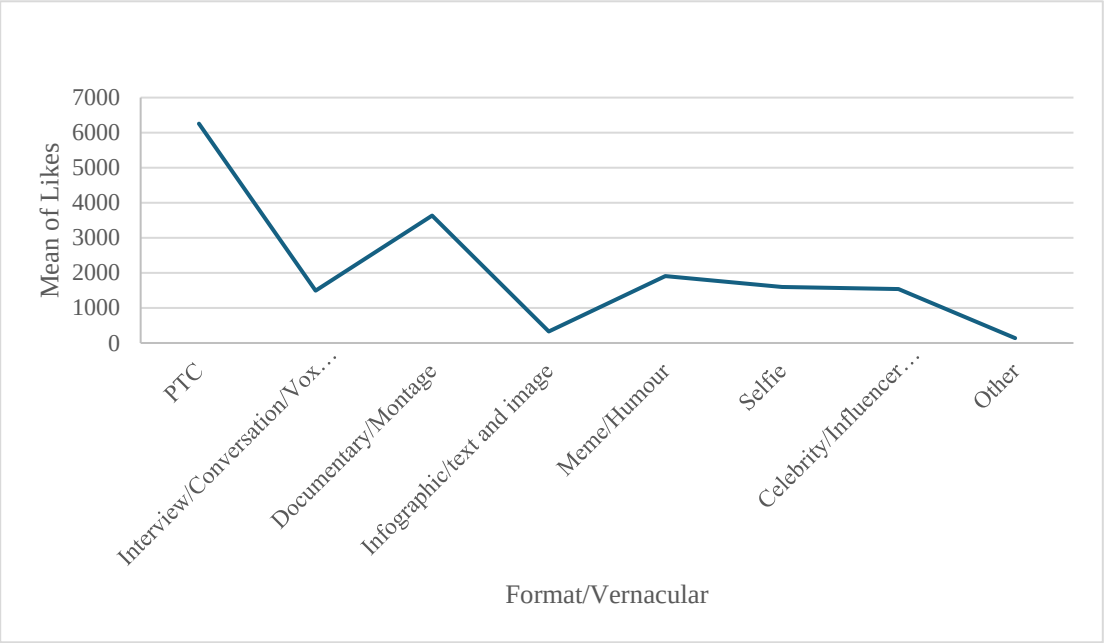


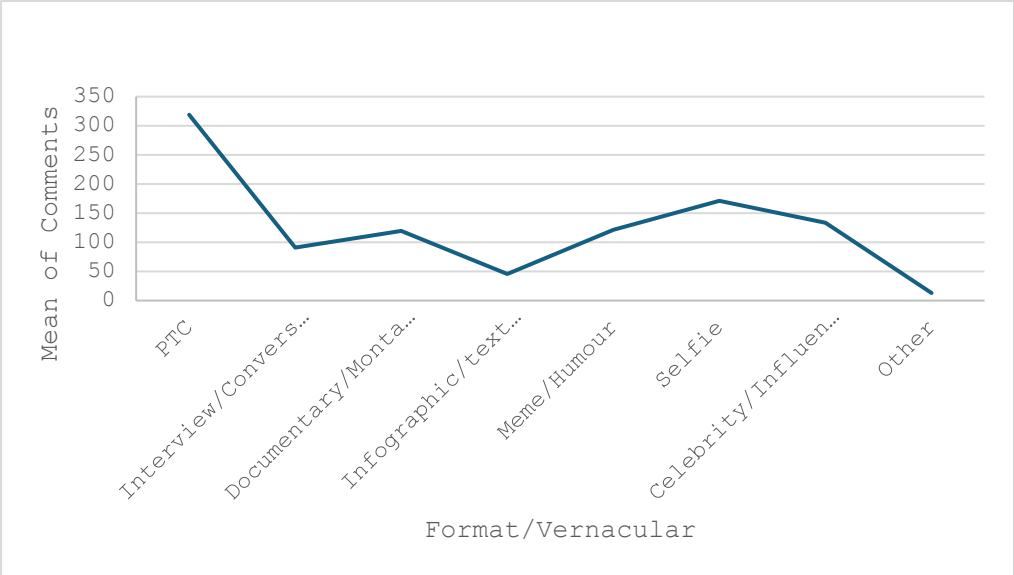
Figure 13: One way ANOVA test for relationship between Format/Vernacular and number of comments

ANOVA

Comments

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2942193.066	7	420313.295	1.481	.175
Within Groups	69254781.041	244	283831.070		
Total	72196974.107	251			

Figure 14: Means plot for the relationship between the number of comments and Format/Vernacular type



RQ2. What political and personal topics did Reform UK candidates cover in their TikTok posts?

Figure 15 shows that 86.9% of all posts across all three strata were purely political, whereas only 4.4% of posts were personal, and 7.1% of posts were both political and personal. 1.6% of posts could not be identified as either political or personal. Interestingly, Figure 16 suggests that personal topics were most commonly featured in posts by candidates in the Top strata (8.3%). Whilst mixed posts were most commonly posted by the Bottom strata. Suggesting a trend between personalisation and popularity.

Figure 17 indicates that Democracy was the most popular political theme discussed by candidates, making up 40.1% of all posts across the three strata. The second most popular political topic across the strata is Manifesto, which makes up 15.5% of the total posts; the majority of the Manifesto posts were made by candidates in the Middle strata (21/39 posts). The third most popular political theme was Immigration (7.1%), with half being produced by candidates in the Top strata (9/18).

Figure 15: Table of Political, Personal and Mixed post counts

Total Political/Personal/Mixed Candidate Posts

		Count	Percentage
Political/Personal/Mixed	Neither	4	1.6%
	Political	219	86.9%
	Personal	11	4.4%
	Mixed	18	7.1%

Figure 16: Table of Poltitical, Personal and Mixed posts by strata

Political/Personal/Mixed Candidate Posts by Strata

Strata		Count	Percentage
Top	Neither	2	2.4%
	Political	71	84.5%
	Personal	7	8.3%
	Mixed	4	4.8%
Middle	Neither	1	1.2%
	Political	75	89.3%
	Personal	3	3.6%
	Mixed	5	6.0%
Bottom	Neither	1	1.2%
	Political	73	86.9%
	Personal	1	1.2%
	Mixed	9	10.7%

Figure 17: Table of Political Themes in Candidate Postsgrouped by strata

Political Themes in Candidate Posts (grouped by strata)

	Top		Middle		Bottom		Total	
Political Themes	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
No political theme	10	11.9%	4	4.8%	2	2.4%	16	6.3%
Manifesto	7	8.3%	21	25.0%	11	13.1%	39	15.5%
Business/Economy	5	6.0%	5	6.0%	4	4.8%	14	5.6%
Democracy	39	46.4%	32	38.1%	30	35.7%	101	40.1%
Health and Social Services	3	3.6%	3	3.6%	0	0.0%	6	2.4%
Civil/Human Rights	2	2.4%	4	4.8%	6	7.1%	12	4.8%
Immigration	9	10.7%	3	3.6%	6	7.1%	18	7.1%
Infrastructure	2	2.4%	3	3.6%	7	8.3%	12	4.8%
Education	2	2.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	0.8%
Enviroment	0	0.0%	1	1.2%	4	4.8%	5	2.0%
Crime	0	0.0%	2	2.4%	5	6.0%	7	2.8%
Military/Defence	1	1.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.4%
International Affairs	1	1.2%	2	2.4%	1	1.2%	4	1.6%
Local/Constituency Affairs	3	3.6%	0	0.0%	6	7.1%	9	3.6%
Other	0	0.0%	4	4.8%	2	2.4%	6	2.4%

Figure 18: Personal Themes in Candidate Posts (grouped by strata)

Personal Themes in Candidate Posts (grouped by strata)

	Top		Middle		Bottom		Total	
Personal Themes	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
None	72	85.7%	76	90.5%	72	85.7%	220	87.3%
Friends	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	1.2%	1	0.4%
Food & Drink	3	3.6%	0	0.0%	1	1.2%	4	1.6%
Family & Home life	3	3.6%	0	0.0%	5	6.0%	8	3.2%
Popular Culture & Media	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	2.4%	2	0.8%
Hobbies & Interests	1	1.2%	1	1.2%	1	1.2%	3	1.2%
Health & Wellbeing	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Places/Travel/Events	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Religion/Culture	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	2.4%	2	0.8%
History	3	3.6%	3	3.6%	0	0.0%	6	2.4%
Generation	1	1.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.4%
Other	1	1.2%	4	4.8%	0	0.0%	5	2.0%

Figure 18 shows the distribution of posts with personal themes across categories and strata. Overall, 87.3% of the total posts collected did not include any personal themes. Of the posts that did include personal topics, Family and Home was the most prominent (3.2%), which were mainly posted by candidates from the Bottom strata, followed by History (2.4%), which was evenly distributed between the Top and Middle strata. Third came the other category, which suggests a limitation of the coding categories.

The following ANOVA tests in Figures 19 and 21 test the null hypothesis (H0) that all group means will be equal.

Testing the relationship significance between likes and theme (Political/Personal/Mixed), Figure 19 indicates that p = 0.085, while not within the typical significance value for social sciences (p = 0.05), the p value can be considered as marginally significant or indicating a trend close to significance. Figure 20, therefore, demonstrates marginally significant evidence of engagement (likes) and the presence of personal topics.

Figure 19: One-way ANOVA test, testing the relationship significance between Political/Personal/Mixed themes and Likes

ANOVA

Likes

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1090765054.432	3	363588351.477	2.237	.085
Within Groups	40314677655.421	248	162559184.094		
Total	41405442709.853	251			

Figure 20: Means plot for Likes and Political/Personal/Mixed themes

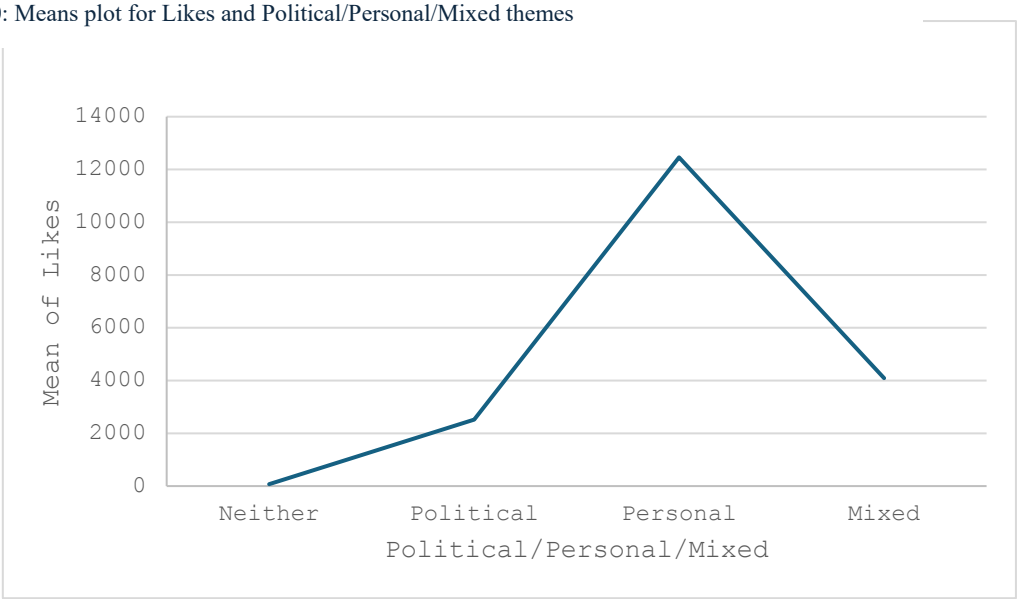


Figure 21 indicates unlikely levels of statistical significance as p= 0.390, failing to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, whilst following the engagement trend demonstrated in Figure 20, the findings of Figure 22 cannot be relied on to make assumptions regarding their relationship.

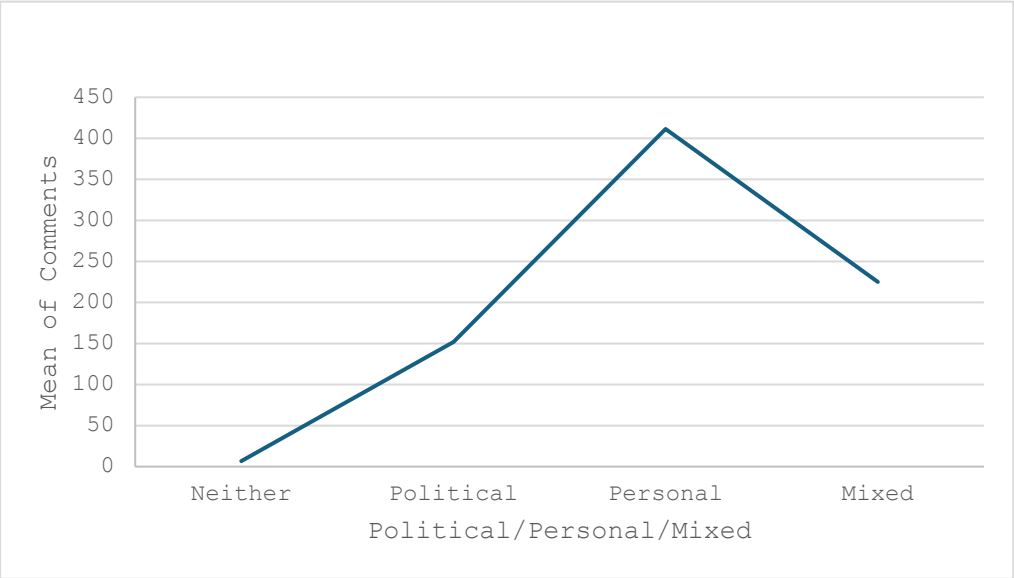
Figure 21: One-way ANOVA test, testing the relationship significance between Political/Personal/Mixed themes and Comments

ANOVA

Comments

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	869568.075	3	289856.025	1.008	.390
Within Groups	71327406.032	248	287610.508		
Total	72196974.107	251			

Figure 22: Means plat for Comments and Political/Personal/Mixed themes



RQ3. What degree of populist style did candidates adopt?

As one can see from Figure 23, the Bottom strata made significantly fewer references to the people, with a total of 88.1 % of their posts including no reference. Interestingly, the Top and Middle strata had equal levels of direct references among their posts (11.9%), but the Middle group had more indirect references overall. The table also shows that indirect reference to the people drove higher average engagement. However, direct reference to the people was more frequent in posts overall.

Figure 23: Count of References to the People

			Reference to The People		
			No reference	Direct reference	Indirect reference
Strata	Top	Count	69	10	5
		Row N %	82.1%	11.9%	6.0%
	Middle	Count	67	10	7
		Row N %	79.8%	11.9%	8.3%
	Bottom	Count	74	6	4
		Row N %	88.1%	7.1%	4.8%
Likes	Mean		1750	6538	14047
Comments	Mean		120	253	626

Figure 24: Count of Exclusion Of Out Groups

			Exclusion Of Out Groups					
			No reference	Immigrants	Members of LGBTQI+ community	Non-Christians	Criminals	Non-white people
Strata	Top	Count	69	11	2	1	1	0
		%	82.1%	13.1%	2.4%	1.2%	1.2%	0.0%
	Middle	Count	80	4	0	0	0	0
		%	95.2%	4.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Bottom	Count	80	3	0	1	0	0
		%	95.2%	3.6%	0.0%	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Likes	Mean		2793	6702	69	512	850	.
Comments	Mean		170	162	7	23	70	.

Figure 24 demonstrates that the exclusion of outgroups was not frequently referenced in the sampled posts. Immigrants were the outgroups that were most frequently excluded. This exclusion aligns with a higher average number of likes per post than posts with no reference. Suggesting that the exclusion of Immigrant populations in posts drives more likes.

Figure 25 demonstrates that anti-elitism towards political elites was the most significant Anti-elitism category. The second most significant is anti-elitism towards the media. Overall, the top strata posted the most content which featured anti elitism.

Figure 25: Count of Anti-Elitism

			Anti-Elitism					
			No reference	The Media	Political Elites	The State	Intellectuals	Economic Powers
Strata	Top	Count	59	2	19	3	1	0
		%	70.2%	2.4%	22.6%	3.6%	1.2%	0.0%
	Middle	Count	68	3	12	0	0	1
		%	81.0%	3.6%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%
	Bottom	Count	75	2	7	0	0	0
		%	89.3%	2.4%	8.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Likes	Mean		2708	13597	2983	1839	230	804
Comments	Mean		141	912	168	168	22	78

Figure 26: Count of Common Sense

			Common Sense	
			No use of common sense	Use of common sense
Group	Top	Count	80	4
		%	95.2%	4.8%
	Middle	Count	83	1
		%	98.8%	1.2%
	Bottom	Count	82	2
		%	97.6%	2.4%
Likes	Mean		3086	867
Comments	Mean		169	52

Figure 27: Count of Crisis/Threat

			Crisis/Threat	
			No crisis or threat	Creates a sense of crisis or threat
Group	Top	Count	74	10
		%	88.1%	11.9%
	Middle	Count	74	10
		%	88.1%	11.9%
	Bottom	Count	72	12
		%	85.7%	14.3%
Likes	Mean		1913	10665
Comments	Mean		125	451

Figure 26 demonstrates little reference to common sense across all posts. 4.8% of posts made by candidates in the top strata featured reference to common sense. There is no significant relationship between references to common sense and engagement evident.

Figure 27 shows that crisis or threat was most frequently referenced by candidates in the bottom strata. Overall, there is a similar trend in reference to crisis or threat across each strata, Top = 11.9%, Middle = 11.9% and Bottom = 14.3%, which has a positive relationship with engagement metrics.

The significance of these findings will be unpacked and considered in light of the literature in the following section.

5. Discussion

The central research question of this dissertation asks: How did Reform UK candidates use TikTok to appeal to the people in their general election campaign? To answer this question, in light of the literature, it is necessary to break the answer into two sections: personalisation and degrees of populism.

5.1 Personalisation

Reform UK candidates take a subversive campaign approach, adopting communicative strategies and participating in 'spontaneous and direct communication' to the people (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020, pp.601-606), by self-representing on TikTok and bypassing the mainstream media.

The findings reveal that the candidates made use of the affordances of TikTok, with just over three-quarters (76%) of the sample posts being video posts, to communicate with the electorate. The most popular Formats or Vernaculars across the three strata were PTC (piece to camera), Infographic/text and image and Documentary/Montage. This indicates that the candidates favour a range of communication styles. PTC format uses direct address, making direct eye contact with the camera, and breaking the fourth wall. This is different to the Selfie format, which only made up 10.3% of posts (see Appendix 2, Figure C), which offers more of a sense of performed authenticity and spontaneity (McGregor, 2018, p.1141). The second most popular format, Infographic/text and image, indicates the use of the platform to share information, without the need for the political actor to self-present. Thirdly, the Documentary or Montage vernacular maintains a third-person perspective. Overall, the frequency of these categories suggest a degree of formality and professionalism maintained in the candidates posts, favouring the PTC format indicates a will to replicate the effects of

‘down the line’ media content, whereby the political looks into the camera as if they are making eye-contact with the audience, whilst being able to bypass media gatekeepers and ‘avoid critical confrontation from those who question them’ (Roemmele, 2020, p.598).

Interestingly, candidates who achieved the highest vote share also shared the most posts with personal themes, allowing their ‘backstage’ lives to slip into the frontstage lives (Goffman, 1956) and self-presenting as more ‘[human]’ (McGregor, 2018, p.598) and relatable to the people. However, with only 4.4% of posts including purely personal themes, and 7.1% including combined personal and political themes, the results suggest that personalisation is less strategically significant than what Graham et al.’s study found for political actors on Twitter.

Despite the limited inclusion of personal themes, the results of this sample indicate that personalisation drives engagement. However, the statistical tests show that it is highly likely these results are due to chance.

5.2 Degrees of Populism

Overall, the candidates with the highest vote share (the Top strata), evidenced the highest degree of populist style, scoring the highest proportions of populist style in 4/5 of the codes, compared to the other strata. With there being evidence of a moderate positive linear relationship between vote share and number of followers (an engagement metric), one could suggest an association between degrees of populism, engagement and performance in the general election. This supports Bozdağ’s findings, which associate stronger degrees of populism with eliciting the most user reactions (2025, p.235). This, of course, is a broad assumption about a relationship, rather than a causation and therefore suggests that more research, and a larger sample size is necessary to investigate this possible trend.

Overall, this study supports Jagers and Walgrave’s (2007) and Moffit’s (2016) view that populism is a matter of degree, which can be more or less present at certain times. This is evident across all candidate posts, in each strata, which demonstrates a varying degree of populist style across posts and accounts alike.

6. Conclusion

Mudde and Kaltwasser see populism both as a threat and a remedy for democratic politics (2017, p. 6). With the rise of populism in Europe and the growth of platforms that afford populist styles, this study makes an important contribution to the study of populist political

communication and digital campaigning, documenting the strategies and communication styles which have contributed towards Reform UK's rise in popularity.

The criterion for the stratified sampling was assigned on the assumption that there is a likely relationship between the share of votes (popularity), engagement and political communication style, as suggested by the empirical research discussed in the literature review. This pattern of association was tested and found that whilst there is a positive moderate relationship between vote share and follower count, the tests on the relationship between vote share and posting frequency and follower count and posting frequency returned as not statistically significant, suggesting a need for a larger sample size.

Some weaknesses of the study include the high level of variability in the data. Whilst an attempt was made to anticipate the differences in candidate engagement metrics and posting behaviours, outliers such as Nigel Farage meant that the Top strata included extreme variation, likely skewing some of the statistical tests. Whilst these tests are still valuable, a suggestion for future studies would be to consider the impact that these outliers may have on outcomes.

Another key limitation of this study is the time jump between the general election and the date of data collection. This means that data could have been deleted, accounts could have been taken down, and engagement rates could have significantly risen, with more time allowed for users to interact with older posts. Future research that attempts to replicate this study should endeavour to do so closer to the data of the election.

To measure engagement further, a suggestion for future research would be to measure the discourses that emerge in the comment sections of posts to learn more about the two-way engagement that occurs between candidates and citizens.

This dissertation has contributed to scholarly debates on populism as a style and has evidenced that political actors who are widely considered as 'populist' can be more or less populist at different points in time. Thus, it would be interesting to conduct a comparative study which also considers how political actors who are not considered as populist may adopt populist political style and to what effect.

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Appendix

1. Coding Manual

General Notes and Instructions

For all coding categories (T1-T6), coders must only choose one option. The unit of analysis is the TikTok post made by the Reform candidate. The TikTok post (video or still image) is the main point of interest but should be reviewed in conjunction with the caption to establish the codes. For videos, coders should watch them at least twice to ensure all data is understood. Internet searching is permitted to understand the context of the video, image, politics or memetic text.

T1: TikTok Architecture

What type of post is it?

1 = Video

2 = Image slide show or single image

The post is a singular image, or a set of images in the slide show format. The slideshow format can be indicated by the presence of two outward-facing arrows at the bottom of the screen which allow the user to click through the images. This should not be mistaken for a video slideshow, which would have had to be edited together by the user and uploaded to the platform; this can be identified by the absence of click-through arrows. There may be smaller moving images in the form of GIF's or Stickers overlayed onto the image, as long as the main image is still, the post should be coded as an Image.

3 = 'Stitch'/Side by side video

The video uses the 'stitch' format, featuring a reposted video from another user's account, identifiable by the presence of another account's username, followed by a video reaction from the candidate.

T2: TikTok Format/Vernaculars

All posts are coded for their format, choose one of the following:

1 = Piece to camera (PTC) – Video of a Reform candidate or a party member/supporter directly addressing the viewer and making eye contact with the camera. This may be overlaid

by images and videos, but most of the video features the candidate speaking to the camera. This may be interrupted with overlayed images of videos, but the beginning of the video starts with the induvial speaking directly to the camera.

2 = Interview/Conversation/Vox pop – More than one person is visible in the video, or the person in the video is talking to someone off-camera. They are asking and answering questions, but not directly talking towards and making eye contact with the camera. The question may not be included in the video, but it is clear that there is either someone on or off-screen who is involved in the steering of the conversation.

If the interview only features as part of the video and is edited together with video footage from a third-person perspective, this should be coded as an 'edit', as the content of the video then becomes not about the content of the interview but the surrounding content that it is edited with.

3 = Documentary/montage/ – Video of the candidate, captured from a third-person perspective, where they do not address/speak to the camera. Instead, there may be a voice-over, music playing, or they are delivering a speech (but not towards the camera). If the fourth wall is broken during any period of the video, and the candidate directly addresses the camera or audience beyond the screen verbally and with direct eye contact, the post cannot be coded as a documentary. An edit is where all of the video remains in third person, but it may feature part of an interview, edited together with another video which does not include an interview.

4= Infographic/text and image/image – A digitally produced video or image featuring overlayed text or animation.

5 = Meme/Humour – Replicating a pop culture meme or using a trending 'sound' or song. Posts may feature trending music, or video formats that are replicated across the app. As this requires coders to be familiar with current trends, coders are encouraged to refer to TikTok: Creative Centre to identify current trends, formats and 'sounds.

6 = Dance video – Video of a candidate or party members dancing to a song.

7 = Selfie – video or image where the candidate is holding the camera/phone themselves. This will likely be a close-up shot, with at least one of the individual's hands out of view.

8 = Endorsement – Video featuring a celebrity, influencer, or member of the public endorsing the MP candidate. This could also include a local 'influencer' like a religious leader or other non-political members of the community.

9 = Other
Any post that does not fit the above categories.

Rules:

- In the instance that a 'PTC', 'Documentary/Conversation' or 'Selfie' video features a celebrity or influencer, the video should be coded as a 'Celebrity/Influencer endorsement'.
- If the video features a repost for memetic purposes, code as 'Meme/Humour'.
- There may be more than one category in a video. In this instance, you code for the category which is present for the most amount of time in the video (unless instructed otherwise). For example, in the instance that there is an infographic that appears for 5 seconds at the end of a 2-minute 'PTC' video, you must code the video as 'PTC'.

T3: Repost or Original content

Repost – A repost is any content, video, or image that has been created for another platform and then posted on TikTok. The video or image features reposted content, which can include a 'Stitch' or side-by-side. This can also include a reposted video from another platform, e.g. Instagram, or reposted news content. This also includes a repost of any video or image that was first published somewhere else, for example, a video for the news or a parliamentary proceeding. Some indicators of a repost video could be the following: a podcast set-up, including microphones or a set, watermark, and branding.

0 = Original content
1 = Reposted content

T4: Political or Personal, or Mixed?

In the post, are the topics covered political or personal in nature, or both?

0 = Neither political nor personal

1 = Political

2 = Personal

3 = Mixed

T5: Personal Themes

Code all videos that feature personal or personal and political topics. Personal topics are only topics that are personal to the candidate, if another person features in the video and talks about one of the topics below this should not be coded as personal. However, if personal topics are mentioned in the caption, these should be coded as personal.

0 = None

1 = Friends/

Featuring friends, speaking about friendship, this does not include talking about 'friends', in the context of social media following. For example, "My friends on Facebook…".

2 = Food/Drink

Talking about food and drink

3 = Family/Home Life

Featuring family members in the video or talking about them. Talking about being a relation to someone e.g. talking about life as a father/mother/parent.

4 = Popular Culture and Media

This includes references to celebrities and celebrity culture**,** sports people, television and film. Talking about a football team should be coded as popular culture, whereas playing for a football team should be coded as hobbies/interests.

Example: Video name SR12

Video screenshot	Video description	Video caption:
	Before going on to talk about campaigning, the candidate says, 'Just a quick one before the England game starts', and finishes the video by proclaiming 'come on England!'.	Fyp foryoupage reform uk
This should be coded as Popular culture and Media as it refers to England playing in the Euros.		

5 = Hobbies/Interests

Hobbies or interests could include the following: animals, pets**,** clubs or participating in sports/exercise. A hobby or interest is something that the candidate participates in, for example, playing a sport, funding a local team or walking their dog. The activity is specific and personal to them.

6 = Health/Well-being

Discussing mental wellbeing/health, talking about exercise for fitness or mental health.

7 = Places/Travel/Events

Holidays, non-political visits, and music festivals.

8 = Religion/Culture

Speaking about one's own religious beliefs/faith. E.g. Saying 'God bless you'. Exclamatory phrases like 'Oh my god' should not be included.

9 = History

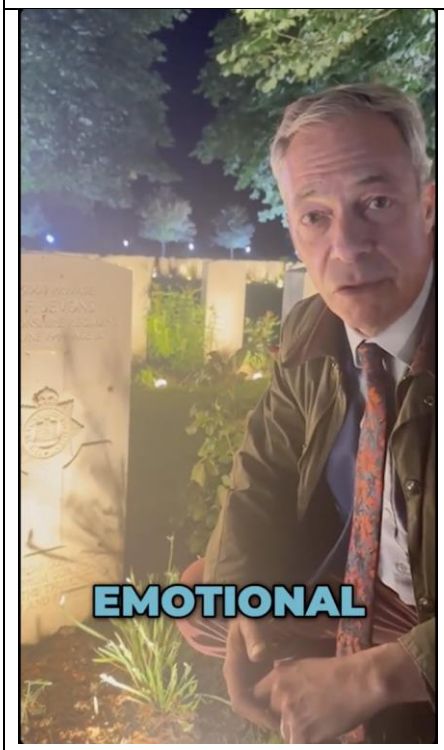
Speaking about an interest in history or a historical event. For this to be considered personal, the candidate should be evoking emotion or opinion about the historical event. Simply stating an event or using history to add context should not be considered personal.

10 = Generation

Talking about personal experience because of the generation they are part of, e.g. gen z, or their 'youth'.

Example:

Video name: NF5

Video screenshot2	**Video description**	**Video caption:**
	Nigel Farage squatted by the grave of an 18-year-old man who lost his life on D-Day. Farage reads the inscription on the grave and then says, "And these are very emotional and very powerful words and many of you on TikTok are the same age, it's worth thinking about".	W.F Jevons, aged 18, was killed in action 80 years ago today #dday.
This should be coded as History, as it demonstrates the candidate's interest for this historic event.		

11 = Other

T6: Political Themes

0 = No political theme

1 = Manifesto

Posts should be coded as such if the post discusses multiple key issues, which are included in the Party's manifesto. Having reviewed the Party's Manifesto, and reading the Party Leader's key lines on Reform UK's priorities (Reform UK, 2024), references to or quoting of more than one of the following key issues should be coded as Manifesto:

a. **'Freeze immigration and stop the boats'** – Freeze non-essential immigration, 'stop the boats', restrict international students
b. **'End government waste'** - refers to government overspending
c. **'Cut taxes to make work pay'** - lift income tax, cut energy taxes, cut stamp duties, abolish VAT tourist tax, abolish grief tax
d. **'Restore law and order'** - crime and Justice, sentencing review, increase criminal justice budget, change definition of hate crime, 10,000 more detention places, tackle organised crime, CMS reform, stop child grooming gangs, tackle youth crime.
e. **'Repair our broken public services'** – Housing and NHS
f. **'Slash energy bills'** – Lowering energy bills
g. **'Unlock real economic growth'** – reference to economic growth through supporting SME's
h. **'Stand up for British culture, identity and values'** - 'Reclaiming Britain' – Anti-woke policies, and prioritisation of Christian values.

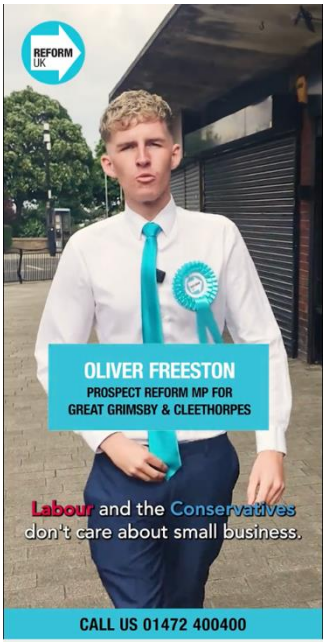
Whereas single issues should be coded with one of the codes below.

2 = Business/Economy

Includes workers' rights and pay, inflation, cost of living, and small and medium-sized businesses.

Video name OF9

Video screenshot	Video description	Video caption:

	Oliver Freeston walking through a town and discussing Reform's stance on supporting small and medium sized (SMEs) Businesses.	Small and medium sized businesses are the backbone to our economy. It seems that only Reform seem to understand this. What would Reform do to help small businesses? Free Over 1.2 million Small and Medium Sized Businesses from Corporation Tax. Lift the minimum profit threshold to £100k. Reduce the main Corporation Tax Rate from 25% to 20%, then to 15% from year 5. Abolish IR35 Rules to Support Sole Traders. Britain's self-employed often work longer hours and take more risks. Many have no pension and receive no sick pay. Lift the VAT Threshold to £120,000. Free up small entrepreneurs from red tape. #smallbusiness #reform #reformuk #cleethorpes #grimsby #backsmallbusiness #vote #votereform #uk #generalelection #helpsmallbusinessgrow #supportlocalbusiness #shoplocal #cashisking
This should be coded as Business/Economy. Whilst Reform's policies for SME's is a key part of their manifesto, as it only discussed as a single issue and so should be coded as such.		

3 = Democracy

This includes the discussion of Parliamentary affairs, campaigning, polling results, the right to vote, conceptualises democracy or citizenship, and talks about the credibility of a political opponent, polling and campaigning. This therefore includes generalised insults towards the opposition. Asking people to register to vote, canvassing, and fundraising.

4 = Health and Social Services 3

Includes the NHS, social care, police, private healthcare, World Healt010h Organisation.

5 = Civil/Human Rights/Social Culture

Includes racial injustice, representation, LGBTQIA+ rights and any socially contested issue, this could include the debate on gender identity. Only issues in the UK are included.

6 = Immigration

Legal migration, asylum seekers, and illegal migration. 'Stop the boats'

7 = Infrastructure

Includes housing, public services, energy, and water, work and pensions, benefits

8 = Education

Primary and secondary education, universities, and curriculum, student loan.

9 = Environment

Global warming, fossil fuels, pollution, wildlife, net zero, ulez

10 = Crime

Knife crime, prisons, anti-social behaviour, organised crime, youth offences, and grooming.

11 = Military and Defence

Any discussion of the UK's military services and defence budget.

Any discussion of the UK's role in the Israel and Palestine conflict or the Ukraine war should be coded as 'International Affairs'.

12 = International Affairs

Includes Ukraine war, Isreal and Palestine war, EU – European Convention on Human Rights. Historical events should not be included, unless the politician is making a political statement about the event. Brexit

13 = Local/Constituency affairs

Any discussion of singular or multiple local issues may include a reference to a local news story that is political in nature, a reference to the local council or infrastructure or explicitly answering questions raised by the community. If questions are taken from the comments and

there is no clear reference to the constituency of the candidate, this should be coded under manifesto or a singular issue as those who comment are not necessarily members of the candidate's constituency.

Example:

Video name JM1

Video screenshot	**Video description**	**Video caption:**
	Sat in his office, James McMurdock answers questions that 'people' from his constituency have 'come out' to him with.	Day 3 of the #election #campaign for #july4th with #Reform #ReformUK #nigelfarage #reformparty @Reform UK @reform UK supporter @Reform Uk GB
This should be coded as local/constituency affairs, as it directly refers to being asked questions by people in their constituency.		

14 = Other

For any post that does not clearly fit into one of the coding categories mentioned above.

Rules:

When there is more than one topic, choose the most prominent one. Choose the topic that is mentioned most frequently or for the longest time in the video. If a topic is mentioned at the beginning and end of a video, choose this as the most prominent theme. If the post is an image or number of images, code it as the topic that is most frequently displayed in the images. Use the caption to support this decision.

Populist Political Communication Style

T7: The People

Referencing the 'people', generally or as a population category that the candidate claims to represent. A population category is defined as a 'group of people having in common a constant feature that is of electoral interest in the given rhetorical context' (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p.335), a group united through experience, beliefs or identity. This will be identifiable through the use of the following lexis: 'us', 'we'. See examples below for the distinction between direct and indirect references.

0 = Does not refer to the people

1 = Direct reference to the people

2 = Indirect reference to the people

Examples:

- Direct reference - "**The people** want our country back", 'the people', 'the country', 'the nation', 'the British people',
- Indirect reference – "**We** want our country back" (when referring to the general will of the people), 'our needs, wants, voices', 'millions of people agree with me', 'the majority', 'let us get our country back'

T8: Exclusion of Outgroups (Others)

Negatively referring to one of the following groups:

0 = Do not refer to the exclusion of an outgroup

1 = Immigrants - Refugees, Economic Migrants, Family Migrants, Forced Migrants, Environmental Migrants and Asylum Seekers

2 = Members of LGBTQIA+ community –

3 = Non-Christians – People who practice a religion other than Christianity.

4 = Criminals – People who have committed a crime

5 = Non-white people – non-Caucasian

T9: Anti-Elitism

Does the post express negativity towards an elite, and if so, who are they? Code when a negative attitude towards one of the following population groups is shown.

0 = Do not refer to the elite

1 = The Media – media tycoons, journalists, news organisations, e.g. The BBC

2 = Political Elites – Parties, Government, Ministers, the PM

3 = The State – Administration, civil service**,** Bank of England

4 = Intellectuals – Universities, writers, professors, scientists

5 = Economic Powers – Multinationals, employers, trade unions, capitalists

T10: Common Sense

Any direct reference to using 'common sense' when referring to a political solution to a problem.

0 = No reference

1 = Reference

T11: Crisis or Threat

Creating a sense of crisis happens both rhetorically and performatively. A sense of crisis or threat can be created, not only by direct reference, but by the creation of the sense of urgency, calling for 'short-term and swift action' (Moffit, 2016). When coding for the crisis or threat, coders should look for the words and phrases describing the nation, or the ruling of it, to be in 'crisis', 'threat', 'disaster', 'out of control' or be 'broken'. Threat can be in reference to immigration, economic difficulties, perceived injustice, military threat, or social or cultural change (Moffit, 2016, p.45). Threat or crisis can also be created through metaphors and similes, comparing one thing to another that is indicative of a crisis, threat or disaster, e.g. A war. Uses of phrases such as 'Before it's too late', 'save Britain', 'the fight', 'join the revolt' also indicate a level of threat.

0 = Does not refer to crisis or threat

1 = Creates a sense of crisis or threat

Example:

Video name NF1

Video screenshot	Video description	Video caption:

	A journalist asks, “How would you respond to people who accuse you of cynically using inflammatory language to stoke culture wars? Nigel Farage responds, ‘If 3800 boats, and 125,00 people isn’t some sort of slow-motion D-Day in reverse, I don’t know what is…” *Video of Nigel Farage on beach plays, cutting to an overhead shot of a person jumping out of a boat onto shore, followed by a cut back to Nigel Farage with edited electricity bolts over his eyes*.	125,000 illegal migrants have crossed the English Channel in nearly 4,000 boats since 2018. You can use whatever word you like for it, but I think invasion is appropriate — and millions of people agree with me. #election #nigelfarage #immigration’
This should be coded as a sense of crisis or threat, as it directly compares immigration with a historic war invasion.		

2. Statistics

Figure A: Scatter graph of vote share and Followers

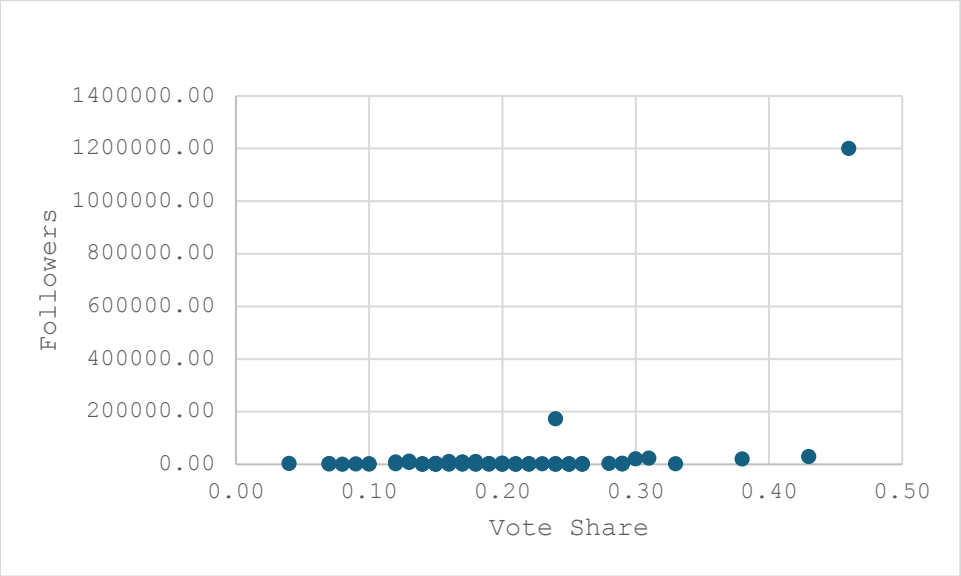


Figure B: Scatter graph of Followers and Videos posted

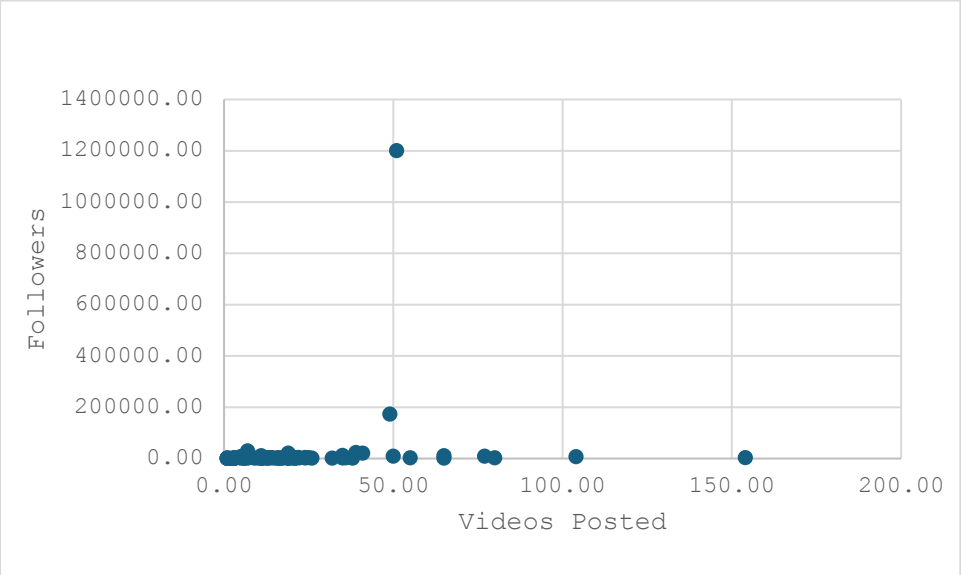


Figure C: Table of Format/ Vernacular count by Strata

		Format/Vernacular															
		PTC		Interview/ Conversation/ Vox Pop		Documentary/ Montage		Infographic/ text and image		Meme/ Humour		Selfie		Celebrity/ Influencer endorsement		Other	
		Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Strata	Top	33	42.9%	6	26.1%	19	48.7%	8	13.3%	4	50.0%	9	34.6%	4	22.2%	1	100.0%
	Middle	18	23.4%	5	21.7%	9	23.1%	35	58.3%	2	25.0%	9	34.6%	6	33.3%	0	0.0%
	Bottom	26	33.8%	12	52.2%	11	28.2%	17	28.3%	2	25.0%	8	30.8%	8	44.4%	0	0.0%
Repost	Original Content	67	87.0%	10	43.5%	21	53.8%	51	85.0%	6	75.0%	24	92.3%	18	100.0%	1	100.0%
	Reposted Content	10	13.0%	13	56.5%	18	46.2%	9	15.0%	2	25.0%	2	7.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

**Note that Dance Video had a value of zero across all strata and therefore, has been considered an insignificant category.*

3. Ethical Review Form

COMM3910 Communication Dissertation / COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Methods Ethical Review Form

1. **Basic project details**

Your name	Maia India Barrett
Student ID	201452101
Name of supervisor	Todd Graham
Provisional title/ topic area	The Performance of Populism on TikTok

Ethical review is required for all research carried out in the University involving people (human participants), including research undertaken by students within a taught student module. Further details of the University of Leeds ethical review requirements are given in the Research Ethics Policy available at: https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/109/2023/12/Research-ethics-policy.pdf.

For ethical approval on this module, you should discuss research ethics with your supervisor and ask them to review and approve this form. You must submit your form with your supervisor's signature to the submissions area in Minerva by the published deadline (see module handbook), or before you begin fieldwork (whichever is soonest). **Please note that you must not commence fieldwork until this form has been approved and signed by your supervisor and the module leader if necessary.** You must complete this form even if your research does not involve people.

Please note that you must NOT complete research with participants who are under 18, unable to give 'informed consent', or are 'vulnerable' (e.g., prisoners, asylum seekers, the homeless). This module does not have ethical approval for research with these groups. Also, you must NOT store any participant data on your personal devices. All data related to research participants must be stored on your University One Drive storage facility.

Further Research Ethics Guidance for Dissertations is available in Minerva. Please refer to this Guidance when completing this form.

1. **Summarise the aims, objectives, and method of the research (max 300 words).** Provide a summary of the research, outlining the aims and objectives and / or research questions and the proposed methodology. Please explain how you will conduct the research (e.g., how will research participants be identified and recruited and what will they be asked to do, or for online research, how will people's data be selected, used, and analysed?)

This research project will look at the political communication styles and techniques, within MP candidate TikTok videos. Informed by political communication theory and a populist communication framework, I will conduct a quantitative content analysis of candidate TikTok videos, published during the run up to the 2024 general election.

The project aims to measure how TikTok was used by Reform UK MP candidates to connect with citizens during the election campaign period, and explore potential trends in populist political communication styles, afforded by the digital platform.

Data will be sampled and scaped from public facing TikTok accounts.

2. **Confirm if you plan to conduct fieldwork with (data on) people**	**Yes**	**No**
Will your dissertation involve conducting research on people (this includes online research methods and researching data on people / secondary data analysis)? Tick as appropriate.	☒	

If you ticked No to Question 3, you do not need to take further action in respect of ethical approval. Please proceed to the declarations in Part C.

If you ticked Yes to Question 3, you need to complete Part A.

Part A: Ethical Considerations Raised by Your Research

2. **What is the source of the data used in your research?** (Indicate with an 'X' all that apply)

New data collected for this research	☒
Data previously collected	
Data already in the public domain (including Internet-based research)	
Other, please state:	

3. **How will the data be collected?** (Indicate with an 'X' all that apply)

Through one-to-one research interviews	
Through focus groups	
Self-completion (e.g. questionnaires, surveys, diaries)	
Through observation	
Data previously collected	
Data already in the public domain	☒
Other, please state:	

4. **Personal safety: risk assessment**

Will your fieldwork be outside the University campus?	**Yes**	**No**
		☒

If you answer Yes to Q. 6 you will need to complete a separate risk assessment form and send this to your supervisor to review. Supervisors will need to approve the risk assessment before signing this form.

5. **Will the project involve any of the following** (Tick as appropriate) (Please check the Dissertation Research Ethics Guidance Notes when completing this section)

	Yes	**No**
Discussion of sensitive topics, or topics that could be considered sensitive		☒
Prolonged or frequent participant involvement		☒
Researching people without their knowledge and consent	☒	
Cause potential harm to participants or others (including researcher(s))		☒
Potential conflicts of interest		☒
Researcher(s) in a position of authority over participants		☒

Cooperation of an intermediary to gain access to research participants or material		☒
Internet-based research or other visual / vocal methods where participants may be identified who may not expect their communication to be accessed by third parties:		☒
Translators or interpreters (other than self)		☒
Fieldwork taking place outside the UK [See point 3 Personal Safety above]		☒
Other (please state):		

NB: you must NOT complete research with participants who are under 18, unable to give 'informed consent', or are 'vulnerable' (e.g., prisoners, asylum seekers, the homeless).

6. Research data management

Will the research involve any of the following activities at any stage (including identification of potential research participants)? (Please check the Dissertation Ethics Guidance Notes when completing this section)	**Yes**	**No**
a. Examination of personal records by those who would not normally have access		☒
b. Sharing data with other		☒
c. Use of personal contact details other than email and telephone numbers (e.g. postcodes, faxes, home / work address)		☒
d. Publication of direct quotations from respondents	☒	
e. Publication of data that might allow individuals to be identified	☒	
f. Use of audio / visual recording devices		☒
Explain in this textbox what will happen to the data you collect once you have completed the module: Guidance on management of your research data and on data protection is available in the Dissertation Ethics Guidance Notes		

NB: You must NOT store data on your personal devices: all data related to research participants must be stored on your University One Drive storage facility

If you answered Yes to any of the items in Questions 7 and 8, please ensure you complete Part B of this form which requires you to explain how you will conduct your research ethically. As noted above, if you answered Yes to Question 6, you must complete the separate risk assessment form and send this to your supervisor to review before signing this form.

If you answered No to all the items in Questions 7 and 8, you do NOT need to complete Part B of this form. Please now complete Part C.

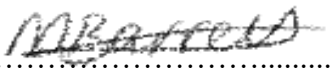
Part B: Addressing the Ethical Considerations Raised

7. **For the ethical considerations indicated in Questions 7 and 8 in Part A of this form, provide further details and explain how these issues will be addressed. Please refer as appropriate to the Dissertation Research Ethics Guidance Notes, and the University's Research Ethics Policy, the module reading list, and other resources on ethics and good practice in research available in Minerva.**

Response to ethical considerations identified in Question 7: As the accounts are made by public figures, over the age of 18, whose data is viewed, shared and reproduced by the members if the public and the media, there are no concerns with the archiving and sharing of their content.
Response to data-management considerations identified in Question 8: No user information, comments or tags (of non-public figure users) will be included in the research rapport. The TikTok videos and their captions will be archived using an online scraping tool, but comment sections will not be saved, removing any GDPR concerns.

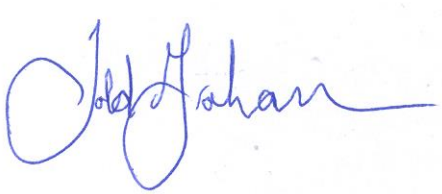
Part C: Dissertation Research Ethical Approval: Declaration

Student declaration (for all students)	**Tick as appropriate**
I confirm that the research ethics form is accurate to the best of my knowledge.	☒
I have consulted the University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy available at https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics/university-protocols-and-policies/ and the dissertation research ethics guidance notes.	☒
I understand that ethical approval will only apply to the project I have outlined in this application and that I will need to re-apply, should my plans change substantially.	☒
If my research will be conducted outside the University campus, I am aware that I need to complete the separate risk assessment form and send this to my supervisor to review.	☒
For students conducting research with (data on) people	
I am aware of the University of Leeds protocols for ethical research, particularly in respect to protocols on informed consent, verbal consent, reimbursement for participants and low risk observation. If any are applicable to me, signing this form confirms that I will carry out my work in accordance with them.	☒

Student's signature: 

Date: ……2/4/25…….…….....

For Supervisors	**Tick as appropriate**
No further action required	
I confirm that the dissertation project is in line with the Guidelines for COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Ethics / COMM3910 Communication Dissertation.	X
I have discussed the ethical issues arising from the research with the student and their risk assessment (if necessary) and I agree that all issues have been accurately and fully addressed at the time of signing this form.	X
Further actions required	
Refer to module leader for further review.	



Supervisor's signature:

Date: 14 April 2025

Part D: Dissertation / Research Project Ethical Approval: Module Leader authorisation

To be completed by the module leader (only necessary if requested by the student's supervisor)	**Yes**	**No**
No further action required		
The project falls within the parameters of the module's block ethics approval.		
Additional comments		

Module leader's signature: …….....

Date: …….…….....