

Public Institutions Meet TikTok: Communication Strategies and the Rise of Govtainment

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Submitted: 29 March 2025 **Accepted:** 4 September 2025 **Published:** 16 October 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service” edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496>

Abstract

This study explores how the communication strategies of public institutions have been redefined by digital platforms, with a particular focus on TikTok. Specifically, it examines the extent to which elements of “govtainment”—the “spectacularisation” of government communication through digital media—are present in the communication strategies of public institutions. We analysed how the communication strategies of two Romanian ministries on TikTok are shaped by the platform’s specific characteristics, the impact of these adaptations on their audiences, and what elements of “govtainment” can be identified within their content. We employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis of TikTok publications by Romania’s Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Internal Affairs—the only two ministries with a consistent presence on the platform. The findings indicate that both ministries adapt their communication strategies to align with TikTok’s features, incorporating elements that enhance virality, such as tone, viral trends and sounds, content formats, speech acts, and humanisation. Our analysis confirms the presence of govtainment elements in the communication strategies employed by these ministries. However, when correlating spectacularisation elements such as trend participation, tone, and speech acts with audience engagement, we found that their presence does not necessarily result in the highest engagement rates. Nevertheless, the overall figures suggest that both institutions have managed to gain significant engagement on their TikTok accounts.

Keywords

communication strategies; government communication; govtainment; public communication; spectacularisation; TikTok

1. Introduction

TikTok is a video-sharing social media application, launched on the international market in 2017 by a Beijing-based tech company, ByteDance (Werner, 2025). After 2020, it became one of the most successful applications ever launched (AppFigures, 2020). With more than 1.59 billion active users worldwide in January 2025 (Kemp, 2025b), TikTok is gaining significant traction also in Romania, with 8.51 million users above 18 years of age, approaching Facebook's figure of 9.9 million (Kemp, 2025a). The application is particularly popular among Millennial and Gen Z users worldwide: Indeed, the majority of content creators on TikTok are, at a global level, between 18 and 24 years old (Ceci, 2025).

Since 2023, TikTok has faced partial bans on institutional and governmental devices in multiple countries. European institutions have prohibited staff from using the Chinese application, citing potential cybersecurity risks (Bertuzzi, 2023). Similarly, the United States and Canada implemented restrictions on TikTok for government-issued mobile devices amid growing concerns regarding data privacy and cybersecurity ("TikTok banned on U.S. government devices," 2023). Despite its controversial status, TikTok has become an important channel for governments to reach younger citizens who are often less engaged with traditional political communication. This study examines how governments use TikTok, contributing to debates on digital governance and strategic communication by showing how public institutions adapt their messaging to new media environments and engage audiences in innovative ways.

In Romania, TikTok enjoys significant popularity, ranking as the third most used social media app there (Kemp, 2025a). However, since December 2024, it has been at the centre of a major controversy following a decision by Romania's Constitutional Court to annul the results of the first round of the presidential election. This ruling was based on allegations that one of the candidates had unfairly benefited from a TikTok campaign allegedly orchestrated by Moscow (Ross et al., 2024).

As we intend to analyse TikTok as a government communication channel, it is first important to understand its popularity. Wang and Guo (2023) and Taylor and Chen (2024) consider that TikTok's success can be explained through its algorithm. Compared with other social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram where users primarily receive content from their own network, on TikTok one's network and networking are less important, with the focus being instead on the "For You" feed which is personalized by its algorithm (Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Darvin, 2022; Taylor & Chen, 2024). As a platform, TikTok enables users to post short-form videos—originally limited to 15 or 60 seconds and extended to up to 10 minutes in recent updates. According to the platform itself (TikTok, 2025), its mission is "to inspire creativity and bring joy." TikTok videos encompass a wide range of content, including dance, lip-syncing, comedy skits, and educational tutorials. The platform encourages user creativity by employing filters, stickers, voiceovers, sound effects, and background music (Werner, 2025). Its design incorporates features that foster participatory culture through remixability; features such as "duet" and "stitch" allow users to directly interact with and respond to existing content. TikTok's interface design shapes the user experience and contributes to one's addiction to the platform (Cuşnir, 2025). Moreover, TikTok promotes trends and viral practices (Abidin, 2020) and encourages imitation and replication (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

The impact of social media—and TikTok in particular—on political communication has already been investigated by researchers, with an emphasis on "politainment" strategies involving personalisation and

spectacularisation (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023; Battista, 2023; Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023; Cervi et al., 2021, 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). The rise of the “influencer politician” has also been analysed (Cervi, 2023; Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019; Starita & Trillò, 2021). In contrast, the use of TikTok in government communication has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Social media, in general, has been studied as a tool enabling governments to engage with citizens and involve them in governance processes (Bertot, 2019; Hand & Ching, 2011; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2016; Picazo-Vela et al., 2016), as well as for disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic (Basch et al., 2021; Che & Kim, 2024; Cuşnir & Nicola, 2023; Li et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). However, there has been limited interest in understanding how TikTok’s features and the need for public administrations to engage with younger audiences have shaped government communication. Our research seeks to address this gap by examining how the communication strategies of two Romanian ministries have adapted to TikTok—and what impact they have achieved, in trying to emphasise the “govtainment” dimension of their respective strategies.

2. Literature Review

According to Nieland (2008), “politainment” refers to the blending of politics and entertainment into a new type of political communication and may be seen as resulting from an increasing mediatisation and professionalisation of politics that characterise modern democracies. Although initially the concept referred to the ways governments, political parties, and politicians adapted to the media logic, especially television, later the concept was extended to cover the impact of digital media on political communication. Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. (2023, p. 163) define politainment as “the phenomenon in which political information is trivialised by the hybrid narratives in which it is included and its anecdotal tone, with the aim of reaching an audience that seeks entertainment rather than information” and is used especially in the digital sphere to expand one’s audience.

Until now, researchers have been interested in how political parties and leaders communicate on TikTok and the impact this has, especially on the personalisation of communication and the use of TikTok features. Cervi et al. (2023) examined the use of TikTok in the last presidential elections in Peru as a unilateral tool for promotion, while Zamora-Medina et al. (2023) discussed TikTok’s contribution to a political personalisation approach. These analysis show the uneven use of TikTok in political communication. The idea of the non-adaptation of political communication to TikTok is emphasised by the comparative study carried out by Zamora-Medina et al. (2023), who find that political actors are not exploiting the full potential of TikTok’s features and continue broadcasting their messages largely using traditional communication practices. González-Aguilar et al. (2023) examined how right-wing populist parties and politicians use TikTok, also from a politainment approach, emphasising the spectacularisation of communication. In this case, humourists and entertaining videos reached higher engagement and contributed to the popularity of populist right-of-centre issues. The effectiveness of using TikTok is also emphasised by Zamora-Medina (2023) when analysing politainment strategies, “pop-politics,” and visual storytelling on the accounts of Spanish political parties.

In the framework of politainment, recent studies have emphasised the adoption of influencer marketing techniques in political communication and the rise of the “influencer-politician” (Cervi, 2023). These actors blend political messages with influencer-style marketing strategies such as personal branding, performative aesthetics, and the content styles of internet celebrities, particularly on TikTok. Cervi (2023), Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro (2019), and Starita and Trillò (2021) analysed the techniques of “celebrity politicians” on

social media in different national contexts. Other studies explored how TikTok's features used for political communication blur the boundaries between campaigning and entertainment (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023; Battista, 2023; Cervi et al., 2021) or how content visibility can be amplified through the platform's algorithm (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020).

Government communication strategies help uphold institutional legitimacy and citizen trust, given that there is constant pressure for public organisations to operate in transparency (Graber, 2002) and to ensure democratic accountability (Canel & Sanders, 2011). Government communication has, admittedly, some specific limitations when compared to private organisations: Namely, it operates under constraints such as public records law and confidentiality requirements (Liu & Horsley, 2007), and is shaped by bureaucratic planning schedules and hierarchical decision-making, with its main goal being to inform and serve the public good.

As the popularity of social media has changed the way public institutions communicate with their public, governments have incorporated social media into their communication strategies to engage with citizens and stakeholders (Cmeciu & Cmeciu, 2014; Graham, 2014; Mergel, 2012, 2013). Since its emergence, social media has been perceived as a tool to encourage citizen engagement and to involve them in decisions concerning governance (Hand & Ching, 2011; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2016), to disseminate policies (Picazo-Vela et al., 2016), inform the public, and, in general, promote government transparency (Bertot, 2019). Studies show that while these platforms offer dialogic potential, many governments underutilise them for conducting genuine two-way communication, focusing instead on traditional broadcast methods (Sáez Martín et al., 2015; Wukich & Mergel, 2015).

For all the interest in the way TikTok has reshaped political parties and their leaders' communication, there is much less research on government communication on TikTok and the impact on the way such official bodies produce content. Existing research has primarily explored TikTok's role in government communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Basch et al., 2021; Che & Kim, 2024; Li et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Morejón-Llamas et al. (2024) highlighted that, after the pandemic, public institutions increasingly adopted TikTok to engage younger audiences through dynamic and flexible communication formats. Alonso-López et al. (2024, p. 34) emphasised that TikTok has acquired great relevance among young people, a development which has led institutions, political parties, and brands to maintain an active presence on the platform as it is one of young people main sources of information. This study also showed, however, that Spain's government ministries maintain a low publication frequency on TikTok, and there is a lack of common strategy "to maximize performance on this social network" (Alonso-López et al., 2024, p. 34). In addition, despite being adapted to the technical specificities of the platform (effects, brevity, language, etc.), the content published by these ministries is not concerned with generating participation or engagement (Alonso-López et al., 2024, p. 44).

Yang's (2022) analysis of seven Chinese governmental TikTok accounts found that their performance was quite different from each other and suggested some general principles to improve it. Moreover, Ratnastuti et al. (2023, p. 112) revealed how the Indonesian Ministry of Finance adapts to the TikTok style "so that the delivery of formal public information becomes lighter and more interesting."

While substantial research has examined how TikTok has reshaped political communication, there is a noticeable lack of scholarly attention on how government institutions have adapted their communication

practices to the platform's unique features. Even less is known about how audiences perceive and engage with this type of public sector content. This dual gap—in both institutional production and audience reception studies—underscores the need to explore how TikTok is transforming public communication strategies. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the transformation of government communication through the features available on TikTok, as analysed through the lens of politainment and influencer-politician concepts from the sphere of political communication.

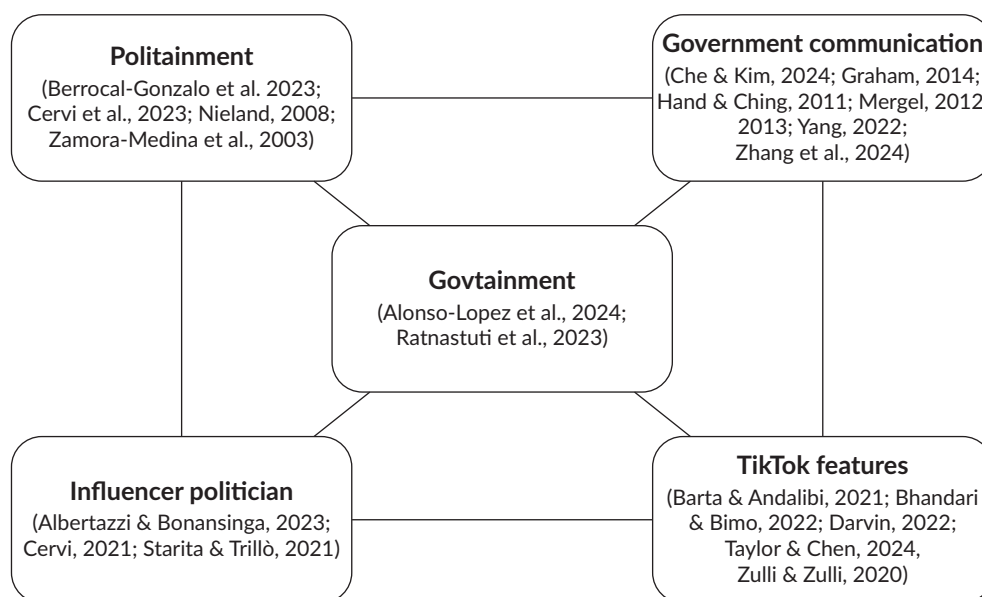


Figure 1. Theoretical framework diagram.

Given the increase in the number of users and the role that social networks currently play in shaping public opinion, it is therefore pertinent to analyse public institutions' communication strategies on TikTok and the interaction between public administrations and citizens on this network. We intend to bridge this gap and explore if the communication strategy adopted by Romanian ministries on TikTok is impacted by the platform's specific nature, what resulted in terms of engagement, and, finally, if we can identify elements of govtainment in this communication strategy. Our research questions are as follows:

RQ1: To what extent can we identify elements of “humanisation” in the communication strategy of the Romanian Ministry of Defence and the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs on TikTok?

RQ2: To what extent can we identify elements of spectacularisation in the communication strategy of the Romanian Ministry of Defence and the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs on TikTok?

RQ3: What is the impact of these elements of humanisation and spectacularisation on the engagement of the audience on these two accounts?

3. Methodology

Our research employs quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Macnamara, 2018) of TikTok publications by the two Romanian ministries concerned: the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of

Internal Affairs, the only two ministries that maintain a consistent presence on TikTok. Although three other Romanian ministries have a temporary, non-consistent presence on TikTok, we did not include them in our analysis as their consistency or impact could not compare with the two selected (see Table 1). None of the other 11 Romanian ministries had a presence on TikTok at the time the data were collected.

Table 1. List of Romanian ministries and their TikTok presence in February 2025.

Ministry	TikTok account status	Number of followers
Ministry of Internal Affairs	Active (verified)	161k
Ministry of Defence	Inactive (verified)	452k
Ministry of Education and Research	Inactive (unverified)	12k
Ministry of Culture	Active (verified)	343
Ministry of Investments and European Projects	Active (unverified)	1k

We used the Apify TikTok Extractor to scrape all the publications on the two accounts from their creation up to 28 February 2025 (the date on which the data scraping was performed retrospectively). For the Romanian Ministry of Defence (@armataromaniei), the videos scraped were posted from 4 August 2019 to 1 June 2023 (there has been no activity on the account since that date). For the Ministry of Internal Affairs (@mai.gov), videos were posted between 28 May 2022 and 8 February 2025. The total amount of TikTok videos, commonly known as “TikToks,” analysed from the Romanian Ministry of Defence account was 100 ($n = 100$), and from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 81 ($n = 81$). Both accounts are verified.

Once the data scraping was completed, the number of followers of the Ministry of Defence amounted to 452k followers and 6.7 million likes for all the TikToks posted. The Ministry of Internal Affairs’ number of followers amounted to 161k followers and 1.8 million likes for their videos.

Our coding analysis is inspired by models provided by Cervi et al. (2021), Cervi et al. (2023), and Zamora-Medina et al. (2023), all of which are adapted for governmental communication. Key variables analysed include the degree of humanisation, the degree of spectacularisation, and the degree of viralisation, as described next.

In order to evaluate the degree of humanisation in communication (similar to personalisation, as a persuasive resource on TikTok, according to Zamora-Medina et al., 2023), we analysed the character(s) featured in the TikTok videos. This trait of humanisation can be seen as the equivalent of personalisation in the field of political communication, but adapted to the context of institutional communication. In this case, it is important to determine if the organisations concerned choose to adopt a more personal and relatable presence on social media, or whether they prefer to maintain a more distant and impersonal representation of themselves. Our objective was to determine whether the two institutions favoured a collective or impersonal representation—such as groups of people without individual distinction or videos devoid of human presence—or, conversely, whether themes related to the army and interior affairs were personalised through the presence of specific, identifiable characters.

In order to evaluate the degree of spectacularisation, we analysed the use of TikTok trends, tone, theme, format, sound, and captions. These categories aim to assess the extent of the politainment dimension, examining how one’s public communication strategy is shaped by the necessity to be engaging and entertaining.

To evaluate the degree of viralisation, we analysed the use of hashtags with the aim of determining whether the institutions leveraged this tool to enhance content reach. Additionally, we examined the number of comments, views, and likes to assess the impact of the posted content and correlate it with other variables. Furthermore, we categorised speech acts in the video text as assertive, commissive, directive, expressive, or declarative (Allan, 1997; Searle, 1979) to identify whether the two ministries favoured specific modes of address to engage users effectively. The post with the highest number of views and likes on each account was analysed from an interpretative perspective linking the theme with other elements in the spectacularisation category to understand the impact produced.

Numbers related to views, comments, and likes, as well as the presence of hashtags and sounds, were automatically retrieved by the Apify TikTok Extractor. All the other categories were coded manually, and the statistical data were processed in Excel. Due to the constraints related to sample size and platform variability, we adopted a descriptive analytical approach to ensure transparency and contextual accuracy in our analysis of TikTok content. Specifically, the platform's algorithmic volatility, and the dynamic nature of content visibility pose significant challenges to the assumptions required for inferential statistical analysis (e.g., randomness, independence, and generalizability). For instance, TikTok's algorithm tailors content delivery based on individual user behaviour and engagement patterns, making it difficult to establish stable baselines or control for variables across samples.

Consequently, a codebook (see Table 2) was created to break the content down into observable variables for humanisation, spectacularisation, and viralisation. Subcodes were assigned to some of the main codes, either deductively (e.g., for speech acts and formats) or inductively (e.g., for character, themes, and tone). The presence or absence of each code was recorded using binary values (1/0), except for metrics such as views, likes, and comments, which were captured as numerical data. The coding process was carried out by a single researcher. In order to assess inter-code reliability, a PhD candidate independently coded a subsample of 45 TikTok videos using the predefined codebook developed by the primary researcher. The resulting Cohen's Kappa coefficient value of 0.81 indicated a strong coding consistency.

For the categories of character and theme, one subcode was assigned to each TikTok. A "relaxed" tone was attributed to videos that addressed serious topics but incorporated a popular song as background music. An "amusing" tone was coded for videos that included explicit humour or depicted light-hearted incidents. A "formal-informative" tone applied to TikToks that primarily provided information, while a "formal-warning" tone was used for videos aiming to alert citizens to potential dangers. Regarding format, the category of "natural life footage" included scenes depicting everyday moments. "Sketches" were coded as staged scenes in which these ministries' employees re-enacted popular TikTok trends. "Monologues" align with TikTok's native content style, referring to a single person speaking directly to the audience in front of the camera. Videos that were edited to look like movies—namely, those using dramatic lighting, smooth camera movements, and colour grading—were grouped under the "cinematic scene" format. In terms of speech acts, the category of "assertive" included mainly informative statements. The "commissive" category encompassed recommendations, commitments, or warnings. "Call to action" described speech acts encouraging the audience to perform a specific action (e.g., "Let's do duets!"), while "interpellation" described speech acts intended to foster engagement by addressing the audience directly (e.g., "Do you know it?") and "expressive"—a wish (e.g., "MAI wishes you a wonderful spring!", "Happy birthday, Romania!").

Table 2. List of codes and subcodes.

Politainment variables	Codes	Ministry of Defence Subcodes	Ministry of Internal Affairs Subcodes
Humanisation	Character(s)	military personnel (collective)	riot police forces (collective)
		single soldier	single police officer
		soldier and family	police forces (collective)
		no human presence	firefighters (collective)
			ministry employees (collective)
Spectacularisation	Trends		
	Tone	formal-informative	
		formal-warning	
		relaxed	
		amusing	
		emotional	
	Theme	military personnel activities	police forces' activities
		ministry promotion	traffic rules
		military-family scenes	practical information for citizens
		TikTok trends	events
		fake news debunking	culture
		other	admission to the Police Academy
			ministry officials
	Format	natural life footage	
		cinematic scenes	
		monologues	
		sketches	
		interviews	
	Sound		
	Captions		
Viralisation	Hashtags		
	Views		
	Likes		
	Comments		
	Speech acts	assertive	
		expressive	
		commissive	
		call to action	
		interpellation	
		invitation	

4. Findings

4.1. Humanisation

When analysing the characters featured in the Ministry of Defence's TikTok content, we find that collective representation, labelled as "military personnel," dominates 60% of the videos. However, in 31% of the TikToks, there is a clear effort toward humanisation, as a single soldier (either male or female) serves as the main character. Additionally, 7% of the videos contain no human presence, focusing solely on military assets.

A noteworthy mention should be made regarding two TikToks (2%) that depict emotionally charged scenes involving military personnel and their families. In one of these videos, a female soldier is embraced by her family upon returning from a mission, while in another, a soldier proposes to his girlfriend in a surprise scene orchestrated by his comrades.

In 51.9% of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' TikTok posts, the main character is a police officer (a policewoman in seven posts). In the remaining posts, we identified a collective character, represented by riot police forces (14.8%), general police forces (11.1%), firefighters (2.4%), and ministry employees in general (8.7%). Ministry officials appeared in only 2.5% of the TikTok posts, exclusively in content related to Romania's inclusion in the Schengen area. Additionally, 4.9% of the TikToks featured no human character, instead showcasing assets, vehicles, or scenes of police operations, while in 3.7% of the posts there are other types of characters.

Moreover, when a single police officer serves as the main character, the content typically involves presenting traffic regulations or providing public safety information, such as warnings about the dangers of using firecrackers. Notably, in four TikToks featuring either a policeman or policewoman as the main character, the officer is portrayed as an idealised, attractive figure, reminiscent of viral TikToks romanticising the appearance of Italian police officers (see Figure 2). These videos frequently adopt a dramatic cinematic style, depicting the officer in action with dynamic background music, resembling an actor on a film set.



Figure 2. TikToks featuring a police officer in a cinematic style.

In these instances, there is no verbal communication. The visual framing and stylistic approach remain consistent for both male and female police officers.

Although collective actors remain prevalent—or even dominant in the case of the Ministry of Defence’s communication strategy—the analysis reveals a significant effort toward achieving humanisation across both ministries’ accounts. Both institutions strategically choose to present an individual police officer or soldier as the voice of the institution, sometimes in highly specific and personal contexts.

4.2. Spectacularisation

4.2.1. Trends

The Ministry of Defence incorporates TikTok trends in 24% of its videos, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs does so in 18.5% of its TikToks. Although most of their content does not strictly follow the platform’s trends, a significant number of videos attempt to increase visibility by using trending formats.

For the Ministry of Internal Affairs, we identified the use of trends in several ways: namely, before-and-after transformations employing transitions (e.g., riot police officers appearing in one uniform and then transitioning into another) set to viral music; a sketch using a trending TikTok sound, where a police officer captions the video with “Tell me something to make me angry”; and another sketch featuring a viral sound to humorously depict a driver’s panic upon seeing a fine being issued.

In the case of the Ministry of Defence, the use of TikTok trends is even more explicit. The ministry engages with popular dances, the “ASMR” trend (short for “autonomous sensory meridian response,” which on TikTok refers to the physical sensations triggered by specific sounds), the capybara trend, transition effects, and trending audio sounds.

Even if the use of trending is not to be seen in the majority of posts, it is significant on both accounts, thus proving the presence of a concern to use viralisation elements that could increase engagement and the visibility of these posts.

4.2.2. Tone

Given that TikTok is generally perceived as a platform where humour plays a central role, we sought to determine whether the Romanian ministries concerned adapt their communication strategies to align with this characteristic. In the case of the Ministry of Defence, the predominant tone identified (see Figure 3) was “relaxed” (65%), followed by “formal-informative” (19%), “amusing” (13%), “formal-warning” (2%), and “emotional” (1%). A “relaxed” tone was assigned to videos showcasing military personnel activities with a popular song as background sound. An “amusing” tone was present in a video where a squirrel was running among military personnel, or in others in which soldiers were synchronising their movements in a TikTok dance.

For the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the distribution of tones was more balanced: “Amusing” (19.7%) and “relaxed” (33.3%) tones were nearly equal to “formal-informative” (30.8%) and “formal-warning” (16%) tones.

The “amusing” tone included TikToks that presented topics such as traffic rules or riot police activities in a humorous manner, often utilising TikTok trends or viral sounds. The “relaxed” tone applied to videos showcasing police activities, typically set to music without additional verbal communication. The “informative” tone was frequently used to convey information about traffic regulations or Schengen area circulation rules, while the “warning” tone served to highlight the consequences of traffic violations, fire hazards, or to counter misinformation regarding police forces.

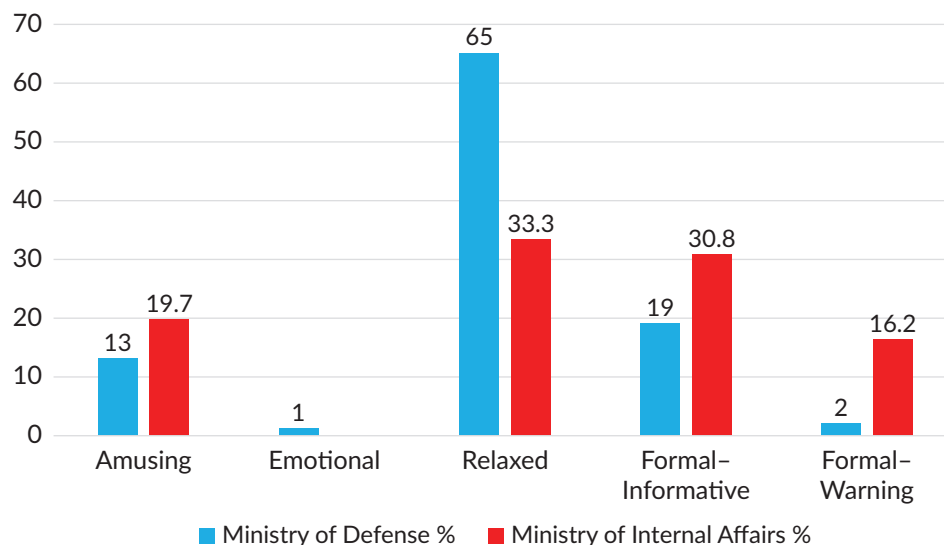


Figure 3. The distribution of tones (%) in the TikTok posts on the two accounts under discussion.

The predominance of the “relaxed” and “amusing” tones (cumulated) across both accounts (78% on the Ministry of Defence account and 53% on the Ministry of Internal Affairs account) demonstrates a clear adaptation to TikTok’s predominant style. This shift highlights a distinct communication approach compared to other social media platforms utilised by the two ministries, such as Facebook and X.

4.2.3. Theme

We analysed the themes of the TikToks posted by both public institutions to determine whether they continue to focus on the serious topics typically found on their official websites and on other social media channels or if there is a noticeable shift in their thematic approach. For the Ministry of Defence, the most frequent theme is the activities of military personnel, accounting for 52% of the posts, followed by promotion of the ministry (14%), events (13%), military-family scenes (5%), TikTok trends (5%), fake news debunking (3%), and other topics (8%). In some cases, TikToks were coded under the “trends” theme as their primary purpose was to recreate a viral TikTok trend rather than to convey a distinct institutional message. Apart from this last specific situation, we did not discover any visible influence of the TikTok platform on the category of theme.

On the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ TikTok account, the primary themes include police activities (33.3%), traffic rules (30.9%), practical information for citizens (17.3%), events (12.3%), culture (3.7%), and the promotion of admissions to the Police Academy (2.5%).

The two public institutions continue to communicate on their traditional topics, which are already present on their websites and other social media platforms (Facebook, X), without being significantly influenced by TikTok's generally lighter content. The impact of the platform is more evident in the way these topics are presented, as demonstrated by the analysis of other categories, rather than in the selection of topics themselves.

4.2.4. Format

The formats used by the two ministries do not closely follow TikTok's dominant and more commercial content styles, such as unboxings, hauls, mini-vlogs, or "get ready with me" (GRWM) videos. On the Ministry of Defence's account (see Figure 4), the identified formats include natural life footage (63%), cinematic scenes (14%), sketches (16%), monologues (5%), and interviews (2%). Under "sketches," we coded scenes in which military personnel re-enact popular TikTok trends, such as "point of view" (POV) videos, before-and-after transformations (depicting individuals or groups before and after joining the military), or dance challenges. All of these were present in the Ministry of Defence's posts.

On the Ministry of Internal Affairs' TikTok account (see Figure 4), natural life footage is also the dominant format (51.9%), followed by monologues (28.4%) and sketches (19.8%). Monologues are particularly well-suited to TikTok's format. In these monologues, it is usually a police officer explaining traffic regulations or providing practical information. In the sketches, police officers actively engage in role-playing. For example, some sketches involve officers participating in TikTok trends, such as "Tell me you're a cop without telling me you're a cop," while others depict police activities through role-play scenarios, including a driver's reaction upon receiving a fine or the way border police officers check documents.

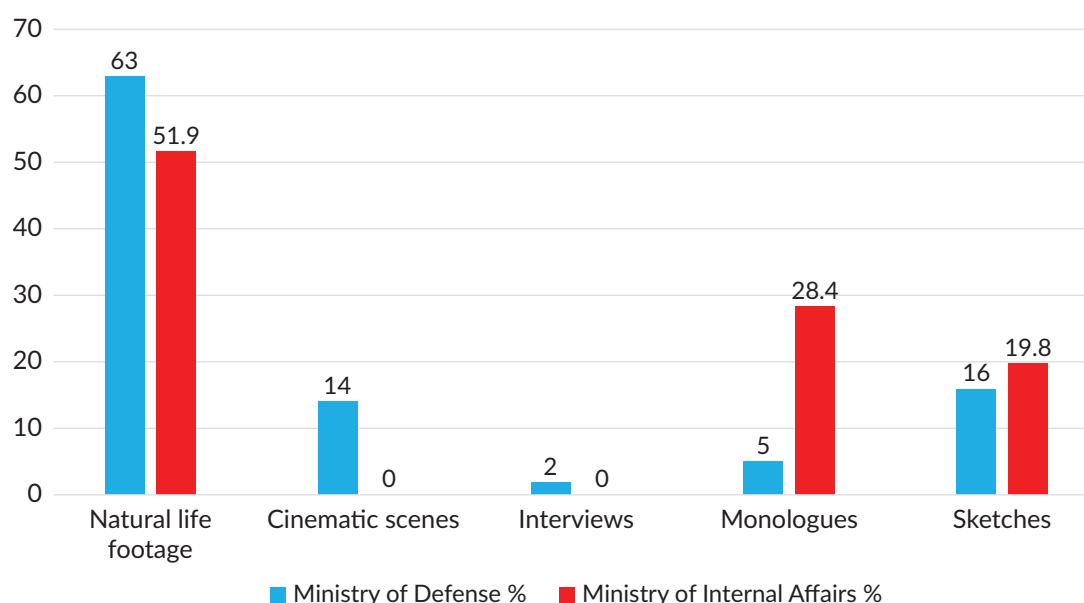


Figure 4. The distribution of formats (%) in the TikTok posts on the two accounts under discussion.

Both accounts exhibit a significant proportion of content tailored to platform-specific formats. Specifically, movie scenes, sketches, and monologues constitute 35% (cumulated) of the formats employed by the Ministry

of Defence, while monologues and sketches account for 48.2% (cumulated) of those utilised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

4.2.5. Sound

The incorporation of viral TikTok sounds or songs serves as a key variable in assessing content adaptation and its entertainment value. Given that TikTok's algorithm prioritises videos utilising trending sounds, and that these sounds foster community engagement, their strategic use can significantly enhance a video's reach and visibility. The Ministry of Defence utilises them in 39% of TikToks, whereas the Ministry of Internal Affairs employs TikTok music or sound effects in only 7% of its videos. This disparity aligns with the Ministry of Defence's observed propensity for trend adoption, suggesting a deliberate effort to maximise content visibility. The Ministry of Defence's notable incorporation of TikTok sounds signifies the institution's adaptation to platform-specific viralisation practices.

4.2.6. Captions

Even if the use of captions on videos is not specific to TikTok, with captions being widely used across multiple platforms such as Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Facebook Videos, TikTok has made captions a mainstream and essential feature in short-form content. Captions are popular on TikTok because they make content more accessible and provide better engagement (as many users watch videos on mute, captions keep them engaged), they allow one to emphasise key moments in the video, and they enhance the storytelling by allowing a trendy editing style. On the Ministry of Defence's TikTok account, captions appear in only 4% of the videos, whereas they are present in 30.8% of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' TikToks. None of the analysed videos utilised TikTok's built-in auto-caption feature. Instead, captions were manually added through text overlays, sometimes incorporating emojis to introduce an element of entertainment, even in videos addressing serious topics such as traffic regulations.

These findings highlight that the Ministry of Internal Affairs actively integrates this TikTok-specific feature (captions on video) to improve content accessibility and enhance user engagement.

4.3. Viralisation

4.3.1. The Use of Hashtags

Using hashtags increases discoverability and reach because trending hashtags boost the chances of appearing on the "For You" page on TikTok. It also helps the algorithm understand the content and recommend certain content to relevant users. Moreover, it can also boost engagement because users can engage more if they identify with a certain hashtag. The Ministry of Internal Affairs incorporates hashtags in 90% of its TikTok videos, with the number of hashtags ranging from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 14. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence employs hashtags in 89% of its videos, with a range of 2 to 12 hashtags per post. In both cases, we identified two primary categories of hashtag usage. The first category aims to reinforce the institution's digital identity, including hashtags such as #mai (the ministry's Romanian abbreviation), #ministerulafacerilorinterne (Ministry of Internal Affairs), #politiaromana (Romanian Police), #brigadarutiera (Road Brigade), #mapn (the Romanian abbreviation for the Ministry of Defence), #army, and

#armataromaniei (Romanian Army). The second category consists of hashtags designed to enhance the reach and visibility of TikTok posts, such as #fy, #foryou, #trending, #asmr, #viral, and #dance.

The analysis of hashtag usage demonstrates that both ministries strategically leverage this feature to optimise engagement and visibility. Their approach effectively combines identity-building hashtags with popular, trend-based hashtags to maximise their reach on the platform.

4.3.2. Views, Likes, and Comments

The Ministry of Defence has an average play count of 577k, with a minimum of 162k and a maximum of 3.2M. The average of likes is 52k, with a minimum of 16k and a maximum of 301k. The average number of comments is 453, while the average of shares is 1,049. The TikTok video that got the highest number of views on the Ministry of Defence account (3.2 million) also has an impressive number of likes (301k) and almost 2k comments. The video (see Figure 5a) captures the recording of the army physical, a test required for admission to military academies. As reflected in the comments, users actively engage by either criticising the candidate's performance or debating the difficulty level of the exercises. This interaction, regardless of its nature, contributes significantly to the post's virality. We can also explain the virality of the video clip by the fact that it presents a reality close to that of young TikTok users (admission to the military academy), with a high potential for identification.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has an average play count of 449k, with a minimum of 4k and a maximum of 4.5M. The average number of likes is 20.8k with a minimum of 127 and a maximum of 193k. The average number of comments is 288, while the average number of shares is 1,167. The most-viewed TikTok on this account (see Figure 5b), with 4.5 million views, is a warning about the consequences of not wearing a seatbelt.

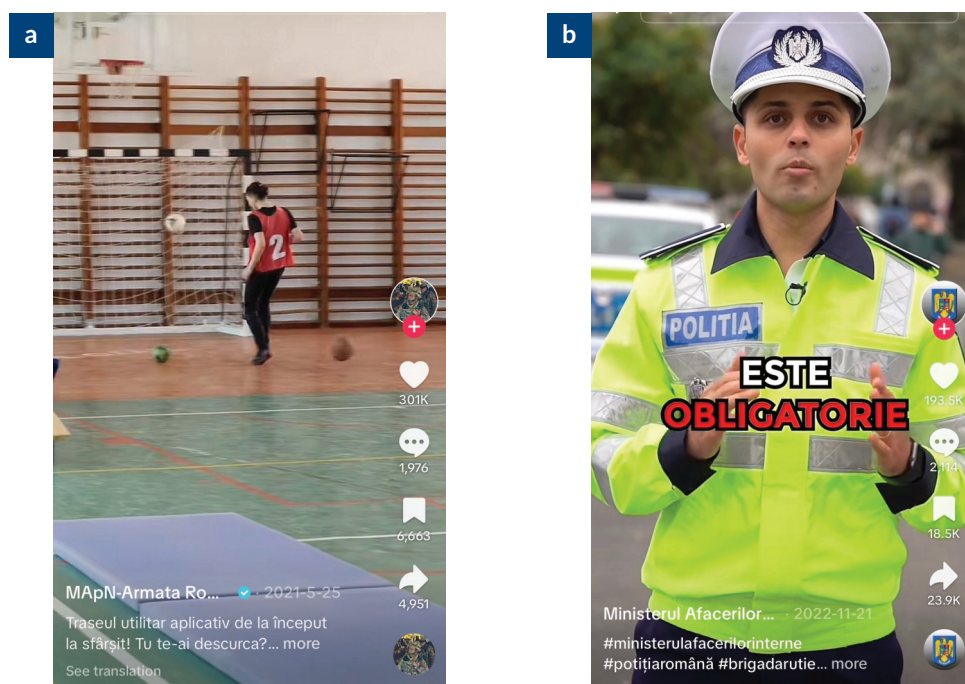


Figure 5. Screenshots of the most popular video (a) on the Ministry of Defence TikTok account, and (b) on the Ministry of Internal Affairs TikTok account.

It also holds the highest number of likes (193k), while the comments (2k) primarily discuss specific situations related to seatbelt use or inquire about exceptions to the rule.

The engagement metrics for both accounts indicate a high level of user involvement, demonstrating that the communication strategies employed are effective and impactful.

We also measured the engagement-to-post ratio (EPR) in relation to various variables, such as tone, trends, and speech acts, in order to assess their impact on the level of engagement each post receives. The EPR measures how much engagement (likes, comments, and shares) a post generates relative to how frequently a tone, trend, or speech act is used. A higher EPR means that even with fewer posts, a tone, trend, or speech act generates a high level of interactions. The EPR formula calculates a weighted engagement score based on the relative impact of likes, shares, and comments, normalised by posting frequency:

$$\text{EPR} = (1 \times \text{Likes\%} + 2 \times \text{Shares\%} + 3 \times \text{Comments\%}) / \text{Posts\%}$$

In the case of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (see Figure 6b), the “formal” tone (“formal-warning” and “formal-informative”) generates the most engagement per post (18.5 EPR and 5.84 EPR, respectively). The “amusing” tone is effective but not as strong as the formal one with 5.39 EPR. Surprisingly, as we are analysing a TikTok account, the “relaxed” tone has very low engagement relative to its usage (0.49 EPR). On the Ministry of Defence account (see Figure 6a), also the “formal-warning” tone is performing the best (14.52 EPR), followed by the “relaxed” (6.23 EPR), the “formal-informative” (5.53 EPR), the “emotional” (2.68 EPR), and the “amusing” (2.68 EPR).

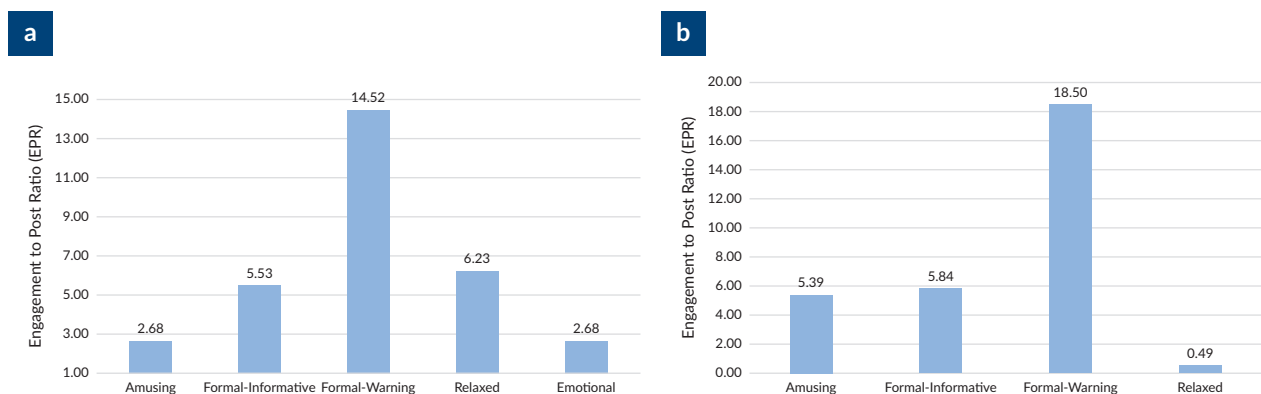


Figure 6. EPR by tone: (a) Ministry of Defence and (b) Ministry of Internal Affairs.

These correlations indicate that although public institutions attempt to shift from a formal mode of communication to a more “relaxed” or “amusing” tone, this approach is not particularly well received by their audience. Instead, the formal tone continues to generate the highest level of engagement. A possible explanation for this trend lies in the effectiveness of the “warning” tone, which performs the best across both accounts. This could be attributed to its ability to evoke human fears and concerns, making it more impactful. Additionally, user comments suggest a resistance to humour in institutional communication, as some users explicitly criticise this approach by questioning its appropriateness, often remarking: “Is this what the army/police do?”

When measuring the EPR in relation to the presence or not of TikTok trends (see Figure 7), the numbers for the Minister of Internal Affairs show that the posts using trends (29.1 EPR) performed much better than those without a trend (0.75 EPR). On the account of the Ministry of Defence, the distribution was more balanced, with a 4.64 EPR for posts including trends and 6.43 for posts with no trend included. These numbers partially confirmed that using trends improves engagement on the accounts of the ministries concerned.

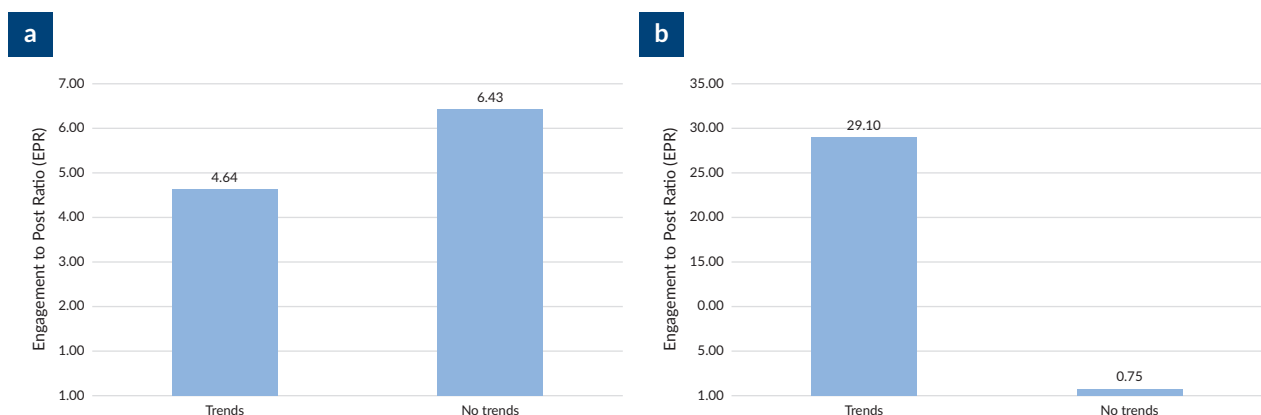


Figure 7. EPR by trends: (a) Ministry of Defence and (b) Ministry of Internal Affairs.

4.3.3. Speech Acts

As we noticed that several posts on both accounts used interpellation or call to action, we also analysed the distribution of speech acts in the text of the TikToks and then correlated them to the engagement (EPR).

The account of the Ministry of Defence has interpellation in 34% of the posts, while 28% of the posts are assertive (informative), 17% commissive (recommendation, commitment, or warning), 15% a call to action, 5% expressive (a wish), and 1% constitute an invitation. As interpellations are particularly effective in order to encourage engagement, the Ministry of Defence frequently uses them: “Who is helping us with a duet?” “Do you know it?” “Which uniform do you like the most?” etc. This way of addressing the public is particularly effective in order to make your community feel involved with the content posted, and may partially explain the strong engagement performance of these accounts. The calls to action are even more engaging as they encourage users to act in different ways: “Let’s do duets!” “Come on with the hearts!!!!” “Stay informed only from official sources!” Users are incited either to post content, to react to the post, or to develop responsible behaviour related to the phenomenon of online fake news.

On the account of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the analysis of speech acts is less relevant, as in 70.4% of the posts there is no text attached, meaning we could not code any speech act. In 16% of the posts there is an interpellation, in 9.9% of the posts there is an assertive speech act (informative), while expressive speech acts (a wish) amount to 2.5% and calls to action to 1.2% of the posts. Interpellations are interesting to emphasise as they actively seek to engage the audience by prompting direct involvement. Examples include: “We are here. And you?” “Do you know how to stay safe online?” “Do you know who can use the public transport lanes?” “What is your childhood dream?” These questions not only encourage interaction but also create a sense of dialogue between the institution and the public, reinforcing engagement and participation.

This analysis proves that both accounts are eager to use speech acts that, in theory, are supposed to generate more engagement and make the audience react and get involved: Interpellations and calls to action (cumulated) amount to 49% on the Ministry of Defence account and 17.2% on the Ministry of Internal Affairs account.

We correlated speech acts with the posts' level of engagement (see Figure 8). For the Ministry of Internal Affairs, it was the assertive (informative content, factual statements) posts that got the highest engagement (16 EPR), followed by interpellation (5.67 EPR). Surprisingly, posts that encourage action (calls to action) received relatively low engagement per post (3.22 EPR), which suggests that audiences do not respond well to direct requests or might find them less compelling. Expressive acts (a wish) have the lowest engagement per post (2.52 EPR). This indicates that emotion-driven content may not be as effective for generating engagement. On the Ministry of Defence account, on the contrary, there are expressive acts that get the highest engagement (14.4 EPR). Commissive speech acts also perform relatively well (6.6 EPR). In contrast to the Ministry of Internal Affairs account, calls to action now perform better and seem more effective. Interpellation and assertive posts perform worse than on the account of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with values of 5.4 EPR and 4.8 EPR, respectively.

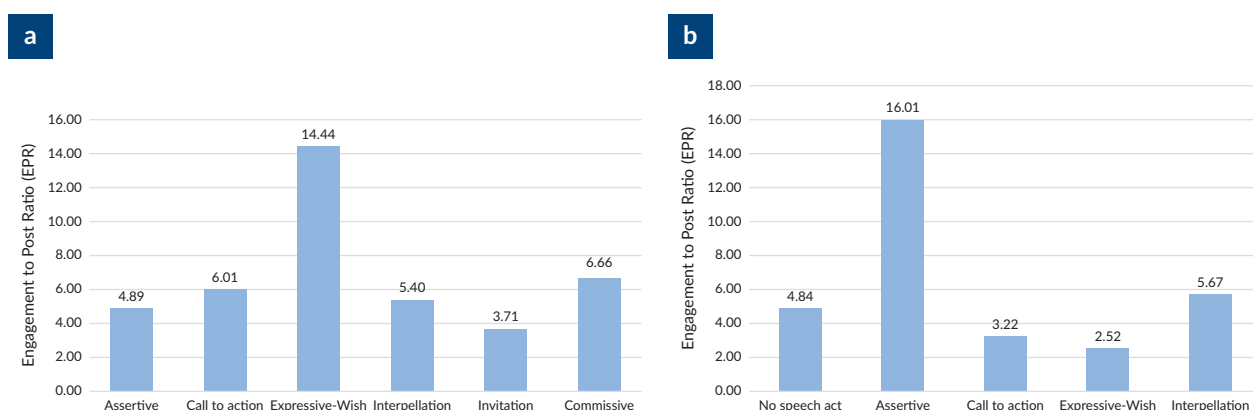


Figure 8. EPR by speech act: (a) Ministry of Defence and (b) Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Surprisingly, on both accounts, it is not speech acts such as interpellation and calls to action that get the best engagement, but assertive and expressive acts.

5. Discussion

Our analysis shows how these two ministries disseminate information to the public through TikTok, focusing on the spectacularisation of the content in order to make it attractive to a targeted public audience (in these two cases, a young audience, one targeted to join the army or the police forces), as is also happening in the field of political communication (Gómez-García et al., 2023).

5.1. Humanisation

When analysing to what extent we can identify elements of humanisation in the Romanian Ministry of Defence's and the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs' communication on TikTok (RQ1), the findings reveal a shift toward humanisation in both cases. Although collective actors remain present, both institutions increasingly use individual representatives, such as policemen or military personnel, to humanise their

messages. This shift aligns with social media's preference for relatable, human-centred storytelling. By featuring officers in personal or situational contexts, the ministries concerned create a sense of authenticity, making their messages more engaging and credible. This effort towards humanisation can be compared to the phenomenon of personalisation in political communication (Cervi, 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023), where political leaders become central to communication.

5.2. Spectacularisation

The analysis of the spectacularisation elements in response to RQ2 reveals that the communication of the two ministries is more influenced by the platform in terms of the use of formats and trends (partially in the use of sounds and captions) than in the choice of the posts' themes.

The use of relaxed and amusing tones further supports the humanisation strategy, differentiating the two ministries' TikTok communication from their more formal approaches on platforms like Facebook or X and confirming the mixing of public information with entertainment (as in *politainment*—see Alonso-López et al., 2024) in order to make the topic more interesting and attractive to the audience (Ratnastuti et al., 2023). However, the EPR suggests that formal and warning tones still generate the highest engagement, likely due to their authoritative nature and the seriousness of the topics addressed and to the public perception concerning the role the two ministries have in governing the country.

The analysis also indicates that both ministries incorporate TikTok trends in order to increase visibility, with the Ministry of Defence using trends in 24% of its content and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 18.5%. This includes popular formats such as before-and-after transformations, viral sound-based sketches, and even ASMR content. While not the dominant strategy, this effort reflects an awareness of TikTok's algorithmic preferences, which favour trending content for broader reach. While the Ministry of Defence embraces TikTok's viral mechanics more actively, with 39% its videos using TikTok sounds compared to 7% for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the latter compensates for this by utilising captions in 30.8% of its videos to enhance accessibility and engagement. The spectacularisation (González-Aguilar et al., 2023) of institutional communication is further reinforced by the use of cinematic video editing, role-playing, and humour.

However, despite this effort to make the content popular, engagement data suggest that traditional, more serious content often outperforms trend-driven content. For the Ministry of Internal Affairs, posts utilising trends had a significantly higher EPR (29.1) compared to non-trend posts (0.75), indicating that trends can drive engagement in some instances.

5.3. Viralisation

Viralisation efforts are evident in both ministries' use of hashtags and speech acts designed to encourage interaction. Hashtags play a crucial role in increasing discoverability, with both institutions using identity-related tags alongside viral ones such as #fy, #foryou, and #trending. Interestingly, despite a strong emphasis on audience engagement through interpellations and calls to action, these speech acts did not generate the highest engagement. Instead, assertive and expressive speech acts performed the best, suggesting that audiences respond more positively to informative or emotionally resonant content rather than direct interaction prompts. This implies that while viralisation tactics are crucial for reach, content

substance remains the key driver of meaningful engagement with public institutions' communications. When assessing the impact of humanisation and spectacularisation on engagement (RQ3), we noticed that the average of views (577k for the Ministry of Defence and 449k for the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and likes (52k and 20.8k) for both accounts is impressive, showing the success of their strategies on TikTok. These findings demonstrate that there is an evolution in the government's communication on social media from a unilateral logic (Sáez Martín et al., 2015; Wukich & Mergel, 2015) to a bilateral one, trying to generate audience participation.

6. Conclusion

This case study underscores TikTok's role as a tool for strategic communication, providing insights into its potential for engaging and informing specific demographic groups. This research highlights the necessity for further research into the effects of spectacularized government information and its potential to cultivate a frivolous or superficial perception of politics among audiences. Our findings indicate that, similar to the case of political communication governmental communication on TikTok is often trivialised, not primarily through thematic content, but rather through the use of specific formats, tones, trends, and modes of address aimed at broadening audience reach. By adopting popular trends, viral audio, interpellations, and calls to action, governmental institutions are not only seeking to make information more appealing, but also aiming to foster greater engagement with audiences—an aspect that could have significant implications for the accountability of public communication strategies.

The analysis shows that both ministries are adapting their communication to the characteristics of the platform and are actively using elements that could increase the virality of the posts, such as tone, picking up on viral trends or sounds, formats, speech acts, or even humanisation of their communication. This adaptation is happening in the way information is presented rather than in the themes about which the institutions communicate, themes that remain largely congruent with those they use on other social media channels. These data confirm the existence of govtainment elements in the communication strategy of the two accounts, as noticed in other analyses focusing on government communication strategies (Alonso-López et al., 2024; Ratnastuti et al., 2023), a phenomenon similar to the politainment trend (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023; Battista, 2023; Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023; Cervi et al., 2021). We consider our findings to indicate a new stage in government communication with a deliberate strategy of using TikTok features in a professional way (using trends, specific formats, relaxed and amusing tones, hashtags, etc.), but also openly trying to engage audiences with interpellations and calls to action.

However, when we correlated elements of spectacularisation, such as the existence of trends, the tone used, and speech acts, with the engagement achieved, the presence of these elements does not automatically translate into the highest engagement rates. One of the explanations for this is that the audience considers that a more informative post, not necessarily one including all possible spectacularisation elements on TikTok, is more congruent with the type of communication that ministries should have, even on this platform. This attitude is reflected in certain user comments on TikTok content that employs popular trends, where criticism is directed at the involvement of institutions such as the army or police in entertaining or light-hearted content (e.g., "Is this what the army/police do?"). Further analysis of user comments may yield a more nuanced understanding of this aspect of public response.

Overall, the communication strategy of the two public institutions on TikTok examined here is successful when we look at the engagement figures. We can therefore conclude they are successfully adapting their communication strategy to the platform, a phenomenon which was not the case in other analyses that investigated government communication strategies on TikTok (Alonso-López et al., 2024; Yang, 2022) or even those concerning political communication (Cervi et al., 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). However, we cannot conclude that success is determined by this adaptation, even if it partially contributes to it.

The research shows that the two ministries have successfully embedded government elements in their public communication strategies and effectively adapted to TikTok's available features, achieving notable engagement and visibility. Although this success reflects institutional agility in order to increase accessibility of public messages, it also raises concerns about the potential trivialisation of complex policy issues when reduced to trend-driven content.

Government communication is increasingly under pressure to engage younger audiences and, following the model of political communication, appears to be shifting to government. However, this approach may affect public trust, as audiences might not be prepared to perceive government institutions as compatible with an entertainment-driven style.

We consider that the research questions have been specifically addressed through this study. However, future research could further investigate how these public institutions conceptualise their TikTok communication strategies, potentially by getting insights from communication experts. Subsequent studies might also explore audience perceptions of ministerial communication on TikTok, for instance through comment analysis or survey-based approaches.

7. Limitations

Our study presents several limitations. Our analysis is context-specific, focusing solely on Romania, which means the findings may not be directly applicable to other countries with different political, social, or digital media environments. The corpus of analysed TikToks was limited by the fact that the coding was partially conducted manually, which constrained the volume of data that could be processed. These limitations highlight the need for further studies that include comparative analyses across multiple countries and leverage automated tools for broader data collection and analysis. Finally, although the descriptive statistical approach limits the generalizability of the findings, it allows for a focused examination of observable patterns within the available data.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Bucharest – Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset is available from the author upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT 4.0 was used for grammar and style improvement in some parts of the manuscript.

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