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TikTok Edits, Vibes, Audio Memes: Participatory Propaganda in the 2025 German Federal Election Campaign

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Abstract

This article examines how participatory propaganda operated on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election, focusing on how platform-specific vernaculars—TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes—reshaped campaign communication. The study analyzes over 1,200 videos from official party and candidate accounts, alongside party-aligned fan videos, edits, and reused pro-party sounds to capture participatory diffusion. Participatory propaganda is conceptualized as co-performed, affect-driven political communication in which audiences create and amplify content. Participatory propaganda contrasts with classical persuasive campaigning in how persuasion is produced, privileging distributed participation, affective resonance, and blurred boundaries between elite and non-elite messaging. Combining platform ethnography and qualitative content analysis, it demonstrates five key markers: remixability, calls to action, coordination between official and unofficial actors, aesthetic and affective prioritization, and snowball virality. These dynamics unfold through TikTok edits (rapid visual sequencing), vibes (affective mood cues), and audio memes (reused sound snippets that carry shared meaning). The findings reveal how co-option and co-production intersect: Official campaigns employ remixable cues that grassroots actors transform into memeable narratives, while elite actors increasingly incorporate fan-produced edits and vibes into their messaging. Right-wing actors benefit most from dense supporter networks and decentralized production. Overall, campaign visibility and participatory uptake on TikTok hinge on affective infrastructures, complicating rational models of electoral communication. The article contributes to theorizing the platformization of politics by integrating campaign research and platform studies, emphasizing collective creativity as a defining feature of digital communication.

Keywords

campaigning; elections; fandom; political communication; political participation; propaganda; TikTok

1. Introduction

In the transition from mass media to the platform age (Klinger et al., 2023), political persuasion has further shifted toward participatory, networked, and affect-driven modes. During the 2025 German federal election, all Bundestag parties campaigned on TikTok (Bösch & Geusen, 2025). Yet it was often unofficial accounts who remixed political messages into playful, emotionally charged content via platform affordances such as TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes. Political communication on TikTok thus operates less through top-down broadcast than through practices co-enacted with audiences, producing hybrid forms of persuasion that blur the boundaries between official messaging and collective creativity (Asmolov, 2019; Wanless & Berk, 2021). While research on platform vernaculars and participatory practices is expanding, empirical work has largely focused on conflict, war, or authoritarian contexts (Chernobrov, 2025; Geboers & Pilipets, 2024). Participatory propaganda in democratic electoral contexts remains understudied, with few exceptions such as studies on the Russian-backed TikTok campaign during the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections (Gross & Schultz, 2025; Stanescu, 2024). This is despite evidence that TikTok's platform-specific logics profoundly alter how political messaging is produced, circulated, and received. This creates a need to link participatory cultures to campaign logics and to specify how platform-native aesthetics and vernaculars now shape political participation (Munger & Li, 2025). This article investigates how participatory propaganda functioned on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election, focusing on three core features: TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes. This study examines both official party and candidate accounts, and a diverse ecosystem of unofficial and fan accounts that not only algorithmically amplified political content but also created it. The research questions are:

> RQ1: How did political actors employ participatory propaganda techniques on TikTok during the campaign, particularly using TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes?

> RQ2: What was the nature of interaction between elite (party/candidate) and non-elite (authentic/inauthentic) actors?

Participatory propaganda is conceptualized as a co-performed, affect-driven mode of persuasion in which audiences act as agents of dissemination, amplification, and meaning-making (Asmolov, 2019; Wanless & Berk, 2020, 2021). The analysis is situated within frameworks of convergence culture, dark participation, and intensified platform vernaculars, where sound templates, visual editing, and affective cues function as primary idioms of political engagement (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Jenkins, 2009; Quandt & Klapproth, 2023). The empirical analysis draws on over 1,200 TikTok videos from party, candidate, and fan accounts, supplemented by additional accounts, sounds, and hashtags collected in February 2025. The article argues that TikTok's vernacular—anchored in sound, editing, and algorithmically amplified vibes—enables hybrid participatory propaganda that fuses co-option and co-production. This dynamic complicates normative models of rational deliberation and demonstrates how participatory propaganda becomes a routine feature of post-digital campaigning in European democracies. The case of the 2025 German federal election advances theory by integrating vernacular platform studies with campaign communication research and by demonstrating how TikTok's affordances relocate persuasive work from parties and candidates to supporters and fan accounts who produce, remix, and circulate political messages under algorithmic logics. While grounded in the German case, the mechanisms observed are platform-driven rather than nationally specific. In the following sections, the article defines edits, audio memes, and vibes as analytical entry points into

TikTok's participatory affordances and presents findings on (a) edits as aestheticized political fandom, (b) audio memes as sonic templates of participation, and (c) vibes as affective infrastructures of persuasion, followed by a synthesis of elite–non-elite interaction patterns.

2. Theory

2.1. From Propaganda to Participatory Propaganda

A Babylonian confusion of tongues is triggered by the mere mention of the word propaganda (Bussemer & Rollka, 2000), dating back to the 17th century and the Congregation de Propaganda Fide established by Pope Gregory XV (Guilday, 1921). Attempts to pin down and define propaganda scientifically have been manifold ever since. These efforts have consistently been shaped by historical media environments and social contexts. The early 21st century has seen a proliferation of concepts and terms surrounding propaganda (Olejnik, 2024). These concepts attempt to capture an expansive yet elusive phenomenon within a rapidly changing, platformized information environment. Within this expanding field (Radić, 2023), concepts such as computational propaganda (Howard & Woolley, 2018), network propaganda (Benkler et al., 2018), and participatory propaganda (Wanless & Berk, 2020) have been proposed to capture propaganda's contemporary forms in contemporary information environments. Participatory propaganda provides a useful lens for examining platform practices that aim to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior through affect-driven, co-performed dynamics involving both elite and non-elite actors.

2.2. Participatory Propaganda vs. Persuasive Campaigning

For much of the 20th century, campaigning, understood here as persuasive activity comprising strategic and orchestrated attempts to shape public opinion and direct action on behalf of political organizations and candidates (Lilleker et al., 2025), remained bounded and situated within a relatively confined and controllable communication environment (Jensen, 2017). Political communication was mediated by a limited number of actors—parties, newspapers, and broadcasters—and followed a predominantly top-down, monologic logic directed at passive audiences (Lilleker et al., 2025). In the platformized media ecology, these structural conditions have been fundamentally reconfigured. The communicative capacities of users are, as a technical matter, equivalent to those of institutional actors (Jensen, 2017). The dissolution of boundaries between producers, disseminators, and audiences (Jenkins, 2009) has produced a hybrid communicative field characterized by the simultaneity of top-down, bottom-up, and horizontal dynamics, resulting in participatory propaganda.

The distinction between traditional persuasive campaigning and participatory propaganda lies in a shift from static, top-down sender–receiver relations to fluid, multi-directional dynamics in which audiences act as active agents with equal technical means. Participatory propaganda differs from classical sender-driven persuasive campaigning in how persuasion is produced, not in whether influence is sought. While tactics in persuasive political campaigning could be deceptive, the source of a political advertisement or broadcast was usually apparent to the receiver. In contrast, a core feature of participatory propaganda is the possibility of obfuscation through blurred boundaries between elite and non-elite senders, alongside distributed re-authorship and peer circulation. Because trust is more likely to emerge through recommendations within personal social bonds and networks, participatory propaganda is theorized to gain credibility through

social recommendation and networked dissemination (Garrett & Weeks, 2013, as cited in Wanless & Berk, 2020).

2.3. Participatory Propaganda: Co-Option and Co-Production

Participatory propaganda is understood as a co-performed, affect-driven mode of persuasion in which elite and non-elite actors act as agents of dissemination, amplification, and meaning-making. It has "only recently been identified as a distinct form of propaganda that deserves to be studied in its own right" (Lewandowsky, 2022, p. 13). The concept has been developed by scholars including Asmolov (2019), Starbird et al. (2023), and Wanless and Berk (2020), who emphasize different mechanisms, effects, and dynamics. All authors highlight that participatory propaganda fundamentally shifts the audience's role from passive consumers to active agents in the communication process. Two central emphases can be distinguished: co-option and co-production.

Co-option emphasizes how propagandists enlist their audiences to disseminate propaganda. Wanless and Berk (2021) provide a formal definition:

> Participatory propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior of a target audience while seeking to co-opt its members to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications, to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. (p. 113)

The nuanced difference from traditional propaganda lies in the fact that modern technologies allow propagandists not only to push a message but also to gain audience "buy-in" through content that triggers engagement. This engagement transforms users from passive consumers into active campaigners, constituting what Wanless and Berk describe as a qualitatively more enhanced form of propaganda that is much more "invasive."

Co-production, by contrast, describes processes where propaganda content or narratives are collaboratively assembled through mutual or shared creation "co-produced by regimes and citizens" (Asmolov, 2019, p. 9). Asmolov argues that participatory propaganda exploits the participatory design of digital networks, shifting from one-to-many communication to a "one-to-many-to-many" model in which targets become new originators, producing snowball effects. Starbird et al. (2023) apply similar reasoning in their analysis of participatory disinformation during the 2020 US election, highlighting collaboration between elites and audiences. They conceptualize participatory disinformation as a hybrid of top-down and bottom-up dynamics. The distinction between co-option and co-production centers on audience agency and intent. Co-option describes the mechanism by which the audience is persuaded to become a delivery vehicle for the propagandist's predetermined message, whereas co-production describes the collective, collaborative effort between elites and the audience in generating the components of the message or narrative itself. Both dynamics can coexist within the same campaign, making participatory propaganda a hybrid phenomenon that combines elite direction with grassroots creativity.

Participatory propaganda can be identified in practice through several markers: content explicitly designed for remixing and sharing (such as templates or audio tracks); implicit or explicit calls to action encouraging

audience participation in message dissemination; evidence of coordination or interaction between official institutional accounts and unofficial supporter accounts; prioritization of affective and aesthetic appeal over deliberative argumentation; and the presence of "snowball effects" where individual users become new originators of distribution. These markers constitute the analytical framework guiding the empirical analysis.

2.4. Empirical Contexts and Research Gaps

Empirical studies of participatory propaganda have so far mostly centered on conflict zones, authoritarian systems, and the US. Gharavi and Gilpin (2025) observed participatory authoritarianism, while Geboers and Pilipets (2024) investigated participatory propaganda in Ukrainian wartime posters and through music on TikTok. Chernobrov (2025) examined online narrative battles between Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas during the 2020 Karabakh war. Repnikova and Fang (2018) documented how Chinese authorities increasingly enlist ordinary internet users as active collaborators in propaganda and public opinion campaigns. In the US context, Watson (2025) showed how YouTube political influencers and their followers jointly propagate conservative narratives in a participatory manner. Outside the US, however, empirical studies of participatory propaganda in democratic elections remain scarce (Seppälä, 2022). Notable exceptions include recent analyses of TikTok campaigns during the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections, which focus primarily on foreign information and manipulation interference (Gross & Schultz, 2025; Stanescu, 2024). This study broadens the empirical scope by examining participatory propaganda in the context of democratic election campaigning in Europe. It examines strategies and practices applied by German elite and non-elite actors on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election. This research enhances important work on participatory cultures in earlier political campaigns, as demonstrated by Jungherr (2012) on the German federal election of 2009, and contributes to understanding how participatory propaganda operates across diverse political systems and communication environments.

2.5. TikTok's Platform Affordances

Before turning to TikTok's political vernaculars, it is necessary to outline the platform's affordances—the technical and cultural conditions shaping user practices (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022). TikTok's design centers on an algorithmic "For You Page," short-form vertical video with integrated audio and editing tools, and an interface optimized for rapid, continuous engagement. These features privilege aesthetic appeal, affective intensity, and algorithmic amplification, shaping how users encounter and rework political content. Building on prior analyses of TikTok campaigning and right-wing communication strategies (Bösch, 2023), this study identifies three key vernaculars—vibes, edits, and audio memes—central to participatory propaganda on the platform. While edits, audio memes, and vibes are not exclusive to TikTok, its affordances and algorithmic logics uniquely operationalize, align, and amplify these practices. The following analysis therefore treats them as platform-specific articulations of participatory propaganda within TikTok's electoral ecology.

2.5.1. TikTok Edits: Aestheticized Political Fandom

TikTok edits constitute a genre in which creators stylize footage, often of political figures, through rapid cuts, music synchronization, effects, and filters (Terpak, 2024). As Munger and Li (2025) argue, edits function as political fandom, prioritizing aesthetic appeal—making a politician "look good"—over policy-based persuasion. The significance of edits lies in their departure from facticity as a criterion for political

communication. Previous modalities of social media, particularly text-based platforms, placed significant emphasis on whether statements were true or false. For edits, facticity is beside the point (Munger & Li, 2025). Instead, these videos prioritize aesthetic appeal, emotional resonance, and the construction of parasocial affinity with political figures. The genre's informal designation as "thirst traps"—a term typically associated with sexualized self-presentation—signals its orientation toward visual appeal and affective attraction rather than substantive political argumentation. Experimental work suggests that exposure to such edits can influence viewers' evaluations of target politicians under specific conditions, highlighting that aesthetic presentation may shape political impressions (Munger & Li, 2025). This represents a shift toward what might be called "vibe-based" political evaluation, where feelings about a politician's presentation matter as much as or more than substantive political considerations. Moreover, the scope of the "political" expressible through video suggests an expanding role for this form of communication in 21st-century political discourse (Munger & Li, 2025).

2.5.2. Audio Memes: Sonic Templates of Participation

Audio memes constitute a distinctive and structurally central feature of TikTok's ecology. Building on research defining memes as units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by users (Shifman, 2013), audio memes extend memetic logic into the sonic domain. Unlike visual memes, audio memes function as sonic templates—snippets of music, dialogue, or sound effects—that users appropriate and remix across videos (Pilipets & Chao, 2025). These sounds become shared cultural resources that carry affective associations and contextual meanings that accumulate through repeated use. On TikTok, the same audio track can circulate across thousands of videos, forming what Pilipets and Chao (2025) term "memetic soundscapes." These sonic environments allow accumulated associations to travel across contexts within TikTok's sound-driven interface (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). When applied to political content, audio memes frame interpretation even before visual content is fully processed, creating an immediate affective orientation toward the message. This represents a form of remix culture (Denisova, 2019; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) where political expression emerges through the creative reappropriation of existing sonic materials. Audio memes are not politically neutral. Research shows that TikTok's auditory practices are exploited to intensify information disorders in conflict contexts (Bösch & Divon, 2024) and by far-right actors to circulate political messaging (Geboers & Bösch, 2025). Audio memes thus serve dual functions: They lower barriers to political participation through templated creativity while simultaneously enabling forms of political manipulation. By inviting users to co-produce political meaning through shared sound templates, audio memes can serve as a participatory propaganda practice.

2.5.3. Vibes: Affective Infrastructures of Persuasion

Vibes describe the atmosphere and feeling of spaces, events, experiences, and content both online and offline (Brown et al., 2024) that have been incorporated into digital vernaculars and have been transformed into commodities (Lupinacci, 2025). Vibes represent a shift away from shared intelligibility and factual authority toward a world where performative resonance and emotional alignment determine what is perceived as real or important, as Fendt (2025) argues. In the context of TikTok, vibes refer to a combination of symbolic, aesthetic, contextual, and taste-related elements that create particular moods or affective experiences (Royuela, 2025). Unlike traditional concepts of affect or emotion in media studies, vibes capture the colloquial understanding users themselves employ to describe their experiences on the platform.

As Kender (2022) demonstrates, users attribute distinct affective qualities to different social media spaces—characterizing platforms by their overall vibe—which shapes expectations for how interaction and expression should unfold. By examining vibes on TikTok, it is possible to explore the affective dynamics that capture the attention of TikTok users and the ways in which their affective states lead them to scroll in search of particular vibes (Royuela, 2025). In political communication, vibes function as a mode of evaluation that operates alongside or even supersedes traditional criteria like policy positions or factual accuracy. Research on far-right movements demonstrates how "vulgar vibes" can constitute a form of affective politics that mobilizes support through emotional resonance rather than ideological coherence (Leander & Lobato, 2025). Political content succeeds when it generates a desired vibe—signaling casualness, coolness, desire, or other diffuse affective and bodily responses (Miles, 2023). In what Fendt (2025) terms a "vibocracy," a societal condition in which public life and decision-making are shaped by affective resonance, performative legitimacy, and unstable epistemic frames, the production of such vibes becomes a functional requirement of political communication rather than a supplementary stylistic device.

To translate these conceptual insights into empirical observation, the following analysis situates participatory propaganda within the communicative ecology of the 2025 German federal election, where TikTok emerged as a central site of political meaning-making.

2.6. The 2025 German Federal Election: TikTok as Political Battleground

The 2025 German federal election represents a pivotal moment in TikTok's evolution as a space for political communication. For the first time, all parties represented in the 20th Bundestag actively used the platform to reach approximately 23 million German users, marking a decisive shift from the 2024 European Parliament elections, when several parties remained absent (Bösch, 2024). Between January 1 and February 23, 2025, official candidate and party accounts generated a combined 363.9 million views, illustrating TikTok's unprecedented reach and engagement potential. The election thus offers a unique opportunity to observe participatory propaganda under conditions of full-party adoption, where platform affordances and vernaculars directly shape campaign strategies.

In response to AfD dominance on TikTok, democratic parties adopted platform-appropriate strategies, shifting from rational-informative, sender–receiver communication toward emotionally charged, participatory messaging (Bösch & Geusen, 2025). Successful campaigns, particularly those of the AfD and Die Linke, benefited from active ecosystems of unofficial accounts that fulfilled the participatory aspirations of politically engaged users (Neuberger et al., 2019). In TikTok's fleeting and dense information flow, campaigns are difficult to plan and control as publics organize emergently and bottom-up, with memetic narratives and trends appearing, disappearing, and transforming rapidly. This context makes vibes, edits, and audio memes not merely stylistic choices but strategic necessities for political actors seeking to penetrate the platform's "noise" (Salvaggio, 2024) and reach fragmented audiences.

Building on the theoretical framework of participatory propaganda and the specific context of the 2025 German federal election, this study investigates the two questions:

> RQ1: How did political actors employ participatory propaganda techniques on TikTok during the campaign? This question examines whether and how elite and non-elite users deliberately leveraged

participatory mechanisms based on the three features—TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes—to amplify their messaging, and what specific practices characterized these strategies.

RQ2: What was the nature of interaction between elite (party/candidate) and non-elite (authentic/ inauthentic) actors? This question explores whether the relationship between official party accounts and unofficial fan accounts is better characterized as co-option (elites enlisting audiences to spread predetermined messages), co-production (collaborative creation of political narratives), or alternative configurations.

3. Methodology

To analyze participatory propaganda during the 2025 German federal election campaign on TikTok, the study examined content produced by (a) elite actors, official accounts operated by political parties and leading candidates, and (b) non-elite actors, including both authentic and inauthentic user accounts. Accounts were identified, labeled, scraped, and systematically analyzed to trace interaction patterns and content characteristics across actor types. Authentic accounts were identified based on observable cues such as identifiable user handles, profile images, and consistent posting behavior. Inauthentic accounts lacked such indicators and operated under anonymity. The authentic/inauthentic distinction is used pragmatically to trace coordination and amplification rather than to claim objective verification.

The data comprise three corpora. Corpus A includes posts from the official TikTok accounts (lead candidate and one central party account) of all parties represented in the 20th German Bundestag (AfD, BSW, CDU, Greens, Die Linke, FDP, SPD) from January 1 to February 23, 2025 ($n = 1,207$). Corpus B captures non-elite actors. These accounts were identified via an exploratory user-centric approach (walkthrough method) supported by systematic election- and party-related hashtag searches. This approach identified party-aligned non-elite accounts through cues such as user handles, profile images, and consistent hashtag usage. The process allowed the identification of an ecosystem of unofficial "fan accounts" that produced content supporting specific parties or candidates. Sampling stopped once two fan accounts per party were identified. The author qualitatively analyzed 56 fan videos from 28 accounts (two per party; see Section 4.3). In addition, candidate-name + "edit" hashtag searches yielded 3,230 edit videos (see Section 4.1). Corpus C examines audio diffusion through 10 pro-party sounds used by both elite and non-elite actors; the most widely used sound appeared in approximately 9,000 videos (see Section 4.2). Counts of edits and sound usage are reported to illustrate circulation dynamics and scale, not to claim comprehensive coverage. All videos were downloaded on February 24, 2025, using Zeeschuimer, a browser-based data collection tool, and subsequently processed in 4CAT. The analysis focused on selected information-rich cases (Sandelowski, 1995) and combined immersive platform observation with qualitative content analysis. An iterative coding process assessed each video for the presence and function of edits, audio memes, and vibes as they materialized on TikTok, alongside markers of participatory propaganda. Edits, audio memes, and vibes were coded with attention to aesthetic emphasis, sound reuse and diffusion, and affective atmospheres shaping political evaluation. The markers used for participatory propaganda are:

- Marker 1: content explicitly designed for remixing and sharing;
- Marker 2: implicit or explicit calls to action encouraging audience participation;
- Marker 3: evidence of coordination between official and unofficial accounts;

- Marker 4: prioritization of affective and aesthetic appeal over deliberative argumentation;
- Marker 5: presence of "snowball effects" where users became new originators of distribution.

Several methodological limitations apply. First, TikTok's algorithmic distribution produces feed-specific exposure, introducing selection bias. Although systematic hashtag and account monitoring mitigated this, comprehensive sampling remained impossible. Second, content ephemerality and platform restrictions (e.g., scraping limits) constrained data collection. Third, the study examines production and circulation rather than audience interpretation or behavioral effects; engagement metrics indicate participatory uptake rather than persuasion.

4. Findings

The following analysis examines how participatory propaganda materialized on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election through the platform-specific vernaculars of TikTok edits, audio memes, and vibes. The findings trace how parties and candidates attempted to mobilize users and how audiences co-produced and amplified campaign messages. The empirical subsections below contain information-rich cases exemplifying recurring patterns. These cases are used to illustrate how the five markers and vernacular forms materialize, rather than to claim frequency-based representativeness for the entire election discourse. This section addresses RQ1 and RQ2 by identifying patterns of co-option, co-production, and hybrid interaction between elite and non-elite actors. All parties engaged with platform conventions such as popular sounds, routines, and memes, including the *Busfahrergruß* ("bus-driver wave") performed by Scholz (SPD) and Robert Habeck (Greens). These adaptations already indicate marker 1: content intentionally designed for remixing and sharing within platform vernaculars. Some campaigns explicitly invited participation: On 8 January, AfD leader Alice Weidel urged supporters to redistribute campaign materials on their own channels, offering incentives such as signed merchandise—an example of marker 2. These practices illustrate how the AfD's "TikTok Army" sustains algorithmic visibility through coordinated official and unofficial activity (marker 3), with comparative studies identifying up to 12,790 AfD-affiliated fan accounts versus fewer than 900 for the SPD (Wetzel & Kiess, 2025). According to Dittrich et al. (2025), decentralized production ecologies rather than centralized orchestration underpin the AfD's dominance. By contrast, Die Linke displayed emergent co-production between authentic user accounts and official content, with affective and aesthetic engagement outweighing deliberative argumentation (marker 4). The following subsections unpack these participatory strategies along the three analytical dimensions of vibes, audio memes, and TikTok edits.

4.1. TikTok Edits: Aestheticized Political Fandom (Co-production)

TikTok edits expose the platform's visual affordances—the ways cutting, syncing, and stylizing footage convert political messaging into vernacular spectacle. These edits operationalize marker 1 (remixability) and marker 4 (aesthetic prioritization), converting political figures into fan-style visual templates. A prominent example of TikTok edits in German political communication appears under the hashtag #weidelknecht. For several years, edits under this hashtag have framed an imagined same-sex relationship between AfD leader Alice Weidel and Die Linke politician Sahra Wagenknecht. By the end of 2022, these videos had accumulated 61.4 million views (Bösch, 2023). Although TikTok later restricted hashtag view counts, searches still yield over 1,000 remix variations built from stylized television footage with sexualized connotations. Experimental research by

Munger and Li (2025) suggests that edits as a form of political fandom can influence viewers' evaluations of target politicians. This effect may be particularly pronounced when edits take on "thirst trap" aesthetics. A "thirst trap" refers to online content designed to attract attention and engagement through flirtation or visual allure (Boffone & Rosvally, 2023). Throughout the election campaign, TikTok edits of Alice Weidel, Robert Habeck, Heidi Reichinnek, and Christian Lindner repeatedly appeared in the platform walkthrough and hashtag-based observation. Labels such as "daddy" or "Kanzlerbabe" applied to edits of Robert Habeck illustrate the sexualized, affective framing typical of thirst-trap aesthetics. Fan edits exemplify a bottom-up dynamic in which non-elite users remix and enhance political footage. Because they originate outside official channels, their positionality imbues them with additional meaning and affect. Non-elite users are not co-opted into active engagement but choose to engage in an "acting together" (Asmolov, 2019). Tracking the entirety of TikTok edits on any topic is nearly impossible due to opaque content streams and diminishing access to reliable platform metrics (Kupferschmidt, 2025). Hashtags are one way to try quantifying results, yet hashtags are losing their relevance with fewer users applying them. Not every TikTok edit has a respective hashtag in the captions, yet an overview of those that have at least gives an impression about the prevalence and popularity of candidate-focused TikTok edits. For comparison, the author analyzed hashtags combining candidates' names with the term "edit." Although this method doesn't capture every existing edit (since not all use the hashtag), it still provides a meaningful indication of distribution. TikTok search results show: #aliceweideledit = 2,388 videos (as seen in Figure 1); #roberthabeckedit = 276; #heidireichinnekedit = 237; #christianlindneredit = 219; #sahrawagenknechtedit = 88; #olafscholzedit = 22; #friedrichmerzedit = no results. Once again, the AfD and its support network leverage platform affordances to circulate emotionally amplified content, generating higher visible participatory uptake than other parties. The iterative circulation of these edits, continually remixed by new users, illustrates marker 5: a snowball effect in which individual creators become new nodes of distribution. TikTok edits exemplify co-production in a bottom-up dynamic: Unofficial users transform existing political imagery into emotionally charged fan artefacts that circulate independently of party control. These findings position TikTok edits as a core mechanism of participatory propaganda rooted in co-production rather than co-option. Non-elite users do not merely amplify elite messaging but actively transform political imagery through remixing, aestheticization, and iterative circulation. The uneven distribution of edits—most pronounced around AfD figures—indicates that co-production is shaped by dense, platform-savvy supporter networks. Rather than functioning as classical persuasion, TikTok edits operate as infrastructures of affective alignment shaped by peer visibility, repetition, and snowball-like dissemination. These dynamics extend theories of participatory propaganda by foregrounding vernacular aesthetics as a central mechanism of political meaning-making in platformized environments.
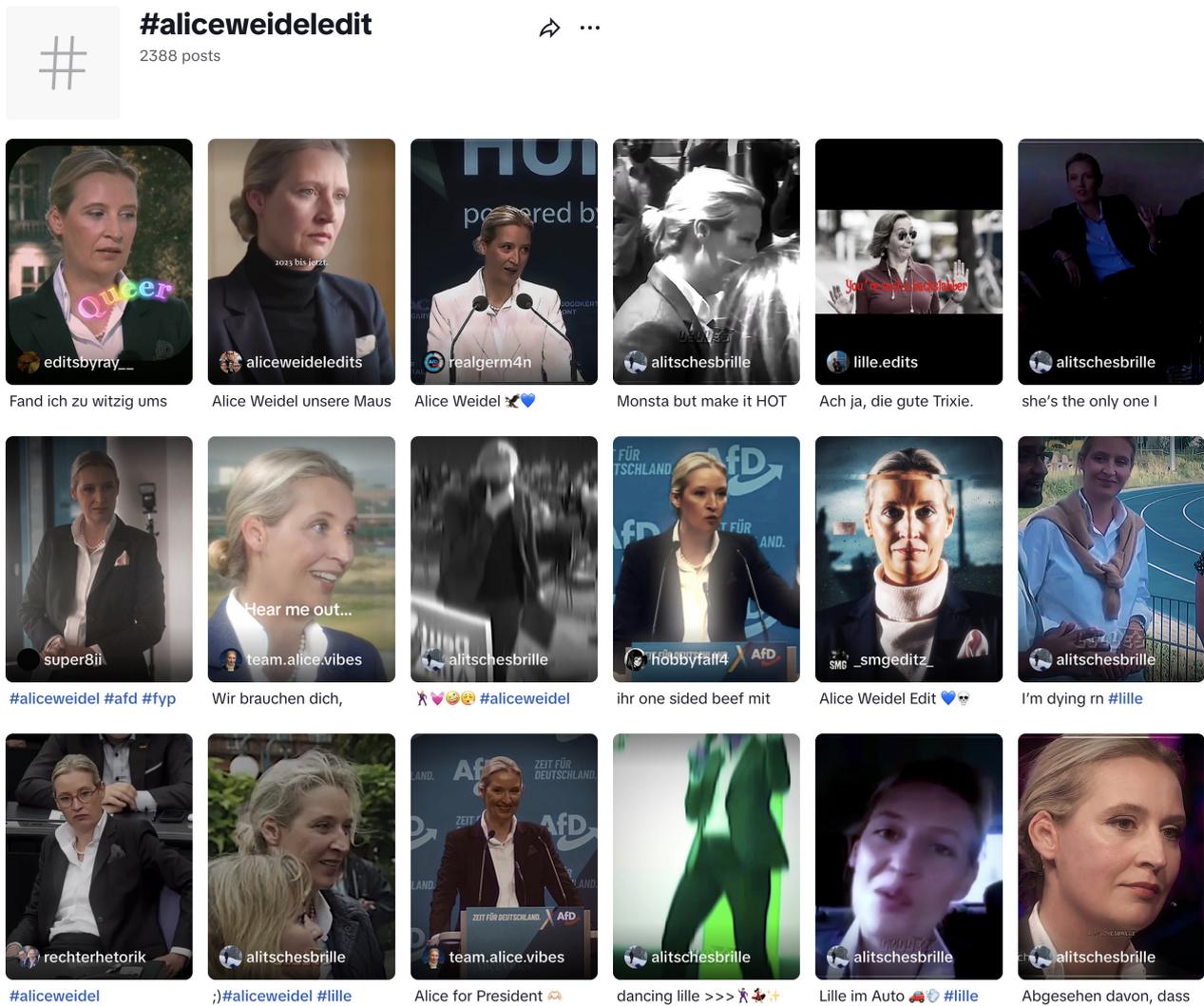
Figure 1. Overview of TikTok edits under #aliceweideledit portraying Alice Weidel as a central, fan-framed protagonist, illustrating the aestheticization and affective personalization of political figures through platform vernaculars. Source: TikTok (n.d.-a).

4.2. Audio Memes: Sonic Templates of Participation (Co-Option/Co-Production)

Audio memes mobilize the algorithmic power of sound. Their prominence in German political communication became visible in August 2024 when Caren Lay, then deputy chairwoman of Die Linke, published a female "empowerment version" of German rapper Shirin David's hit "Bauch Beine Po." The video garnered 1.8 million views, triggered coverage in major German media, and inspired further politically modified songs. Facing poor polling results, Die Linke increasingly relied on sound-driven campaigning that enabled decentralized dissemination and amplification. However, reach and interaction were not primarily driven by official accounts. A sound snippet from a speech by Die Linke's top candidate Jan van Aken became a successful audio meme in February 2025. In the now-deleted original video posted by @die.linke.wiesbaden, van Aken states: "You a**hole. Of course your daughter is scared when there's a bunch of men standing around—but it doesn't matter whether they're migrants or not. The problem isn't migration, it's men." The sound was predominantly adopted by accounts presenting as young women. It was re-used in 3,292 videos between February 11 and February 24, 2025. Figure 2 provides a selection of five of

these 3,292 videos. Most videos feature young women lip-syncing or dancing, with captions expressing approval (e.g., "I love this sound," "Exactly what he said," "Oh he cooked"). This mass replication exemplifies marker 5, as participants become new originators of the message.
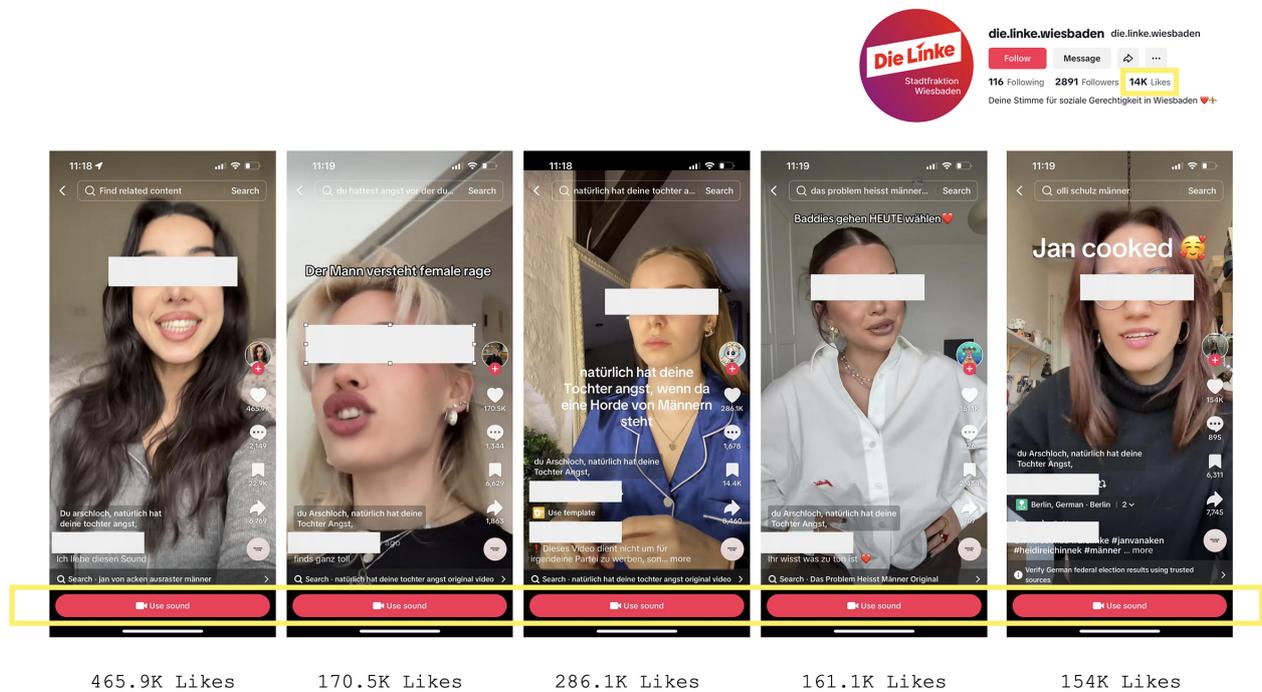

Figure 2. Illustration of an audio meme's circulation showing that five non-elite TikTok creators achieved substantially higher engagement with a reused campaign sound than the official Die Linke Wiesbaden account that originally posted it, exemplifying bottom-up amplification. Source: TikTok (n.d.-b).

In terms of likes, the popularity of these 3,292 videos distinctly exceeded that of the original. By February 24, 2025, the source account had generated 14,000 likes, while the five most prominent derivative videos alone exceeded 1.2 million likes. The statement's spread was thus outsourced to audiences, becoming emotionally charged, relatable, and credible through affirmation. The "you a**hole" sound exemplifies successful co-option of audiences into message proliferation. The case also demonstrates markers 1 and 2: remixable content and implicit invitations to participate. TikTok's sound-driven logic enabled Die Linke to gain audience buy-in rather than merely push a message. The message gained urgency and credibility when performed by thousands of female creators potentially affected by misogyny, rather than delivered by van Aken himself. Van Aken was recast as a sympathetic ally through captions and comments. This case exemplifies co-option: the strategic repurposing of emotional speech into participatory sound templates.

A contrasting dynamic appears in the AfD's use of sound memes, characterized by co-production and inauthentic amplification. A deep, echoing—likely AI-generated—male voice intones "AfD, Deutschland braucht die AfD" (AfD, Germany needs the AfD), followed by the rhythmic refrain "Ja, nur die AfD" (Yes, only the AfD). Layered beats and hi-hats build an earworm-like 15-second loop that circulated widely. By February 2025, the sound had been used in over 9,000 videos promoting the AfD. The original creator remains unknown as the original video has since been deleted. The name of the song "BeatBackDrop" links to an anonymous account re-publishing successful songs with generic landscape and motorsport video content. It has been released under multiple author names across platforms including Spotify, YouTube, and

Apple Music. While it is not possible to trace back the original creator, the entirety of videos using the sound offers a glimpse into the world of AfD supporters. Alongside authentic users lip-syncing alone or in groups, numerous inauthentic accounts (e.g., @afdsupporter73, @afddeutschland5) disseminate edits, digital posters, or AI-generated content such as dancing smurfs. A dominant visual indicator is the blue heart emoji in all sizes, signaling pro-AfD sentiment as sticker, comment, or caption. Only isolated official AfD accounts (e.g., @afd.rheinpfalzkreis) use the sound; most videos reflect bottom-up co-production that extends beyond one-to-many communication into one-to-many-to-many dynamics. Across both cases, the prioritization of sonic affect over rational debate reflects marker 4, while dissemination practices illustrate marker 5. These cases show that audio memes are a core feature of participatory propaganda, combining co-option and co-production into a hybrid dynamic of elite direction and grassroots creativity. Studies focusing solely on official accounts thus overlook how unofficial actors dominate dissemination and amplification, often exceeding engagement levels of party accounts.

Audio memes extend theories of participatory propaganda by foregrounding sound as a key infrastructural element of co-option and co-production. Rather than relying on explicit ideological messaging, audio memes function as reusable affective templates that lower the threshold for participation while embedding political meaning within popular cultural formats. This refines existing propaganda models by showing how co-option increasingly operates through templated participation, where audiences are invited to align affectively through repetition rather than persuasion through argument. At the same time, the AfD examples demonstrate how co-production can emerge through decentralized and opaque networks that blur the boundaries between authentic expression, strategic amplification, and inauthentic coordination. Together, these cases suggest that participatory propaganda on TikTok is less about controlling narratives than about stabilizing sonic environments that sustain circulation and visibility across heterogeneous actors.

4.3. Vibes: Affective Infrastructures of Persuasion (Incorporation/Amplification)

If audio memes mark the sonic dimension of participatory propaganda, vibes capture its affective atmosphere—how tone, style, and performed authenticity drive engagement. The misfire of FDP politician Christian Dürr exemplifies this dynamic. In October 2024, Dürr joined the "Gen-Z wrote the script" trend, reading slang-filled lines meant to display youthful flair (Booth, 2024). Yet despite repeatedly invoking the word vibe, his delivery felt inauthentic, prompting mockery on TikTok and in traditional media (Skibbe, 2024). The misfire highlights a "vibe economy," where success depends less on factual accuracy than on convincingly performed authenticity and affective alignment (Fendt, 2025; Lübke, 2021). In this context, parties such as the CDU pursued incorporation strategies spanning co-option and co-production (Asmolov, 2019; Wanless & Berk, 2021). Reflecting marker 3, official actors integrated user innovations into top-down messaging to amplify platform-native, affective narratives. "Young Friedrich" illustrates this: The official CDU account reproduced core elements of a video first posted by an inauthentic user to capture its vibe.

On April 29, 2024, @conservo.de posted an 11-second edit titled "Young Friedrich," featuring archival footage of Friedrich Merz (as seen in Figure 3) set to a slowed-down version of ATC's "Around the World." The montage, combining 1994 campaign clips that Merz had re-uploaded to YouTube in 2021, shows a young Merz thinking, smiling, and nodding—stylized through synchronized cuts and filters (Terpak, 2024). As Munger and Li (2025) note, such edits embody political fandom, aiming to make politicians look good rather than persuade through policy or competence. Facticity is beside the point as Merz, 70 years old, is not a "Young Friedrich" any longer

but presumably has been—at least in this vibey fan-edit. Here a certain cheeky, mischievous yet friendly "Merz Vibe" is conveyed that feels relatable and aspirational for a younger target audience due to the fact that inside the political "icon" is still a young boy from the Sauerland region. The term "Merz Vibes," often emphasized with glitter emojis, later appeared in official TikTok videos by CDU Deutschland. Team Merz, a self-proclaimed "officially unofficial" TikTok channel that is run by members of the CDU, publishes an edit on February 14 that tries to utilize affects and emotions. Team Merz uses the term "aura" positioned in bold captions as a textual overlay for the entire video. "Aura," Germany's youth word of the year 2024, denotes perceived charisma or presence. Aura functions as a mode of evaluation that can supersede policy or factual accuracy, privileging felt resonance over programmatic persuasion. The accompanying sound is a slowed-down track by electronic producer Ogryzek, reinforcing an aura of masculine power. The video's style in tempo and visual design closely resembles that of @conservo.de's version. Symbolically, Team Merz reads as an evolution of "Young Friedrich," recoding the smirking youth into a figure of confident, near-term leadership. Merz Vibes and Aura have evolved into an official communication strategy.
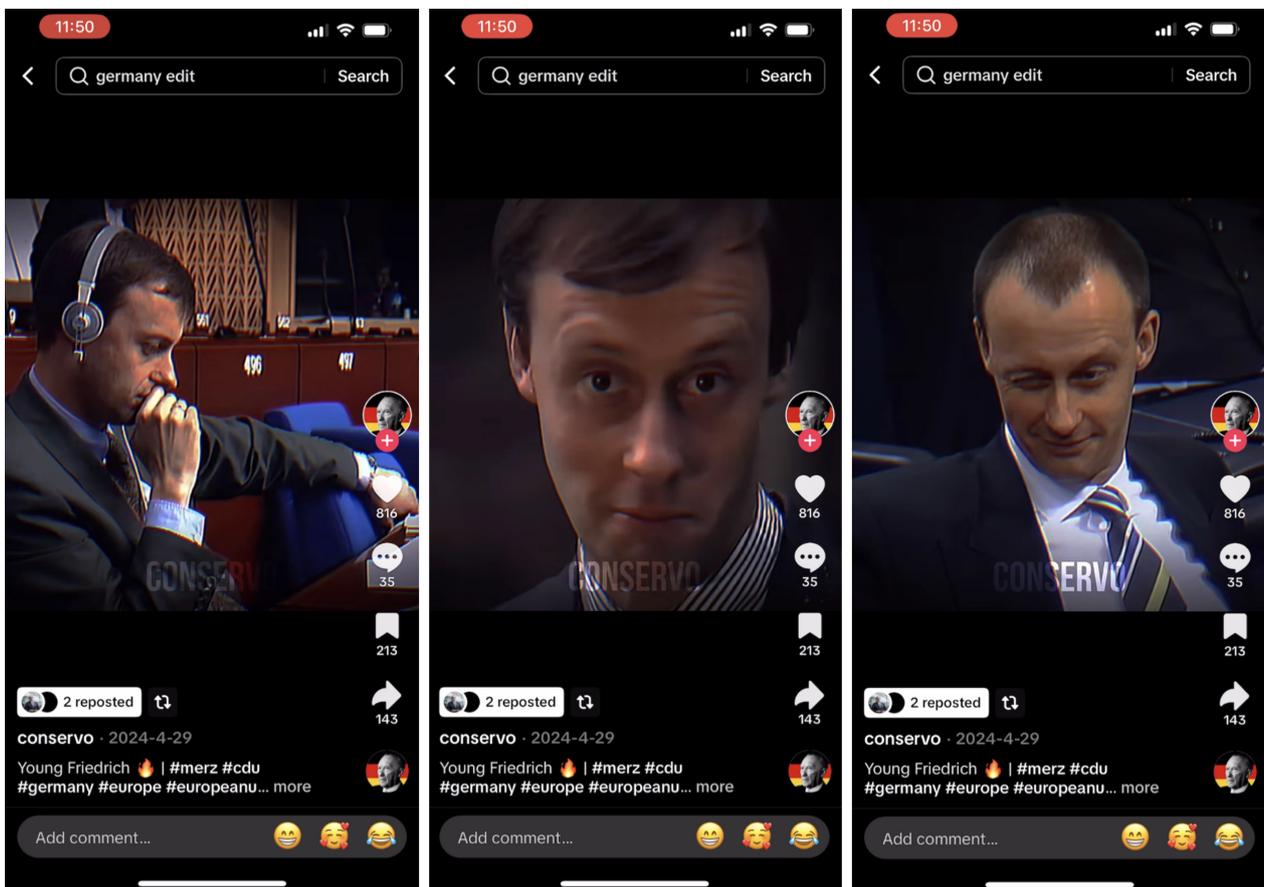

Figure 3. Screenshots from a TikTok edit portraying Friedrich Merz in a stylized, aspirational manner as "Young Friedrich." The vibe was later echoed in official campaign videos, illustrating the co-productive dynamic between vernacular and elite political communication. Source: Conservo (2025).

Robert Habeck, the Greens' leading candidate, was similarly associated with a distinct set of "vibes." Users attributed "Daddy Vibes," "Schoolteacher Vibes," and dubbed him a "Robrat"—a play on Kamala Harris's "brat" meme coined by popstar Charli XCX—or a "Kanzlerbabe" (chancellor babe) in his "Kanzler era," referencing Taylor Swift's "eras." The unofficial @robratHQ (first post: September 28, 2024), modeled after "Kamala HQ,"

preceded the official @roberthabeck account (first post: December 16, 2024) and may have shaped the uptake of "brat"-style language. While most videos gained modest traction, the Robrat phenomenon proved culturally significant: Imitation, derivatives, and hashtags such as #habeckcore illustrate marker 5—amplification via style replication. Habeck later reposted fan-made videos using slogans like "Green is brat," demonstrating bottom-up to top-down incorporation. New inauthentic accounts such as @kanzlerxera by "Robrat Slaybert" (first post: February 5, 2025) extended this dynamic. This suggests that political communication on TikTok becomes embedded in a vibe-based infrastructure where emotional resonance and stylistic congruence outweigh rational argumentation. Participatory propaganda emerges as elite–non-elite interplay, where co-option and co-production converge through affective vernaculars that translate political identity into felt connection. Conceptually, "vibes" capture how affective atmospheres structure political evaluation as ambient signals inviting recognition, imitation, and alignment—often independent of programmatic content or factual claims. Incorporating fan-generated vibes into official communication creates a feedback loop in which elites adapt to non-elite affective registers, challenging linear persuasion models and reframing political influence as emergent from iterative remixing, stylistic convergence, and algorithmic amplification.

Taken together, the aestheticization of political communication across vibes, edits, and audio memes foregrounds all five markers of participatory propaganda—remixability, mobilization, coordination, affective prioritization, and snowballing circulation—as interdependent features of a hybrid communicative ecology. Across these vernaculars, participatory propaganda redistributes persuasive labor across elite and non-elite actors, though unevenly: Dense supporter networks such as those surrounding the AfD enable continuous bottom-up visibility that frequently surpasses official engagement metrics, while parties with thinner participatory ecologies (e.g., CDU, Greens) compensate by incorporating fan aesthetics and optimizing for templateability and vibe-congruence. Conceptually, these findings extend existing theories of propaganda by shifting attention from message content and sender intent to circulatory dynamics and affective infrastructures. Co-option and co-production do not operate as discrete strategies but as intertwined processes unfolding through remix practices and algorithmic amplification. These dynamics suggest that participatory propaganda on TikTok operates less through argumentative persuasion than through enrollment into ongoing practices of replication, stylization, and affective alignment within platformized campaign environments.

5. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates how sound, affect, and audiovisual editing together form an affective infrastructure for electoral campaigning on TikTok. Across actor types, TikTok edits, audio memes, and vibes function as overlapping vernaculars through which participatory propaganda materializes. An edit may employ a viral sound to evoke a specific mood; an audio meme may circulate as a reusable sonic template that anchors political meaning across videos; and a vibe may emerge through iterative remixing of aesthetic templates. These dynamics thrive on both bottom-up and top-down processes, fusing co-option and co-production. Political messages are no longer owned but collectively re-authored as users embed them in affective, memeable formats. What emerges is a tendency towards permanent campaigning in a post-digital environment—that is less defined by deliberation than by continuous affective circulation. Vibing with audiences becomes as essential as convincing them while withdrawal from platform logics is no longer a viable political option (Klinger et al., 2023).

Conceptually, this study refines theories of participatory propaganda by demonstrating how platformization restructures persuasive labor through vernacular affordances. Whereas classical propaganda models emphasize message control and ideological coherence, participatory propaganda on TikTok operates through affective infrastructures that privilege remixability, visibility, and stylistic coherence over discursive consistency. By empirically grounding co-option and co-production in platform-native practices—edits, audio memes, and vibes—this study bridges campaign research and platform studies and shows how persuasion increasingly emerges from collective creativity rather than centralized strategy.

The findings reaffirm the article's central argument: Participatory propaganda on TikTok is a co-performed, affect-driven form of political communication. Success depends not on factual accuracy or argumentative rigor but on the capacity to be felt, imitated, and recontextualized. The asymmetries identified—particularly the organizational density of right-wing networks—underscore that participation is unevenly distributed. Conceptually, the study advances research on platformized campaigning by integrating digital platform studies with propaganda and election communication scholarship. Empirically, it demonstrates that focusing solely on official party accounts obscures where political meaning actually crystallizes: in unofficial, hybrid spaces of collective creativity. Normatively, it raises questions about how democratic discourse endures when emotional resonance and visibility outweigh factual deliberation.

Although this study is grounded in the German electoral context, the dynamics identified are not limited to Germany alone. Certain features, such as the organizational density of far-right supporter networks, party-specific campaign cultures, and the historical sensitivities shaping political symbolism, are clearly context-dependent. However, the core mechanisms observed in this study are platform-driven rather than nationally specific. The reliance on edits, audio memes, and vibes as vernacular forms of political participation reflects TikTok's affordances as a sound-driven, remix-oriented platform operating across democratic systems. Similar participatory propaganda dynamics have been documented in the US, Romania, Ukraine, and other contexts, suggesting that platformization standardizes modes of political expression even as ideological content varies. The German case thus serves as a theoretically instructive example of how participatory propaganda emerges when platform logics intersect with competitive democratic campaigning, offering insights applicable to other electoral democracies operating under similar conditions.

As participatory propaganda becomes routine in democratic campaigning, future research must further examine not only its campaign effects but its cumulative role in shaping political subjectivities, affective publics, and the conditions of democratic engagement in platformized societies.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
Please contact the author for anonymized data access.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used GPT-5 for the purpose of grammar checking and language polishing.

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