

The “TikTok Messiah”: Ritualized Emotional Performance, Memetic Sound, and Mobilization in Romania’s 2024 Presidential Elections

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Abstract

Since 2024, TikTok’s potential to influence political outcomes has gained heightened visibility. In Romania, the unexpected success of an independent far-right candidate in the first round of the presidential election was widely attributed to his TikTok-based campaign. On the platform, supporters combine text, sound, and image, making a multimodal analytical approach appropriate. We integrate Nabi’s emotion-as-frames model and Tagg’s musical communication model to examine how popular culture and political expression intersect on TikTok. The analysis draws on two datasets analyzed using two complementary methods. First, we employ quantitative content analysis to examine videos and metadata from the calingorgescuofficial TikTok account (742 items) alongside metadata from 1,400 videos using aural meme templates. Second, we apply a newly developed qualitative approach to an in-depth analysis of a subsample of 150 videos employing popular memetic sounds in support of the politician. The novelty of the proposed multimodal analytical approach consists of two layers, denotative and connotative, and two dimensions, visual and aural, to provide an analytical model for memetic expressions of political support on TikTok that lack verbal elements. The results reveal the strategic use of a wide range of memetic sounds—from hip-hop and pop-folk to military marches and religious chants—to mobilize voters dissatisfied with the political establishment and to amplify nationalist sentiment centered on claims of national sovereignty around the candidate. We identify how established narratives are repurposed and performed on camera through emotional cues. Visuals anchor these emotions in diverse settings—from everyday life to protest scenes—while sounds provide scripts for communal performance.

Keywords

emotional framing; memetic sounds; musical communication; political communication; popular culture; presidential elections; Romania; sovereigntism; TikTok

1. Introduction

The major change brought by social media has been described as the creation of a network media logic. It differs from mass media logics in several crucial aspects concerning media production, distribution, and use. Network media logic focuses on media as an information environment and ways in which access to, use, and misuse of information have changed, including the spread of disinformation (Cardoso, 2023; Klinger & Svensson, 2024). This information environment, in which strategic campaign communication also takes place, functions as a platform on which individual identities are performed by algorithmic remixing and distribution of content (Cardoso, 2023). TikTok, the fastest-growing social and video network (Newman et al., 2025), is accelerating the shift towards digital platforms, eroding the influence of professional, institutional journalism, while nurturing a fragmented, alternative media landscape. Significant scholarship has been dedicated to the role played by Facebook or Twitter in elections in the past two decades, but emerging research into TikTok use in strategic campaign communication shows significant differences. Grantham (2024) highlights the importance of integrating popular culture trends, manifested through music or visuals with legacy approaches such as humor or negative campaigning. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2021) propose that popular culture functions as a shared symbolic resource, stimulating communication across political differences and engagement of new participants in political expression. TikTok is widely recognized for its focus on trends and unpredictable negotiation of virality through its algorithm, breaking away from the context of the content creator and their audience of followers. The platform's affordances anchor new forms of political expression and mobilization.

TikTok has indeed emerged as a major source of information and news for audiences around the world (Newman et al., 2025), and increasingly so in Romania, where the platform already had around 9 million accounts in 2024—one of the highest user penetration rates in the EU, at approximately 47% of the population (Ernst, 2024). Our empirical research focuses on the case of the annulled 2024 Romanian presidential elections, where the surprising first round win of far-right independent candidate Călin Georgescu was widely associated with the use of TikTok campaigning, with media and political commentators using labels such as the “TikTok Candidate” or the “TikTok Messiah” (O’Sullivan, 2024).

1.1. Understanding TikTok’s Model of Communication

TikTok’s model of communication can best be understood through the lens of media ecology and Carey’s (2008) ritual model of communication. Marshall McLuhan (1964) pointed out that the effects of radio were different in the different contexts in which the technology was adopted. Less developed, less literate societies could not, in his view, “neutralize the radio implosion without revolution” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 138). In the paradigm of media ecology, radio encouraged tribal village tastes for gossip, rumor, and personal malice, acting as a decentralizing, pluralistic force (McLuhan, 1964). The concept of “secondary orality” (Ong, 2013) describes the orality of electronic media such as radio or television. In the same vein, “tertiary orality” (Logan, 2010) expands Ong’s considerations on literacy to the new digital forms of speech used in emails, blogs, and instant

messages. Print syntax fades in the dialogical nature of new forms of computer-mediated communication, allowing utterances to be replies that rely on the previous utterances of others. Finally, drawing on McLuhan, Ong, and Logan's works, Andrey Mir proposes that the newsfeed used by most mobile-first digital media platforms, such as TikTok, is a flow that has no structure or completeness typical of literacy, which dismantles other logical structures determined by literacy (Mir, 2025). In this view, in the feed, deliberation and abstract consideration are replaced by impulsive reaction, personal anecdotes, and other features of primary orality—"bragging, truth relativity, analog thinking, and magical consciousness" (Mir, 2025).

TikTok's role in the campaign environment should be seen as a space for ritual performances of community and belonging, in line with James Carey's ritual model of communication. Carey (2008) argued that communication is not only about transmitting information but about expressing shared values and reinforcing social bonds. Symbolic practices—such as dance, play, or news—help create a shared sense of reality by confirming collective identities and beliefs. These ritualized performances have been identified as central to online digital activism and social movements (Cervi & Divon, 2023), and the case of the Georgescu campaign, regardless at this point of the manner in which it was orchestrated, shows how it can become central to an election campaign as well.

Central to these ritual performances is the importance of audio in TikTok, an aspect that has been described as an "aural turn": from lip-syncing to remixing sounds or using lyrics as punchlines (Abidin & Kaye, 2021), and where hashtags and sounds can turn into a source of mutual amplification (Pilipets, 2023). TikTokers engage in practices that embody the performance and participation-oriented nature of secondary orality (Ong, 2013), but also the relational bias, truth relativity, and impulsivity that tertiary, digital orality retrieves from primary orality (Logan, 2010; Mir, 2025). In addition to supporting sound-based memetic forms, TikTok's Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch features promote the dialogical nature of digital orality and facilitate political discourse. The Green Screen feature is used to provide citational evidence for legitimation, the Duet feature allows users to express agreement or disagreement through nonverbal cues or superimposed text, and the Stitch feature enables users to provide additional commentary (Quick & Maddox, 2024).

The participatory affordances of TikTok made the performance of the repertoire and audience practice a new element in political communication. In social media discourses, the templates of political communication acquire both their form and meaning by employing a wide range of extant cultural references, from songs becoming memetic sounds to visual memes. Thus, historical and popular cultural references become framing devices with a new element of remediation: TikTokers perform iconic gestures or facial expressions that embody the reference, but at the same time use a reference to frame their message or experience.

1.2. Discursive Strategies: History and Popular Culture as Framing Devices

The role of social media platforms in election campaigns has long been described as providing venues for reinforcement-based or preference-based persuasion. This involves tailoring content towards audience preferences, creating content communities or echo chambers, and increasing the effectiveness of messages despite the fragmented information environment (Cacciatore et al., 2016, p. 17). This "preference-based reinforcement" is achieved by activating existing knowledge structures in the audience involving textual, visual, auditory, and nonverbal cues (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). These cues will vary by context as they are culturally shared schemas.

However, leveraging popular culture and historical narratives for political purposes is not a new or context-specific phenomenon, although the specific examples are. Historical myths have always been part of a politician's rhetorical toolbox. The power of music to communicate a sense of belonging, protest, and resistance in a participatory manner is also a known staple of political communication, though it is less well documented (Street, 2014). Popular culture has gained increased political relevance with the mediatization of politics and the accompanying increased emotionalization, particularly on social media platforms that cultivate affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014).

Authoritarian and populist leaders, particularly, have strategically appropriated cultural and historical references. Populism has even been defined as a “discursive and stylistic repertoire” (Brubaker, 2017), relying on templates or schemata like “the people” or “crisis.” For example, projections of “historicized victimhood” in Central and Eastern Europe relies on and activates extant representation of people as oppressed underdogs, either historically or economically: In both Poland and Hungary, tropes of historical injustices have been utilized to frame the people versus the elites opposition, or cast the EU as an oppressor to be fought (Meijen & Vermeersch, 2024). Political leaders or movements may be associated with popular songs to construct oppositions and collective identifications. Political parties may embrace or endorse specific styles and artists, or even commission songs that strategically construct “the people” (Barna & Patakfalvi-Czirják, 2022). These are strategic communication tools employed by political parties in countries such as Austria, Italy, and Sweden. The aim is to cast actors as ordinary people or as “aligning themselves with popular identifications” (Dunkel & Schiller, 2024).

In line with the European trend, Romania has observed a rise in a movement that combines nationalism and populism. This movement involves journalists, media outlets, social media influencers, politicians, and public figures, and frequently exploits religious and ethnic minority-related sensitivities to fuel anti-EU and anti-Western sentiments (Cucu, 2025). The interplay between media sources, narratives, and citizens has become evident following the unprecedented political developments in Romania. Presidential elections were annulled after the first round, which was won by Călin Georgescu. Previously a largely unknown independent candidate, Georgescu ran on an anti-system, nationalist, and anti-EU platform, attracting significant support from voters disillusioned with mainstream parties (Damian, 2024).

1.3. Romanian Elections in the Context of the Rise of Sovereignism in Europe

The election results and the extraordinary annulment of the election mark a turning point both in Romanian political history and a major shift in the role of platforms in Romanian politics. The unexpected result was widely attributed to the success of his social media campaign, particularly using TikTok, and was followed by widespread public debates on the role of the platform in the election, including allegations of Russian interference (Cistelean et al., 2025). Declassified reports have argued, on the one hand, that Georgescu's #echilibrusiverticalitate campaign, modelled on Russia's “brother next to brother” campaign in Ukraine in 2022, engaged the services of micro-influencers who were unaware of the broader agenda and were paid approximately 80 EUR per 20,000 followers (Administrația Prezidențială a României, 2024). Since then, literature has also shown that the TikTok campaign capitalized on divisive sentiments and rhetoric. It used aggressive digital marketing tactics, such as granular voter profiling, microtargeted ads, and emotionally polarizing content, to mobilize disillusioned voters, disproportionately amplifying existing narratives of the far right (Cistelean et al., 2025). In the context of the 2024 Romanian presidential elections, high social

media engagement was correlated with increased support for nationalist populist parties (Botan et al., 2025). This research analyzes the mediated logics that shaped these processes on TikTok. The scientific objectives underpinning our research are to identify and attempt to explain the changes brought on by the use of new platforms such as TikTok, characterized by affordances such as algorithmic curation and visuality (Hase et al., 2023), as well as support for the emergence of imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

2. Extending the Emotions-as-Frames Model

2.1. A Multimodal Extension of the Emotion-as-Frames Model

Political TikToks contribute to the emergence of “affective networked publics,” a concept proposed by Papacharissi (2014). These publics are structured around expressions of sentiment on digital platforms. We employ the emotion-as-frames model proposed by Robin Nabi (2003) to explore these expressions of sentiment with respect to the affordances of TikTok. Nabi’s model conceptualizes emotions as perspectives through which stimuli can be interpreted. It focuses on message features that are likely to elicit specific emotions. Furthermore, the model posits that emotional experiences may influence the seeking and accessibility of information, leading to emotion-consistent decisions and actions (Nabi, 2009). Nabi’s work extends beyond fear appeals research. It explains through a cognitive functional model how “message-relevant negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, guilt, disgust) affect the direction and stability of persuasive outcomes” (Nabi, 2009, p. 211). Three constructs are fundamental to this: emotion-driven motivated attention, motivated processing, and expectation of message reassurance (Nabi, 2009). She notes, however, that less work has been done on positive emotions. Nabi differentiates between message-relevant negative emotions and ambient mood states, the latter of which lack distinct action tendencies (De Los Santos & Nabi, 2019). In methodological terms, emotional reactions or discrete emotions have been coded by facial expression (Ekman & Friesen, 1971, 1978): happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise. More recent research (De Los Santos & Nabi, 2019) integrates the emotions-as-frames model and cognitive functional model to study anger, fear, and hope as different motivational goals, frequently emphasized in news coverage.

Emotions and emotional framing are linked to facial expressions in short-form videos. But TikTok facilitates imitation and aggregation through sounds, which, according to mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988), influence mood states and may connect specific performances within communal, interactive, and meta-communicative forms and participation rituals (Schellewald, 2021).

TikTok is a multimodal platform where meaning is generated through the sequencing and recontextualization of text, sound, and image. When information is presented multimodally, the audience tends to give precedence to visual modes (Kress, 2010, p. 187; Molin & Godhe, 2020, p. 162). However, the structural architecture of the platform is fundamentally audio-centric with sound as a pivotal element, often acting as a main conduit for trends, memes, challenges, and group affiliation (Radovanović, 2022). These affordances of the platform facilitate a manifestation (Darvin, 2022; Radovanović, 2022) of aural discourse similar to the call-and-response songs found in religious, military, and other communal contexts (duets, sequencing, recontextualization, and reuse of sounds; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Peterson, 2018; Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2024). Although harmonious audiovisual combinations promote an integrated understanding of the message, research suggests that audiences create coherent mental models when confronted with

multimodal discourse. However, this comes at the expense of a detailed analysis of the individual components of the message (Mayer & Moreno, 2003). Together with the inherent nature of TikTok sounds—short, in the background, repetitive, and associated with different visuals—they are placed lower in the modal density continuum. This attracts lower levels of attention and awareness (Norris, 2012, p. 3998). As such, the meanings directly associated with the sounds are simplified and interpreted at superficial levels. Thus, the emotions visually encoded in facial expressions need to be analyzed together with affective frames encoded in the aural mood of the videos. To achieve this, we employ the Thayer (1989) energy-stress model. It categorizes emotions along two dimensions: energy and stress (both low to high). Thus, the emotions as frames model can be extended by dividing the aural mood space into four quadrants or clusters: “exuberance” (high energy/low stress), “anxious/frantic” (high energy/high stress), “depression” (low energy/high stress), and “contentment” (low energy/low stress).

2.2. A Multimodal Model for Sound-Induced Emotional Framing

To articulate what a sound generally evokes, we have followed Tagg’s structure of Parameters of Musical Expression, Connotative, Metaphorical, and Anaphonic (what the music sounds like and what it refers to aurally), and the Paramusical Field of Connotation (culturally specific “identifiable semantic fields”; Tagg, 2013).

Our conceptual framework proposes integrating the distinction between monological and dialogical expression, which correspond to the features of secondary and tertiary orality, respectively. These features are mapped to specific TikTok affordances, which are identified here and in previous works (Quick & Maddox, 2024). The emotion-as-frames model (De Los Santos & Nabi, 2019) is integrated in two aspects of the proposed multimodal analysis model: (a) the emotion performed nonverbally—using categories of facial expressions (Ekman & Friesen, 1971, 1978) where the face is visible; and (b) the sound-induced mood—using the Thayer (1989) energy-stress model for the soundtrack of the videos. The Thayer (1989) model was chosen due to its potential for use in automated classification as the emotion-as-frames model was used recently in conjunction with automated classification of facial expressions (Kim et al., 2024). Lastly, the final components of the proposed multimodal analysis model address the verbal and visual narrative elements of the messages. These components identify the collective actors, groups, or social categories portrayed in the video as well as whether the message references the past, present, or future.

2.3. Research Design

The goal of this research is to explore emergent communication strategies employed in Romania’s Presidential elections by analyzing both content shared by candidates and content created and distributed by propagators and supporters, the imitation publics created by TikTok’s memetic function. By identifying the factors that contributed to the success of Călin Georgescu’s campaign on TikTok, using the emotion-as-frames model, the research endeavors to also fill in a gap in existing literature with respect to multimodal analysis of strategic communication campaigns on TikTok. Since the tertiary orality of digital media has a strong dialogical aspect, analysis of aural memes employed to affectively engage and mobilize users is essential. We thus formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: How did the calingeorgescuofficial account content adapt to TikTok’s affordances?

RQ2: What is evoked by the sounds used as memetic templates by supporters of the campaign?

RQ3: How is support for the candidate expressed with respect to TikTok’s affordances?

RQ4: How is political mobilization for the candidate articulated through emotional and narrative framing devices?

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

In order to answer the RQs, two datasets were collected. One dataset was collected from the “calingeorgescuofficial” TikTok account using the Apify actor TikTok Data Extractor. The account had 259,600 fans at the time of data collection, making it the most followed TikTok account associated with the candidate. The account was not marked as verified by the platform and its bio section indicated a link to the Telegram channel “propagatorcg.” The dataset collected on November 30, 2024, comprised seven slideshows and 742 videos. None of the posts were marked as sponsored on the platform.

To identify the sounds used as memetic templates by supporters of Călin Georgescu, we examined the content associated with #calingeorgescu hashtag, and we identified several sounds that served as audio templates for videos either explicitly supporting the candidate or aiming to mobilize voters. Since the data was collected in the aftermath of the intensely debated first round election results, when some of the content had already been removed, it was not possible to gather a large sample with temporal coverage over the entire electoral campaign. We selected seven sounds (Table 1) that had been used in over 2,500 videos, according to the count provided by the platform. Thus, the dataset includes popular memetic sounds used by supporters of Călin Georgescu, both before and after the first tour of the 2024 Romanian Presidential elections. Some of these sounds predate the campaign and were being used as memetic sounds in other contexts (see Figures 2 and 3, and the analysis of S02–S07 in the Supplementary File). The sounds were analyzed using Tagg’s musical communication model. Using the Apify actor TikTok Sound Scraper, on November 30, 2024, we collected a

Table 1. List of sounds used as aural templates.

Sound code	Videos using sound on 30.11.2024	Sound source/song
S01	23,600	“AventuraROLive—Privim spre libertate” (Looking towards freedom; 2024)
S02	17,400	“B.U.G. Mafia—În anii ce-au trecut” (In the years gone by; 2003; instrumental intro to a live rendition)
S03	25,800	“Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and Shreya Ghoshal—Teri Meri” overlapping a group of soldiers taking the Romanian Army’s military oath (2011)
S04	13,600	“Marian Hulpus—Imnul diasporei” (The diaspora’s Anthem; 2020)
S05	18,700	“Moromeții—România, trezește-te!” (Romania, wake up!; 2004)
S06	7,720	“Jador, Costi, Vlăduța Lupău—Mare e lumea” (The world is large; 2021)
S07	2,923	“The TRONOS Psaltic Group of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy—Se-aude glas peste Carpați” (A voice is heard over the Carpathians; 2018)

dataset of 200 video metadata for each sound. In the third step, we filtered a subsample of 150 posts using popular memetic sounds that had used hashtags associated with the Călin Georgescu campaign. These were coded for the manual multimodal analysis. One major limitation in terms of sampling is that some of these posts were removed (either by the creator or by the platform) after suspicions were officially raised regarding the conduct of Călin Georgescu’s electoral campaign.

3.2. Data Analysis

For the quantitative data analysis, Tableau Public, Google Pinpoint, and KH Coder were used to analyze both datasets: metadata from the calingeorgescuofficial account (749 posts) and the sample of videos using memetic aural templates (1,400 posts). All the audio from the videos published by the calingeorgescuofficial account was processed using speech-to-text and named entity recognition, tools provided by Google PinPoint. The seven sounds identified as relevant for the case study (see S01–S07 in the Supplementary File) were analyzed using a qualitative approach based on Tagg’s structure of Parameters of Musical Expression, Connotative, Metaphorical, and Anaphonic and the Paramusical Field of Connotation to articulate what a sound generally evokes. The multimodal coding model described in Table 2 integrates the emotion-as-frames framework across two dimensions: nonverbal emotional expression (analyzed through facial expression categories) and sound-induced mood.

Table 2. Multimodal emotion-as-frames coding model.

Video types	Original	Vlog (face on camera): subject directly addresses their audience and their face is visible on camera POV video: filmed from the perspective of the person creating it, giving the viewer a sense of being present and experiencing events as they happen
	Re-mediated	Distributed: the video from a different source (TV or digital platforms) is distributed without minimal modification Interpreted: the video from a different source (TV or digital platforms) is distributed with a personal note or interpretation added through superimposed text edits
	Remix	Green Screen: allows users to superimpose images or videos onto the background of their creation Duet: allows users to post an original video side-by-side with another user’s publicly accessible video Stitch: enables users to integrate other publicly available TikTok videos into their own
Emotion performed nonverbally (only for original videos where faces are visible)	Fear Anger Sadness Disgust Joy/elation Surprise	
Sound-induced mood	Anxious/frantic (high energy/high stress) Exuberance (high energy/low stress) Contentment (low energy/low stress) Depression (low energy/high stress)	

Table 2. (Cont.) Multimodal emotion-as-frames coding model.

Reference	<p>Past: historical events, historical figures</p> <p>Present: the context of the elections, current political actors, references to current issues</p> <p>Future: projections of positive or negative events or phenomena, promises, future challenges</p>
Collective actors	<p>The video shows, mentions, or the subject is identified as a member of: diaspora, farmers, military, drivers, family, protesters, etc.</p>

The subsample of popular memetic sounds used by the supporters of Georgescu (150 videos) was coded by four coders using the multimodal model described in Table 2. Prior to full coding, all four coders participated in a training phase that included joint review of the codebook, pilot coding of a subsample, and clarification of ambiguous categories. Further, a randomly selected subsample of 20 videos of the dataset was independently coded by all four coders to assess intercoder reliability, and the pairwise agreement between coders ranged from 84 to 96 identical coding decisions out of 100, which was considered an acceptable level of agreement.

3.3. An Analysis of Calingeorgescuofficial Videos

The calingeorgescuofficial account’s activity dates back to the middle of 2022, with intense posting activity registered in early 2023, followed by a brief discontinuation, then an increase in posting activity in late 2023 and throughout 2024. Interest in the posted content registers an increase in the number of plays only in late August 2024, followed by a sharp increase in plays and overall engagement in late October and early November 2024, as shown in Figure 1. The weekly posting activity shows periods of intense activity, with 40 or 50 videos posted in the same week. The increases in the number of video plays follow a distinct pattern, with significant changes in weeks starting on 09-Sep-24, 11-Nov-24, and 18-Nov-24, respectively. The average duration of videos decreases from over 400 seconds in October 2022 and June 2023 to under 60 seconds in November 2024. The evolution of shares, digs, and comments over time on calingeorgescuofficial follows a similar pattern, with engagement numbers climbing sharply in late October 2024 to reach a peak just before the first round of the 2024 presidential election.

The videos posted between August 2022 and August 2024 are mostly recut and remediated from various TV appearances and only videos posted in the context of the presidential election campaign are more adapted to the TikTok format. To provide an overview of the candidate’s verbal discourse throughout the entire video dataset, we employed named entity recognition (Table 3). The entities (persons, organizations, and locations) mentioned in the transcripts of 720 videos from the calingeorgescuofficial dataset ($N = 749$) illustrate that the discourse relies heavily on references to historical and cultural figures that were cultivated by Romanian exceptionalist discourses (Țăranu, 2025) and which are familiar to all Romanians (figures featured frequently in primary and secondary education as well as featured on Romanian currency). The discourse blends these familiar symbols with discourses on world leaders, national institutions (The Church, The Army, The Academy), global powers, and global organizations. The global scope of the discourses is highlighted by frequent use of the words “world” and “earth,” making use of simple yet relatable notions. Georgescu instrumentalizes national symbols to evoke both pride in a glorified past and dissatisfaction with Romania’s current place in the world.

TikTok Publishing Patterns (Published Content & Video Plays) by Week

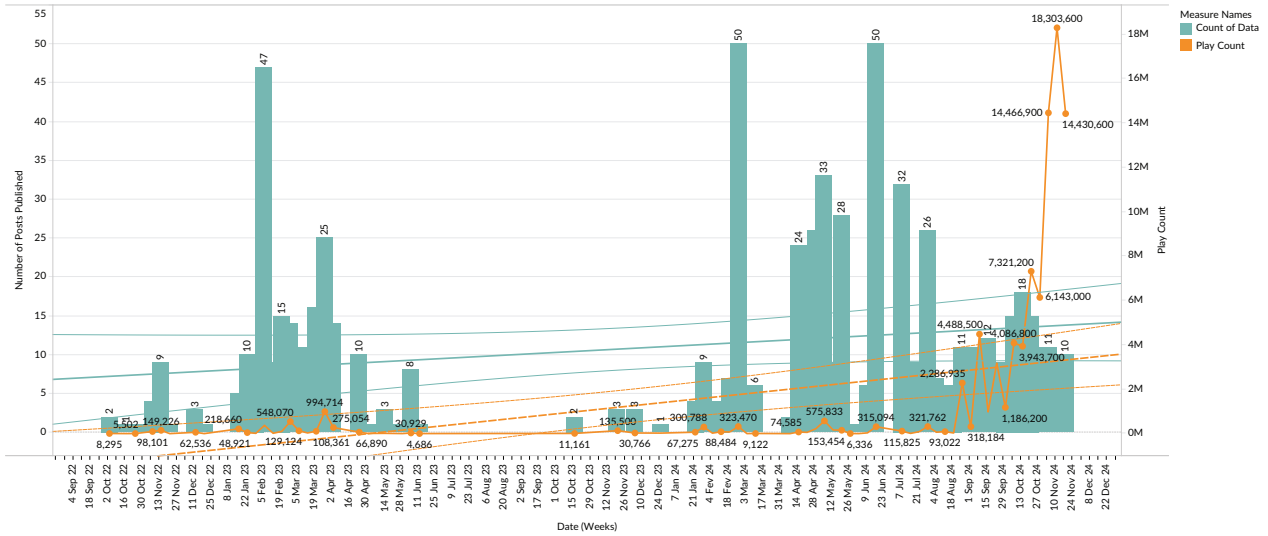


Figure 1. The distribution of posts and post playcounts over time on the calingeorgescuofficial account (August 2022 to November 2024) including trend lines: posts per week ($R^2 = 0.0360$, $p = 0.118117$), play count per week ($R^2 = 0.0187$, $p = 0.000199$). Notes: Outliers were detected in play count per week in weeks 09-Sep-24, 11-Nov-24, and 18-Nov-24.

Table 3. People, organizations, and locations identified through named entity recognition.

People	Organizations	Locations
Călin Georgescu (53)	EU (24)	Romania (258)
Mihai Eminescu (27)	UN (16)	World (101)
Mihai Viteazu (12)	NATO (11)	Europe (60)
Donald Trump (8)	Orthodox Church (10)	Earth (52)
Constantin Brâncuși (7)	Club of Rome (8)	USA (35)
George Simion (7)	Romanian Army (7)	Ukraine (31)
Ștefan cel Mare (7)	Romanian Academy (6)	Russia (23)
Vladimir Putin (6)	Social Democratic Party (6)	Bucharest (21)
George Soros (6)	BRICS (4)	China (20)

To summarize and answer RQ1, calingeorgescuofficial employs remediation of TV appearances and only content posted in the context of the election campaign clearly adapts to the affordances of TikTok. Popularity of the account spikes at the beginning of September, and then in the two weeks prior to the first round of the elections.

The calingeorgescuofficial account adapted to TikTok’s affordances only in a small number of videos that are either produced for digital distribution or remediated and edited to durations under 60 seconds. Eight out of the top 10 most-played videos are under 90 seconds long. Overall, the discourse focuses on familiar symbols, incorporating national icons and global themes.

3.4. Memetic Sounds as Affective Scaffolding in Political Campaign Communication

Our qualitative analysis of the aural templates indicates that TikTok's sounds feature is a low-friction source for elements that function as a collection of affective scripts for political expression that people can selectively draw upon to perform their political identity, in a "call-and-response" performance that does not require generating original content. These sounds contribute to the framing of the content they background, translating non-verbal, musical structures into fields of connotation that outline the public's political views. The modularity offered by TikTok's affordances allowed the campaign to scale rapidly, as supporters did not need to articulate policy; they only needed to perform the sound.

The qualitative mapping of these sounds, treated as museme stacks (Tagg, 2013), demonstrates a process of intense recontextualization. Rather than relying on purpose-built campaign materials, the observed content frequently repurposed existing cultural repertoires including hip-hop, pop-folk, and religious chants. This process of recontextualization allowed the campaign to scale rapidly across diverse demographic segments, "hijacking" the sounds to activate culturally shared schemas that align with the candidate's narratives.

We can organize these scripts into four primary thematic clusters:

- Messianic adoration: Scripts evoking religious and spiritual authority, positioning the candidate as a redemptive figure of hope.
- Martial ethos and sovereignty: Scripts involving military oaths and national anthems activate narratives of national pride, state duty, and protection against external threats.
- Identity and diaspora: Most frequently found in combination with the previous theme, these scripts are centered on themes of class struggle, the resilience of cultural identity, and a desire to overthrow the political order to reclaim their common roots.
- Anti-establishment resistance: Scripts involving repurposed subcultural symbols and anthemic calls-to-action are used to perform communal defiance against the perceived establishment—"the system."

To answer RQ2, the strategic use of these templates amplifies individual positions, grievances, and opinions into collective action. This repetition of the same affective scripts in widespread sharing contributes to the appearance of inevitable support, facilitating the "majority illusion" (Lerman et al., 2016). Our multimodal coding confirms that high-energy and high-stress aural moods are dominant, evoking a sense of urgency and struggle that is reinforced by on-camera performances. This approach to political communication suggests an "aural turn" which enables rapid mobilization through mimicry rather than a deliberative engagement. The ability to surface versatile, high-affect audio templates is a significant factor in achieving visibility within TikTok's algorithmic environment and this has potential implications for political movements that intend to adopt it as a communication platform for their movement.

The analysis assumes an assonant model reader. All sounds are subject to ironic interpretation by dissonant readers or may become inefficient in their communication to an unfamiliar reader (Eco, 1984, p. 7). Other issues that may show up in interpretation are codal incompetence—when the receiver and the transmitter do not share a common code (references, vocabulary, cultural awareness, etc.)—and codal interference—when even if the understanding can be shared, the meaning is distorted by personal contexts. But, as Tagg argues,

codal incompetence and interference are also essential to the renegotiation of music's meanings (Tagg, 2013, p. 178), which is especially relevant in the appropriation of sounds on TikTok.

The sounds used as memetic templates by supporters of the campaign attune to the identities of specific categories from which they emanated in previous months or years—the military, the police, the diaspora, the farmers, the transporters, the young, etc. Support for the candidate is expressed through participation in memetic phenomena that use the official campaign sound (S01) or reuse sounds that were previously attached to rituals of passage (S03), memorialization and nostalgia (S06, S07), participation in mobilization for a previous cause (S02), a specific group identity (S04), and older or relatively newer (S05) anthemic “wake up calls.”

3.5. An Analysis of Hashtags Associated With Aural Templates

The analysis of sounds used as aural templates and a sample of associated video metadata (1,400 posts) shows that with the exception of S01, which was a template of explicit support, most templates were repurposed or “hijacked” by supporters of Călin Georgescu in the weeks preceding the first round of the Romanian presidential elections.

Figures 2 and 3 further show that videos using most of the sounds described above in our analysis were already being used on TikTok before Călin Georgescu's campaign in various contexts related to categories such as police, riot police, and military (S03, S07), Romanian diaspora (S02, S04), farmers and drivers (S05, S06). Aural templates which were already successful in other contexts are repurposed to express support for Călin Georgescu. Figure 2, based on a crosstab analysis of coded hashtags in the text of the 1,400 posts that used one of the seven aural templates (S01–S07), shows that use of hashtags supporting the candidate specifically is exhibited only in the first weeks of November 2025. For Figures 2 and 3, the total frequencies are as follows: Calin_Georgescu ($n = 225$), reply ($n = 93$), duet ($n = 11$), elections ($n = 43$), voting ($n = 140$), protest_mobilisation ($n = 55$), viral_fyp ($n = 380$), diaspora ($n = 106$), farmers ($n = 36$), drivers ($n = 16$), and police&military ($n = 96$).

Especially in the case of the templates used in relation to the military or police, we can observe that their use predates the 2024 presidential campaign. Use of hashtags and aural templates associated categories, such as farmers and drivers or transporters, peaks in late 2023 and early 2024 in conjunction with protests on the Bucharest bypass which leaders of the two right-wing populist parties (George Simion and Diana Șoșoacă) attempted to capitalize upon, but were denied by protesters (Ștefănescu, 2024). Hashtag hijacking is not a new phenomenon (Hadgu et al., 2013) but the reuse of sounds and audio meme templates for coordinated campaigns has been recently studied in the context of computational propaganda on the invasion of Ukraine (Bösch & Divon, 2024).

The analysis of the aural templates' field of connotation shows that the campaign adapted to TikTok's affordances by leveraging the platform's “use this sound” feature to create a discursive repertoire (Brubaker, 2017), which also served as an aural architecture on which supporters could rely to express, or rather perform, their connection. This repertoire evoked culturally shared schemas (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017) including the figure of the messianic leader, historical victimhood, oppression and revolt (RQ2), and constructions of “the people” and of a sense of belonging by communal musical performances and subcultural symbols (RQ3), also mobilizing via references to crisis and awakening, emotionalized duty, military and religious, but also threats of violent revolt (RQ4).

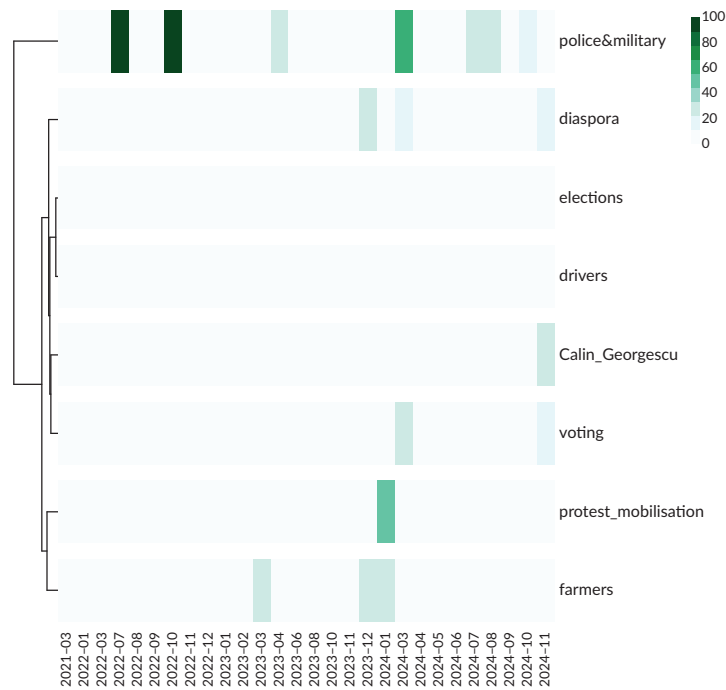


Figure 2. Overview of hashtag categories by month of use in the memetic sound dataset (N = 1,400). Notes: Chi-square for hashtag categories by months—Calin_Georgescu (278.231**), reply (426.195**), duet (511.711**), elections (29.28), voting (112.345**), protest_mobilisation (393.981**), viral_fyp (209.116**), diaspora (90.978**), farmers (233.618**), drivers (48.850**), police&military (171.616**); * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

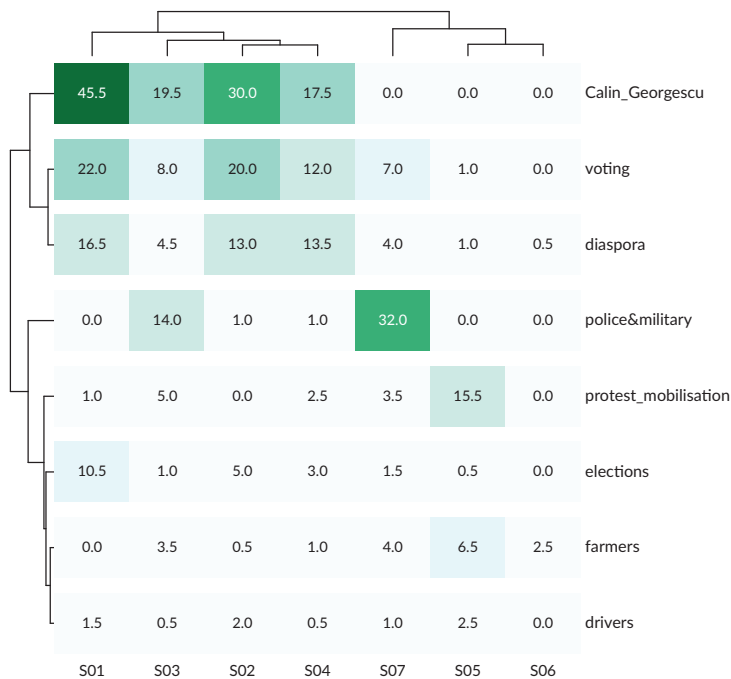


Figure 3. Overview of hashtag categories by sound used in the memetic sound dataset (N = 1,400, 200 documents per sound S1–S7). Notes: Chi-square for hashtag categories by sounds—Calin_Georgescu (274.117**), reply (189.260**), duet (12.645*), elections (54.895**), voting (98.222**), protest_mobilisation (93.642**), viral_fyp (87.771**), diaspora (74.224**), farmers (25.318**), drivers (8.598), police&military (279.588**); * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

3.6. A Multimodal Analysis of Videos Using Memetic Sounds

The 150 coded memetic videos show that, although joy/elation is the most frequently performed emotion on camera, fear generates more engagement on average. Analysis of sound-induced moods shows that high-energy sound templates are preferred and generate more engagement on TikTok. We found that most videos adopt a POV or a Vlog format and the use of the platform's dialogical remix affordances is limited (as seen in Table 4).

Table 4. Sound-induced moods by video types ($N = 150$, Chi-square = 11.10357).

Video type/Sound-induced mood	High energy/ high stress	High energy/ low stress	Low energy/ high stress	Low energy/ low stress
Original video—POV	22	21	12	11
Original video—Vlog	13	24	10	5
Remediated—Distribution	1	4	1	3
Remediated—Interpretation	5	9	4	2
Remix—Duet	1	1	–	–
Remix—Stitch	1	–	–	–

The mode of address in both POV and Vlog formats is, however, marked by the context of a polarized public and the elections, with most verbal (voice or text) expressions being formulated as agonistic, reactive to perceived disrespect from politicians or unnamed others, future threats of war, either over land or resources, or more frequently over issues of culture and identity. The use of audio meme templates corresponds to categories of users from whom they originated: on-camera performances using S03 emphasize martial ethos or POV performances using S02 feature the driver's perspective or cars. Performances over S01 are expressions of enthusiastic support, often featuring families or young adults.

The analysis of the videos using the predominant aural templates and supporting the candidate shows that the preferred platform affordance adopted was the individual-led formats, POV or Vlog, thus building the affective public via individual authenticity and repetitive reinforcement rather than dialogical commentary (RQ3). The preferred affective frames (Figure 4) are exuberance (high energy/low stress) in both Vlog and POV videos. High energy/high stress mood is dominant in POV videos, evoking a sense of urgency, stressed by on-camera performance. While joy is more frequently performed, fear generates more engagement, which, combined with the larger average play count of the high energy/high stress videos, contributes to the sense of urgency and struggle, also evoked by the cultural repertoires connoted by the templates (RQ2). Thus, support for the candidate is expressed primarily as a ritualized performance of personal emotion, individual testimonies recalling Carey's notion of confirmation (RQ3), creating an affective frame for support dominated by anxious/frantic or exuberant moods (RQ4).

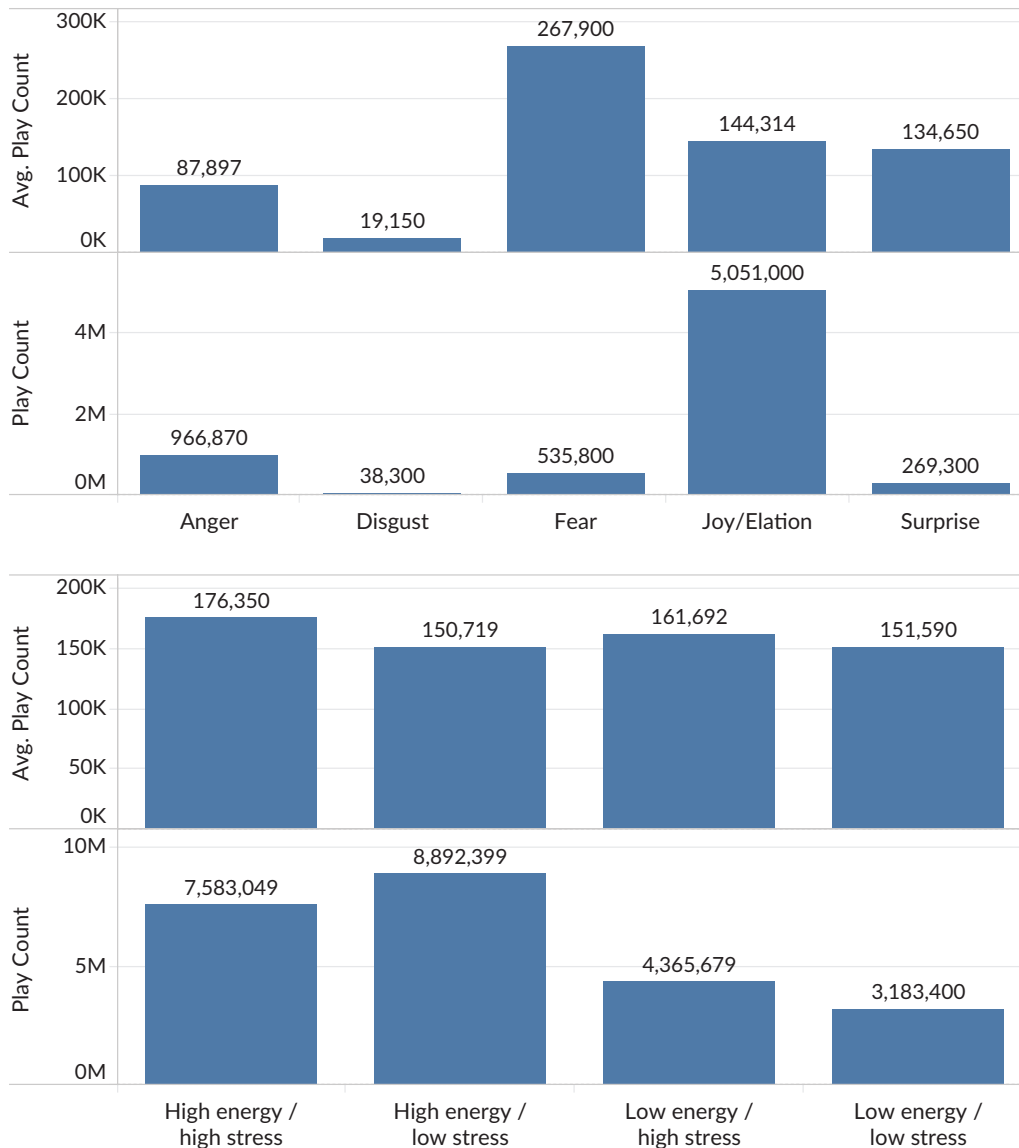


Figure 4. Total and average number of plays by dominant emotion expressed (top) and sound-induced mood (bottom; $N = 150$).

4. Conclusion

TikTok’s memetic function is used to create “a complex ecology of users’ imitation, affective attunement, and attention hijacking” (Bösch & Divon, 2024, p. 5086) through automated indexing and amplification based on users’ previous engagement. In the Romanian 2024 presidential election case, the grievances of farmers and transporters, the military ethos, and especially the feeling of disenfranchisement of the sizeable Romanian diaspora are effectively hijacked through the use of relatable memetic templates.

The use of a broad spectrum of sounds from different musical styles and categories contributes to the impression of widespread societal support—an effect dubbed the “majority illusion” in social networks (Lerman et al., 2016). This effect can be achieved through algorithmic hacking: Artificially boosting videos the moment they are posted to signal to the algorithm that the content is “viral.” Supporters of the

Georgescu campaign appear to have used memetic sounds to simulate and subsequently stimulate massive popular support. They targeted already mobilized communities of discontent (diaspora members, transporters, farmers, military personnel, and police officers) who were ready to rally around familiar and accessible symbols and references. These findings also demonstrate how TikTok's audio-centric architecture can serve as an affective scaffold for a political campaign by building discursive audience repertoires and ritualized performances of emotion. These performances connect individual testimony with collective action and function as an effective tool for networked mobilization.

New strategic communication in election campaigns may employ pop culture references, memetic sounds that are already familiar and relatable to many users to flood the feeds of large numbers of users with explicit or covert messages of support for a candidate or a cause. Communities connected by rituals anchored in sounds, hashtags, and verbal and non-verbal performances may be targeted by concerted political messages. The political candidate and their explicit presence manifested through content published on primary channels become just vessels, performing vague or familiar statements, maintaining wide addressability and relatability. These are then imbued with meaning by appropriating rituals associated with existing causes and grievances and adapting them for the performance of political support. In electoral communication, TikTok's feed seems to encourage acclamation by emoting and imitation, not abstract consideration and deliberation.

The research faced some limitations with respect to data collection since only data collected in the context of the aftermath of the first round of the annulled 2024 Romanian presidential elections could be used reliably. Controversy over the outcome and subsequent developments led to much of the content being removed. Within hours of the confirmation of the results of the first rounds of the election, during first data collection tests, content and entire accounts became unavailable. Subsequently, the analysis of content supporting Călin Georgescu was limited to a smaller sample of sounds since the data collection also included uses of the sounds unrelated to the Georgescu campaign. Mitigation was attempted by extending the analysis to include video types classification.

The proposed model, which extends the use of Ekman's classification of emotions expressed through facial expressions to sound-induced mood using Thayer's classification, coupled with qualitative analyses of sound templates informed by Tagg's parameters of musical expression and semantic fields, proved useful in integrating the analysis of the aural and visual dimensions in multimodal research. This is especially true since categories based on Ekman's or Thayer's models can be classified automatically and show promise for use in future mixed-methods research on larger samples.

The findings of the research on the Romanian 2024 "TikTok Messiah" align with recent scholarship on the intersection of far-right narratives and disinformation campaigns (Innes et al., 2021), including propaganda in the context of the invasion of Ukraine (Bösch & Divon, 2024), the utilization of historical references in addressing alleged crises within populist discourse (Meijen & Vermeersch, 2024; Menke & Wulf, 2021), and in-depth analyses of the exploitation of exceptionalism, protochronism, and autarky in recent sovereignist discourse (Țăranu, 2025).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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