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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Classen, K., Kollmer, A., Schlage, M., Schöpflin, A., Winkler, J., & Witterspan, H. (2024). Right-wing populist communication of the party AfD on TikTok: To what extent does the AfD use TikTok as part of its communication to win over young voters? In A. Godulla, C. Buller, V. Freudl, I. Merz, J. Twittenhoff, J. Winkler, L. Zapke (Eds.), *The Dynamics of Digital Influence: Communication Trends in Business, Politics and Activism* (pp. 100-122). Leipzig <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-94713-2>

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UNIVERSITÄT
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The Dynamics of Digital Influence

Communication Trends in
Business, Politics and Activism

Edited by Alexander Godulla, Christopher Buller,
Vanessa Freudl, Isabel Merz, Johanna Twittenhoff,
Jessica Winkler and Laura Zapke



Imprint

The Dynamics of Digital Influence: Communication Trends in Business, Politics and Activism

Edited by Alexander Godulla, Christopher Buller, Vanessa Freudl, Isabel Merz, Johanna Twittenhoff, Jessica Winkler, Laura Zapke

Book designed with the help of AI [Midjourney, www.midjourney.com] and by Kelly Busch, Alexandra Grüber, Anna Kollmer, Denise Kunz, Elise Mattheus, Noa Sandke

Editorial proofreading by Christopher Buller, Vanessa Freudl, Isabel Merz, Johanna Twittenhoff, Jessica Winkler, Laura Zapke

Linguistic proofreading and formatting by Kalkidan Classen, Stefan Eberherr, Patricia Görsch, Dominik Kewe, Julia Stumpf, Lotta Wegner

First Edition, Leipzig, 2024

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To what extent does the AfD use TikTok as part of its
communication to win over young voters?

- A qualitative content analysis

Kalkidan Classen, Anna Kollmer, Malte Schlage, Alicia Schöpflin,
Jessica Winkler, Hannes Witterspan

Abstract

This study focuses on the right-wing populist communication of the party “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD) on TikTok because of the party's increasing popularity and social media presence. The theoretical foundations are provided by framing theory and the theory of right-wing populism. The study raises the question of the extent to which the AfD uses TikTok in its communication to win over young voters. The research leading question is answered by three research questions that deal with the content, linguistic and audiovisual means and the adaptation of the platform rules. This study draws on the content-structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018). From the AfD's public TikTok videos from the end of 2022 to the end of 2023, 120 videos from six accounts, both party and member of parliament accounts, were identified as the object of investigation using the concentration principle. The analysis is based on 13 main categories and 145 subcategories, which were derived from theory and supplemented inductively. The results show that AfD communication covers topics such as security, anti-establishment attitudes and identity politics. They evoke concerns about general security, such as financial stability, fighting crime, the consequences of war and restrictions on personal freedoms. In doing so, they fuel existential fears and create a climate of insecurity. The party uses populist stylistic devices such as provocation, conspiracy rhetoric, emotionalization, and fear-mongering, simplifying complex issues and undermining rational discourse. It constructs an absolute truth through its own narratives. The AfD hardly adapts any interactive functions and does not follow any TikTok trends. The analysis shows that communication focuses more on content than entertainment. Nevertheless, the AfD relies on a strong visual identity and branding through the integration of colors and logos. Hypotheses can be derived from the results of this research, which serve as a starting point for further research. The findings underline the urgency for democratic parties to adapt their communication

strategy on the TikTok platform in order to ultimately reach not only young voters, but also the growing electorate.

Keywords: right-wing populism, TikTok, framing theory, political communication, social media, AfD

Introduction

The rise of the “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD) party has brought the fight against right-wing extremism and for democracy on the daily agenda of German media and political discussions (dpa, 2024; Rademacher, 2024). In January 2024, investigative research by the media company “Correctiv” (Bornmann, 2024) revealed a meeting of high-ranking AfD politicians, neo-nationalists and entrepreneurs at which the plan to expel people with a migration background from Germany was discussed. This led to an ongoing outrage in society with far-reaching consequences, such as demonstrations (Hölzl & AFP, 2024), statements from companies (Neuerer et al., 2024) and personal consequences for some participants, such as the dismissal of Roland Hartwig, the speaker of AfD chairwoman Alice Weidel (Neuerer, 2024).

At the same time, the AfD's strong presence on social media, in particular the video platform TikTok, is attracting increasing attention (Neumeier et al., 2024; Vorreyer, 2024). The *ZDF Magazin Royale* report showed how AfD politician Maximilian Krah "goes viral" (ZDF Magazin Royale, 2024 [translated]) on the platform with misogyny, racism and anti-democratic thinking. However, in the context of the state elections in Hesse and Bavaria in the fall of 2023, the first specialist magazines and newspapers attributed the 17% and 18% increase in voter numbers among the under-30s to TikTok, among other things. Videos by party members have over one million likes (alice_weidel_afd, 2023; mutzurwahrheit90, 2023). This puts the AfD far ahead of other established parties (Hollender, 2023). It enjoys a pioneering position on the platform and knows how to stage its populist content with messages such as "This is how the traffic lights are destroying our country" (alice_weidel_afd, 2023 [translated]) or "Real men are right-wing" (maximilian_krah, 2023 [translated]). In view of these developments, it becomes evident how relevant this topic is to society and science.

Based on the social and scientific relevance, this thesis deals with the research of right-wing populist communication of the AfD on TikTok. First and foremost, the relevant theories and the state of research need to be clarified, with the framing theory and the theory of populism playing important roles. The base of populist social media communication is framing theory: Populist actors use frames to simplify complex issues and reinforce their messages (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). They tap into public fears and disappointments (Betz, 1994) and thus influence how an audience evaluates certain topics (Goffman, 1974). The theory of populism focuses on the frames of popular centrism and anti-elitism (Mudde, 2004). Right-wing

populism, which can be separated from populism, is additionally defined by the call for xenophobia (Betz, 1994).

According to Wodak (2015), the success of right-wing populist parties depends on effective media strategies that include the comprehensive use of different and new media channels. In the past, communication and political science research has focused heavily on how politicians interact with the public on social media, such as X - formerly Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, resulting in numerous studies (Bossetta, 2018; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Stier et al., 2018). Although the rapid rise of the social media platform TikTok has aroused growing interest in the scientific community (Zeng et al., 2021), there is currently very little research on political communication on TikTok (González-Aguilar et al., 2023). Only one study examined the communication of the right-wing populist party AfD on TikTok, with the result that AfD politicians hide their connections to the political system and present themselves as part of the "pure people" (Bösch, 2023 [translated]) among users, whom they address as friends.

Qualitative content analysis is the most widely used and most relevant method for investigating political communication in social networks (Brosius et al., 2016). A content-structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018) was particularly suitable for answering the research questions. Categories were used to obtain concrete answers to the questions on content-related, rhetorical-stylistic, and technical-visual aspects of communication. The main categories were deductively derived in advance based on theory and the sub-categories were formed inductively during the analysis process. The population to be analyzed comprised all public TikTok videos of the AfD party in the period from November 30, 2022 to November 30, 2023. From the population, a sample of six TikTok accounts with the largest number of followers and likes overall was selected using the concentration principle. Finally, the 20 most viewed videos per account were analyzed within the research work, resulting in 120 videos as the object of analysis.

The present status of research and the research gap led to the development of the following research leading question (RLQ): *"To what extent does the AfD use TikTok in its communication to attract young voters?"*.

Theory

The following chapter elaborates on the theoretical background of this study and focuses on defining key concepts. The outlined framework serves as a foundation for the subsequent empirical investigation.

Framing Theory - A Definition

Entman (1993) describes Framing as a process that encompasses the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of perceived reality in communication. The goal of this process is

to convey a specific problem definition, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and / or recommendations for action regarding the subject matter. It should be noted that a frame of a message does not necessarily have to encompass all four functions mentioned. Communicators employ frames (schemas) by consciously or unconsciously making decisions about what they want to convey. (Entman, 1993)

According to Entman (1993), these conveyed messages are shaped by frames, which manifest through the presence or absence of specific keywords, common expressions, stereotypical representations, sources of information, and formulations. These frames serve to reinforce thematic compilations of facts or judgments. Entman points out that the frames in a message and the communicator's intention in framing can influence the recipients' thought processes and conclusions but are not necessarily determinative. Framing serves the function of selecting and highlighting specific elements and utilizing them to structure an argument regarding problems, their causes, evaluations, and/or solutions. (Entman, 1993)

Additionally, framing must be conceptualized as a process model in the theory of media effects (Scheufele, 1999). Media frames can be written, spoken, graphic, or visual and are used by a communicator to convey issues and events through the media (D'Angelo, 2017). The accessibility of social media allows individual users to disseminate messages to their followers. Consequently, the application of personal frames as Media Frames on social media is possible, as demonstrated in studies on political campaigns (Sahly et al., 2019). By interconnecting personal and institutional social media profiles through features such as sharing, hyperlinks, hashtags, and retweets, these platforms quickly generate interactive communication streams that influence news production as well as political and organizational communication (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). This structure gives actors more influence in framing as they are able to resonate with the audience's frames regarding current issues or debates (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). Politicians have recognized this potential and deliberately use it, for example, in the context of election campaigns, to reach their target audience. Therefore, the framing theory is also important in the context of populist communication on social media.

Populist actors use frames to simplify complex societal issues and problems and amplify their messages (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Scheufele, 1999). One research emphasizes that strong frames either present compelling and persuasive facts or appeal to emotions such as fear or anger (Chong & Druckman, 2007). These frames are characterized by their property to be considered the most convincing arguments for competing viewpoints on a topic in public discussions. A common political strategy is to associate a proposal with a positive idea or value that finds broad agreement in the population (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In this context, the framing theory identifies rhetorical elements of populist rhetoric in political communication that contribute to its success (Busby et al., 2019). Populist frames focus on emphasizing perceived failures of the government and presenting this as a primary cause of societal burdens. The use

of this rhetoric within the framing approach aims to mobilize populists or the target audience against established political institutions and their representatives (Busby et al., 2019). The success of mobilization depends on the presentation of issues and framing (Wright, 2009).

A challenge in the right-wing framing strategy regarding immigration and national security – a central topic in right-wing populist discourse – is to obscure direct attacks on race and ethnic belonging while simultaneously creating the impression of sharing legitimate concerns about these overarching public issues (Wright, 2009). According to the principles of framing theory, specific problem definition, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and recommendations for action (Entman, 1993), Busby et al. (2019) find that assigning blame is one of the essential mechanisms through which populist rhetoric promotes support for populist actors.

Despite extensive research on framing theory, particularly in the context of news reporting, journalism, and political activism (Busby et al., 2019, De Vreese, 2005; Scheufele, 1999), there exists a research gap in analyzing how right-wing populist actors utilize framing strategies on TikTok to disseminate their political messages. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the specific features of right-wing populist framing on TikTok and thus contributes to expanding research on political communication in digital media.

Right-Wing Populism - A Definition

To provide a basic understanding of right-wing populism on TikTok, an important empirical trend leads to the "ideational approach" (Kaltwasser & Hawkins, 2018). Canovan (1981) explains that although there is no single definition of populism, basic elements can be identified in the dichotomy between "people" and "elite" (Freeden, 2003; Mudde, 2004). Further, Albertazzi and McDonnell (2007) describe populism as an ideology that pits the idea of a virtuous and homogeneous people against a group of elites and dangerous "others". These "others" are portrayed as those who deprive or attempt to deprive the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007).

In this context populism can be understood as "thin" ideology whose core can be linked to other ideological concepts (Decker, 2006; Freedon, 1998, 2003; Lewandowsky & Siri, 2023; Mudde, 2004, 2017; Priester, 2011), which is substantially supported by an overarching ideology in order to articulate itself politically (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In doing so, they offer short-term solutions for political leadership according to the supposed will of the people, without being able to present more precise views and instructions on political institutions or socio-economic facets (Mudde, 2017). In addition to its ideological characteristics, populism can also include programmatic elements (Müller, 2017), which allows a more precise examination of the concept of right-wing populism (Wolf, 2017).

Accordingly, the political positioning of right-wing populism lies in the role of providing the morally pure and homogeneous people with a voice against the non-moral parasitic elites (Müller, 2017) or political minorities (Wolf, 2017). The stated goals of right-wing populist

programs are identity building (Geden, 2006) to outline a scenario in which lived political, economic, or cultural values must be protected from the influence of elites or minorities on security deficits, ethnopluralism, and economic or social protectionism (Reuter, 2009; Wolf, 2017). Mofitt (2016) describes right-wing populism as using symbolically mediated performative tactics to influence politics, spanning from government to daily life. Decker & Lewandowsky (2017) make a rhetorical distinction between the reduction of complexity, the disposition towards radical solutions, conspiracy theories and thinking in terms of enemy images, provocation, breaking taboos, emotionalization, and fearmongering, as well as the use of violent metaphors.

The identified dichotomy, the program, and the stylistic means of right-wing populism can also be observed in social media. Social media allows the exchange of political content, the initiation of debates, and the formation of collective spaces of understanding (Lewandowsky & Siri, 2023). The study by Enli and Rosenberg (2018) shows that people under 30 tend to trust politicians more and appear more authentic on social media. They show that the practice of communicating an anti-elitist truth on social media can reach a potential (voter) audience more credibly and effectively (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). González-Aguilar et al. (2023) show that TikTok is used both for the communication of ideological principles and for the promotion of respective leaders. TikTok practices focus on attracting voters and supporters and on presenting proposals, criticizing opponents, and praising leaders (González-Aguilar et al., 2023).

As difficult as the term (right-wing) populism is to grasp, its programmatic influences on the formation of political opinion cannot be denied. It is particularly dangerous because no journalistic quality standards are applied in social media (Rußmann, 2019). Regarding that, this research contributes to the understanding of TikTok in the context of right-wing populist political practices of the AfD.

AfD on TikTok - An Overview

The AfD was founded in February 2013 by a group of university professors and former politicians as an eurosceptic party, focusing on economic (ordo-)liberalism, and the promotion of the free market. In the context of the refugee movement in 2015 and their rise of anti-migrant and anti-Muslim attitudes, the party gained momentum (Celik et al., 2020). In 2017, the AfD was able to enter the German Bundestag as the first right-wing party to enter parliament since 1949 (Haller, 2019). The AfD represents "authoritarian, nationalist, homophobic, anti-feminist and historically revisionist positions" (Celik et al., 2020, p. 150).

As early as 2017, in the course of the federal elections, social media campaigns by political parties found their way into traditional media reporting and recorded high access and interaction figures (Haller, 2019). Two thirds of 14- to 29-year-olds use social media daily (Granow & Scolari, 2022). Acquired by Chinese company ByteDance as Musical.ly in 2017, TikTok has become a global phenomenon (Bösch & Köver, 2021), being popular among its

young target group (Granow & Scolari, 2022). With more than two billion downloads (as of 2021), TikTok is the fastest growing platform in the world (Bösch & Köver, 2021). While 1% of users were German in 2019 (Granow & Scolari, 2022), according to TikTok (2023), 20.9 million monthly active users now come from Germany. The daily usage of the platform has grown from 7% to 19% among 14-29 year olds, an increase of 170% (Granow & Scolari, 2022).

TikTok has become a tool of modern political communication for young people (Seng, 2023). Led by the AfD party in first place among German political accounts (Schipmann et al., 2022), almost all parties are representing themselves on TikTok. Although the AfD's official party account was deleted from TikTok in May 2022, more than a third of the AfD's 80 political members as well as supportive parties like "Junge Alternative" already had their own account (Metzger, 2024; Schipmann et al., 2022). In addition, the account of the AfD parliamentary group @afdfraktionimbundestag has 401,000 followers and 6.8 million likes (as of February 2024). This makes the AfD not only the party that uses TikTok the most, but also the most popular compared to other German parties, with the most effective social media communication (Metzger, 2024). On average, AfD videos are viewed three times as often as videos from all other German parties combined (Metzger, 2024). Political and communications consultant J. Hillje credits the AfD's TikTok reach for its success with young voters (Metzger, 2024).

The AfD has been at the center of political, media, and academic discourse for more than a decade (Celik et al., 2020). Wodak (2015) attributes the success of right-wing populist parties to the effective use of media strategies, including the comprehensive use of different and new media channels. Serrano et al.'s (2019) findings show that the AfD's online popularity is superior to other political parties in Germany by focusing on an anti-immigration agenda and avoiding discussion of its economic plans (Serrano et al., 2019). The study by Schelter et al. (2016) concludes that the intensive use of social media is a key success factor for the AfD. Haller's (2019) results show that the AfD party page was able to achieve the highest reach of posts per day in terms of likes, shares, and engagements, concluding that the higher share of posts indicate a stronger online mobilization of supporters.

From the group of populist parties, the AfD achieved the farthest-reaching posts, which were also commented on extensively and homogeneously by users (Degen & Olgemöller, 2023). Degen & Olgemöller (2023) concluded that parties such as the AfD tend to publish emotionalizing and complexity-reducing posts using colloquial language and incomplete and suggestive statements. Bösch (2023) concluded that, unlike other parties, the AfD does not attempt to adapt to the TikTok platform. Instead of entertainment, the AfD pursues its narrative of "truth", "courage", and "freedom" (Bösch, 2023). Furthermore, it disguises its connection to the political system and identifies with the group of "pure people" of TikTok users, who are addressed as friends (Bösch, 2023).

Methodology

In order to investigate how the AfD appeals to younger demographics with its messages on TikTok, qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018) was carried out on the basis of framing theory. The specific content, rhetorical devices and platform adaptations are examined. To effectively analyze text and video content, the content analysis relies on a category system developed through deductive and inductive techniques.

Research questions

The social relevance of this research is evident, as is the dearth of scientific investigation into right-wing populist communication by the AfD on TikTok. Framing theory offers a lens through which to examine communication phenomena, such as the above-mentioned right-wing populist communication of the AfD on TikTok. Actors utilize populist frames to simplify complex social issues and reinforce their messages (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Scheufele, 1999). The following research leading question (RLQ) was derived from the theoretical part of this thesis to review and meaningfully supplement the previous findings on framing, populism and AfD communication on TikTok.

RLQ: To what extent does the AfD use TikTok as part of its communication to win over young voters?

To link the theoretical approaches of framing, populism and right-wing populism mentioned above, three further research questions are derived. Using framing theory, it is possible to examine how the AfD presents these themes within the frames on TikTok and what specific content it emphasizes.

RQ1: What specific content and topics does the AfD choose on TikTok to communicate right-wing populist messages?

RQ2: What linguistic means does the AfD use to communicate right-wing populist issues?

RQ3: To what extent does the AfD on TikTok adapt current rules of the platform for the spreading of right-wing populist messages?

Choice of method

Given the paucity of research on right-wing populist parties, particularly the AfD on TikTok (Bösch, 2023), and the outlined research interest, we selected qualitative content analysis for its exploratory qualities. We employed a content-structuring qualitative content analysis as described by Kuckartz (2018), which accommodates both text and video materials effectively (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019). The content framing analysis employs both deductive and inductive techniques to develop a robust category system for investigating specific communicative

frames, directly addressing the research questions (Oswald, 2022). The methodology was further informed by the framework of Rädiker and Kuckartz (2019).

Analysis unit

The research method involved identifying a population of public TikTok videos from AfD party and member accounts that were relevant from November 30, 2022 to November 30, 2023 based on the research questions (Brosius et al., 2016). The concentration principle guided the sample selection, which focused on accounts with significant reach and interaction, as indicated by follower counts and likes (Heidig & Dobbelstein, 2021). The sample included two party accounts and four member of parliament accounts, with follower counts ranging from approximately 45,000 to 320,000 and like counts ranging from 810,000 to 5.6 million (Table 1).

Table 1

Sample

Name	Background	Follower	Likes
@afdfraktionimbundes-tag	Official account parliamentary group	313.000	5,2 million
@mutzurwahrheit90	Ulrich Siegmund, Chairman of the AfD parliamentary group Saxony-Anhalt	318.800	3,8 million
@sichertdeutschland	Martin Sichert, Health policy spokesman	147.200	2,6 million
@afdsachsen	Official account AfD parliamentary group Saxony	159.600	2.3 million
@alice_weidel_afd	Alice Elisabeth Weidel, Chairwoman AfD Parliamentary Group	243.900	1,4 million
@brandner_afd	Stefan Günther Brandner, Deputy Chairman of the AfD parliamentary group	44.500	796.800

(as of 11/24/23)

A total of 120 videos were analyzed, comprising the 20 most viewed videos from each account. These videos encompassed various phases of the election campaign and seasonal events. All videos were downloaded on December 14, 2023, to ensure consistency in data.

Data analysis

The main categories for analysis were developed deductively from prior research and theory (Baur & Blasius, 2014) and tailored to answer specific research questions. During the initial coding phase, 13 main categories were applied, resulting in 950 coded segments (Table 2). Subsequently, these categories were expanded through an inductive review of the coded segments (Kuckartz, 2018). A second coding run refined these categories further. Throughout the coding process, several reliability tests were conducted to ensure the accuracy of the coding. This rigorous process resulted in a differentiated category system with 2,159 coded segments and 145 sub-categories by the end of the study.

Table 2*Main Codes*

Research Question	Main Codes
RQ1	Security Anti-establishment attitude Identity politics
RQ2	Provocation and breaking taboos Style element conspiracy Emotionalization and scaremongering Complexity reduction & logic errors Disposition towards radical solutions
RQ3	Interactive methodical elements Audiovisual methodological elements Text technology Video technology Audio technology

Results

The following empirical section examines how the AfD disseminates right-wing populist messages on TikTok. The study addresses three research questions: the specific content and topics the AfD selects, the populist stylistic devices it employs, and the extent to which it adapts to TikTok's platform rules. By examining these areas, the analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the AfD's communication strategies and their impact on the platform's young audience. This section highlights the role of TikTok in the political landscape and the tactics used by the AfD to reach and influence young voters.

RQ1

To answer the first research question “*What specific content and topics does the AfD choose on TikTok to communicate right-wing populist messages?*”, three main categories, *Security*, *Identity Politics* and *Anti-Establishment Stance*, were formed deductively.

Security as a “virulent general social issue” (Hall, 1986, p. 101) implies the plight of the “common people” (Hartleb, 2005 [translated]) and a restoration of social order. This distress refers on the one hand to fears of the population regarding crime (Hartleb, 2005), and on the other hand to fears that arise with regard to financial security. The category was inductively broken down into four subcategories in the process: *Danger From Foreign Policy*, *Danger From Migration*, *Inviolability Of The Individual* and *Financial Insecurity*. The subcategory *Danger From Foreign Policy* includes all statements in which politicians accuse the German government of putting Germany at risk of war, e.g. by getting involved in international affairs or provoking an escalation. The subcategory *Danger From Migration* can be illustrated using the example of the AfD Saxony TikTok account: “Now the people see the results [...] of migration.

Everyone sees the increasing loss of our security, our prosperity, our identity, the loss of our homeland.” (afdsachsen 09/25/23 [translated]). The subcategory *Inviolability Of The Individual* deals with the interference in personal life or the deprivation of freedom by politics and call for its preservation:

[...] a politics that has lost all measure and purpose is interfering in our personal lives, presuming to control attitudes and ostracize critics, encroaching on the property of citizens and heirs, engaging in the creeping expropriation and impoverishment of the middle class and threatening the foundations of our economic and social well-being. (alice_weidel_afd 12/31/22 [translated])

The main category *Identity Politics* encompasses issues like immigration, as well as family and gender policy issues (Decker, 2014). It is postulated that conservative social norms should be upheld (Lewandowsky et al., 2016) to protect the national identity and that the German language should be protected for example from gender politics (Rosenfelder, 2017). The norms are expressed in the rejection of equal rights for men and women as well as sexual minorities and discrimination against homosexuals (Lewandowsky et al., 2016). The main category is broken down into the four subcategories *Racist Conviction*, *Speaking Out Against Extremism*, *Nationalism* and *Anti LGBTQ, Gender & Feminism*. Under the subcategory *Racist Conviction* the AfD alleges migrants to be non-integratable and to live contrary to a liberal society. It refers to the “Bürgergeld” (citizen’s allowance) as migrant money and calls for an end to monetary benefits for refugees and foreigners. Migrants are also associated with an increased crime burden, which manifests itself in the form of rape, clan crime and murders. Under the subcategory *Speaking Out Against Extremism*, the AfD positions itself against Anti-Semitism, right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, and Islamism while accusing the German government of siding with Islamists and right-wing extremists.

The main category *Anti-Establishment Stance* includes all statements that are based on the belief that the political elites are acting against the interests of the people (Lewandowsky, 2022). The concept of the people is understood as a vague “we” and stands representative for all who are disadvantaged by the group of power holders (Lewandowsky et al., 2016; Lewandowsky, 2022). The main category is broken down into nine sub-categories: *Impoverishment & Loss of Prosperity*, *Wasting Public Funds*, *Manipulation by the Media*, *Disregard for Civic Interests*, *Government Corruption*, *Government Incompetence*, *Government Fraud & Deception*, *Government Alarmism* and *Creating a Sense of Unity*. Under the subcategory *Impoverishment & Loss of Prosperity*, the AfD accuses the government of seizing private property and citizens' pensions and pursuing a widespread impoverishment and expropriation program.

To answer the research question “*What specific content and topics does the AfD choose on TikTok to communicate right-wing populist messages?*”, it can be stated that AfD

spread right-wing populist messages on TikTok to establish certain narratives. The AfD addresses various issues on TikTok to construct the narrative of endangered security in Germany. Starting from four major danger poles - migration, the lack of protection of inviolability, foreign policy and financial insecurity - the party uses a wide range of threats to outline a social emergency. Particularly by addressing financial hardships, the party resonates with the young target audience on TikTok. Moreover, it deliberately stokes fears of existence and the future among the young generation by highlighting threats in the form of crime, loss of freedom and identity, or war in Germany.

The AfD presents itself as a combative force for the protection of physical, mental, and financial security. By purportedly exposing the corrupt, incompetent, and non-citizen-focused practices of the federal government, a narrative is created in which the government drives the citizens into crisis. A sense of community is created by calling for resistance against the government. It positions itself as a party close to the people and outlines a positive future with the AfD at the head of the government. The content suggests that the AfD is strategically using TikTok as a platform to shake the trust in established institutions and strengthen its own credibility. By channeling frustration and dissatisfaction, it offers the young target group on TikTok a simple alternative.

The AfD portrays migrants next to the government as the second pillar of the crisis. They are described as a threat and the population, especially the young target group, as worthy of protection. The sense of protection is strengthened by emphasizing the preservation of German nationality. The party positions itself as the guardian of traditional values by speaking out against gender politics, feminism, and LGBTQ rights. The fact that the AfD also speaks out against Anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism suggests that it wants to convey a humane standpoint. This return to traditional values could give the young demographic, which faces constant change, a sense of stability. Considering the outlined analysis, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

H1: *The AfD outlines emergencies on TikTok that present the government and migrants as threats to position itself as a protective force.*

RQ2

The second research question "*What populist stylistic devices does the AfD use on TikTok to communicate its themes?*" focuses on the linguistic and substantive stylistic devices that the AfD uses in its communication on TikTok. To answer RQ2, five main categories were developed to categorize the populist stylistic devices: *Provocation and Taboo Breaking*, *Conspiracy Style Elements*, *Emotionalization and Fear Mongering*, *Complexity Reduction and Logical Fallacies*, and *Disposition to Radical Solutions*. In the process of analysis, the main categories were inductively expanded to 30 subcategories. In total, 744 segments were coded.

The first main category, *Provocation and Taboo Breaking*, includes deliberate taboo breaking and provocation in line with the ideological core of populism (Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). By making drastic statements, AfD politicians attract attention from the public (Bergsdorf, 2000). It is not necessarily about representing popular opinions but rather about distinguishing oneself from the elite and disregarding political correctness (Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). In the inductive differentiation, seven subcategories emerged: *Insult & Defamation*, *Argumentative Stylistic Devices*, *Provocation through Exaggeration*, *Provocation through Irony/Sarcasm*, *Provocation through Questions*, *Provocation through Superiority* and *Relativization*.

The second main category, *Conspiracy Style Elements*, includes linguistic and thematic elements found in conspiracy theories and the construction of scapegoats. Douglas et al. (2019) state that conspiracy theories aim to gain political and economic power, violate rights, and alter institutions. Radical versions create a scapegoat, attributing societal issues to specific groups and portraying the party and its supporters as victims (Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). Through differentiation, five subcategories emerged: *Conspiratorial Vocabulary*, *Construction of Scapegoats*, *Questioning Sovereignty*, *Allusion to Secret Knowledge*, *Doom Scenarios*. For example, a video by afd_sachsen states: "The only thing that is increasing. The number of illegal immigrants, those not deported, are skyrocketing. Here, too, it's stone-cold voter fraud. Most Germans don't want any of this. Current polls show that." (afd_sachsen 06/02/23 [translated]).

The category *Emotionalization and Fear Mongering* reflects Decker and Lewandowsky's (2017) definition, where populist actors use emotional language to express a range of positive and negative emotions, with a significant emphasis on fear to amplify insecurities and anxieties (Ernst et al., 2019; Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). The seven subcategories describe the use of emotional and fear-inducing stylistic devices: *Subjective Assessment*, *Building Scapegoats*, *Exaggeration*, *Sense of Community*, *Moral Adjectives*, *Portrayal of Threat Scenarios*, *Fear Mongering through Generalization*.

The main category *Complexity Reduction & Logical Fallacies* refers to a fundamental element of populist rhetoric, the use of common-sense arguments. In this sense, they serve as a substitute for logical and reliable views, formulating resentments and appeals to common sense that simplify complex issues by reducing complexity (Wolf, 2017). During differentiation, six subcategories were developed: *Irrational Causality*, *Friend-Enemy Dichotomy*, *Suggesting Situations*, *Extremism*, *Denial/Doubt of Scientific Findings* and *Simplified Solutions*. These subcategories highlight how the AfD deliberately reduces complex content and thereby substantiates seemingly existing situations without the necessary basis.

The main category *Disposition to Radical Solutions* was developed due to the tendency of populist communication to reject small steps and instead strive for simple solutions (Decker

& Lewandowsky, 2017). In the process of analysis, the main category was expanded by five subcategories; *Call for Unconventional Measures*, *AfD as the Only Solution*, *Claim of the Absolute of One Solution*, *Urgency Rhetoric*, *Contempt/Rejection of Compromises*. A clear illustration of the AfD's portrayal of itself as a singular, viable solution is provided by the following quote: "We want nobody to have to pay for something they don't want to see. There is only liberation with the AfD, [...] with the CDU [Christian Democratic Union of Germany], it will always continue like this." (mutzurwahrheit90, 09/02/2023[translated]).

The analysis shows that the AfD employs provocative communication. This is evident in the party's disregard for political etiquette, use of aggressive and insulting language, exaggeration, direct verbal attacks on individuals and accusations, as well as irony and sarcasm. The results demonstrate how the AfD attempts to differentiate itself from the political elite and attract attention through various communicative strategies, including polemics, sarcasm, and the relativization of important issues. This serves to discredit political opponents and simplify complex societal problems by portraying certain groups or ideas as the alleged cause of grievances. The party employs populist rhetoric to simplify political issues through logical fallacies and complexity reduction, which undermines the rational and scientific basis of political discussions and promotes the spread of its own ideologies. The interpretation of the results provides insight into the potential communication strategy of the AfD on TikTok. The AfD deliberately employs populist stylistic devices to differentiate itself from established political actors and effectively frame its themes. It is evident that the communicated solutions are either formulated in a radical manner or treated in a superficial manner. Based on these observations, it can be postulated that the AfD on TikTok pursues a communication strategy aimed at disseminating simple messages to promote its political agenda and appeal to potential followers. The identification and categorization of stylistic elements in connection with conspiracy theories on TikTok indicates that AfD politicians utilize this platform to disseminate specific narratives and create an atmosphere of mistrust and threat. In consideration of the aforementioned results and considerations, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H2: *The AfD utilizes populist and conspiratorial stylistic devices on TikTok to present radical solutions in a simplified manner.*

RQ3

To answer the third research question "*To what extent does the AfD on TikTok adapt current platform rules for the dissemination of right-wing populist messages?*", five main categories were formed deductively.

The main category *Interactive Methodological Elements* describes which interactive methods the AfD uses strategically in its right-wing populist communication to stimulate potential recipient interaction. TikTok offers functions such as duet or stitch, hashtag challenges, polls, or surveys (TikTok, 2023). Based on the observations, it can be concluded that the AfD

specifically uses interactive elements in its videos and aims to present complex narratives in easily consumable videos by incorporating other types of media. Articles and statistics simplify the communication of their messages. It is particularly noticeable that the AfD makes little to no use of TikTok's platform-specific interactive functions.

Further, the main category *AudioVisual Methodological Elements* describes the various audio-visual elements used by the AfD on TikTok to strategically communicate their right-wing populist messages. These audio and visual elements can be memes, gifs, targeted branding such as logos and colors, as well as environment and context, loops or music, and sounds (TikTok, 2023). The AfD uses audio-visual methodical elements in its TikTok communication. Depending on the accounts observed, TikTok branding elements such as colors, logos, or account brands can be partially localized. The AfD's videos can often be assigned to the parliament environment. The AfD recycles its speeches from the Bundestag and party conferences by converting them into TikTok videos. This targeted use of parliamentary speeches could be due to the fact that the AfD is trying to create the feeling of being actively involved or of being an active participant in the political discourse against the elite.

Focusing on textual elements, the main category *Text Technology* covers platform-specific technical options for incorporating text elements, as well as those generated by external software and embedded within videos. Additionally, it encompasses elements such as hashtags, stickers, emojis, and video captions (TikTok, 2023). The AfD videos contain text modules that boldly summarize the content of the video. Moreover, the AfD uses subtitles on TikTok. This provides that the spoken content is accessible to a wider audience. Regarding that, the AfD largely uses text techniques to underline and emphasize its statements.

Additionally, the main category *Video Technique* covers both external software solutions used before uploading and video editing using TikTok's editing features, explaining the choice and application of video techniques. The primary purpose of TikTok's video technology is the production and distribution of imaginative, brief, and immersive video content. It can be observed, that the AfD makes an effort to adapt its messaging to fit the characteristics of the platform both technically and content-wise. The AfD adapts platform-specific rules regarding video technology, whereas breaks with the rules, e.g. by using the horizontal format.

TikTok users can use the original sound of the video or add the platform's music offering, sound effects, audio clips, or their own song snippets (TikTok, 2023). The main category *Audio Technique* describes the different audio techniques used. Regarding that, it can be concluded that the AfD prefers to use the original audio and neglects the use of separate audio elements. By using the original audio, there is no connection to the adaptation of existing audio trends on TikTok. This suggests that the focus is more on the content of the core message and less on the entertainment factor. The accounts used for the analysis differ in terms of their

adaptation to the rules of the TikTok platform. This in turn leads to different degrees of professionalization of the account owners.

Based on the results and considerations presented, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H3: The AfD selectively adapts its TikTok communication to the platform's rules, whereby it deliberately ignores trends and interactive functions to maintain recognition and increase the credibility of its messages through intimacy with its recipients.

Limitations

In conclusion, it is necessary to acknowledge potential limitations in the methodological approach. The critique notes methodological limitations due to TikTok's non-transparent algorithms, which affect content visibility and analysis, particularly concerning the AfD's impact on younger audiences. This limitation makes it challenging to draw clear conclusions about the targeting of young (potential) voters. Additionally, the algorithms are subject to change, potentially affecting the consistency of data collection and analysis over time. Qualitative content analysis categorizes content based on inherent characteristics but is inherently subjective as categories are defined by researchers, influenced by their biases. Through the process of self-reflection and discourse within the research group, personal biases were identified and subsequently addressed. The study also faces potential sampling bias, as the selected TikTok content may not represent the entire user base or the full range of AfD activities. Temporal limitations, stemming from data collection within a specific timeframe, further constrain the generalizability of findings. In addition to the aforementioned analysis, the evaluation of results is susceptible to overinterpretation and misinterpretation due to a lack of expertise. To mitigate this, the research group engaged in continuous discussion of the results and alternation of research questions within the group. Nevertheless, quality was enhanced through the use of consensual coding, the involvement of multiple coders, and the provision of clear documentation. Inter-coder reliability was measured to ensure consistency.

In conclusion, it is only possible to make assumptions, and no representative statements can be made due to the selected method. The findings are specific to the sample and methodological constraints, limiting their generalizability to broader contexts or populations.

Conclusion

This research project examined the right-wing populist communication of the party AfD on the social media platform TikTok. The first research question addressed the content and topics of the AfD's political communication. The topics of security, anti-establishment attitudes,

and identity politics, which are common for right-wing populist parties, were assessed. In the area of security, topics such as financial security, crime, war, and restrictions on freedom were identified. The party establishes a general feeling of insecurity by trying to raise existential and future fears. Of particular importance for the AfD's communication on TikTok is its anti-establishment attitude. It claims, among other statements, that the government is encroaching on the private property and pension entitlements of citizens and taxpayers and is pursuing a comprehensive program of national impoverishment and expropriation. As part of right-wing populist identity politics, the AfD shares its racist convictions. The party communicatively advocates the closing of borders and a stricter deportation policy. The enemy is clear: migrants. They are accused of increased criminality, which would manifest itself in the form of rape, clan crime and murders.

Using framing theory, it is possible to examine how the AfD presents these topics within the frames of TikTok, which leads to the second research question. The AfD uses various populist stylistic elements. It relies on provocation, conspiracy rhetoric, emotionalization, and fear-mongering. The creation of an enemy image is reinforced by stylistic means such as emphasizing the dichotomy of 'us versus them', accusations, and the particularly negative highlighting of marginalized groups. The AfD simplifies complex issues and works with logical errors and radical solutions.

The research shows that the audiovisual strategy used by AfD politicians contradicts what TikTok recommends. What is particularly noticeable is the stringent integration of branding in the form of colors, logos, and visual identity features. In this way, the AfD creates a recognition effect. In terms of audiovisual and technical aspects, the AfD accounts indicate a varying degree of professionalization. The analysis of 120 videos revealed that the AfD prioritizes core message content over entertainment. The party rarely uses TikTok's interactive functions, trends, or background music, instead opting for original sound and minimal entertaining elements.

Based on the results presented, the research question "*To what extent does the AfD use TikTok in its communication to attract young voters?*" can be answered as follows: The party specifically chooses content to appeal to young people directly. They raise concerns about public safety, such as financial stability, fighting crime, the consequences of war, and restrictions on personal freedoms. These issues are designed to raise existential fears and create a climate of insecurity, which the AfD uses as a political opportunity to spread its political agenda. It adopts an anti-establishment attitude aimed at building mistrust of the established system and presenting the AfD as an ideal solution. It also pursues racist identity politics. The contrast between the AfD's content and TikTok's recommendation means that it is not perceived as native. This in turn can mean that the AfD stands out in comparison to other

communicators on the platform. In summary, the research shows that TikTok plays a crucial role in reaching potential voters.

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