


From Message to Vibe: TikTok and Affective Political Communication in the 2024 UK Election

Sara García-SantamaríaUniversitat de València **Susan Grantham**Griffith University **Kai Grant**Griffith University <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/esmp.107103>

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Abstract. The 2024 UK general election has been widely described as the country's first "TikTok election", reflecting the platform's growing role in political campaigning, particularly among younger audiences. This article examines how Labour and the Conservative Party adapted political communication to TikTok's platform affordances through the use of popular culture, pop culture, and digital vernaculars. Empirically, the article draws on a content analysis of 175 videos posted by both parties between 30 May and 4 July 2024. Analytically, it conceptualises these practices through the lens of cultural vernacularisation and affective orientation, focusing on the hybridisation of symbolic (message-first) and pre-symbolic (vibe-first) communication. The findings show that while both campaigns relied on cultural mediation, Labour more consistently employed humour-driven, transgressive, vibe-oriented formats, whereas Conservative content more often combined cultural framing with explicit claims, warnings, and evaluative judgements. The article argues that TikTok campaigning does not signal the erosion of political meaning, but its reconfiguration through hybrid communicative architectures in which affective orientation and symbolic articulation operate together. More broadly, the study highlights how platform-native campaigning reshapes the conditions under which political communication reaches electorates who are increasingly disengaged from traditional political channels, such as young voters.

Keywords. TikTok, elections, digital campaigns, pop culture, digital vernaculars.

ES Del mensaje al *vibe*: TikTok y la comunicación política afectiva en las elecciones británicas de 2024

Resumen. Las elecciones generales del Reino Unido de 2024 han sido ampliamente descritas como las primeras «campañas en TikTok» del país, lo que refleja el creciente consumo de noticias en esta plataforma, especialmente entre la juventud. Este artículo examina cómo el Partido Laborista y el Partido Conservador adaptaron su comunicación política a las posibilidades y limitaciones propias de TikTok mediante el uso de la cultura popular, la cultura pop y los lenguajes vernáculos digitales. El estudio se basa en un análisis de contenido de 175 vídeos publicados en las cuentas oficiales de ambos partidos entre el 30 de mayo y el 4 de julio de 2024. El artículo conceptualiza estas prácticas a través de los conceptos de vernaculización cultural y orientación afectiva, centrándose en la hibridación entre formas de comunicación simbólica (centradas en el mensaje) y presimbólica (centradas en el ambiente). Los resultados muestran que, aunque ambas campañas recurrieron de manera sistemática a la mediación cultural, el Partido Laborista empleó de forma más consistente formatos humorísticos, transgresores y orientados al ambiente, mientras que el contenido conservador combinó con mayor frecuencia el encuadre cultural con afirmaciones explícitas, advertencias y juicios evaluativos. El artículo sostiene que las campañas en TikTok no señalan una erosión del significado político, sino su reconfiguración a través de arquitecturas comunicativas híbridas en las que la orientación afectiva y la articulación simbólica operan de manera conjunta. También se pone de relieve cómo las estrategias de campaña nativas de la plataforma transforman las condiciones bajo las cuales la comunicación política alcanza a electorados cada vez más distanciados de los canales políticos tradicionales, como ocurre especialmente con los votantes jóvenes.

Palabras clave. TikTok, elecciones, campañas digitales, cultura pop, cultura digital vernacular.

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1. Introduction

The 2024 UK general election marked a qualitative shift in digital campaigning, widely described in the media as the country's first TikTok election. This is not based on claims about TikTok replacing traditional media or directly shaping vote choice, but rather on the platform's emergence as a central site where political content was encountered incidentally, affectively, and at scale, particularly by younger and Labour-leaning audiences (Aguilar García *et al.*, 2024; Smith, 2024). For the first time in a UK general election, major parties treated TikTok not as a peripheral outreach tool but as a core campaign arena, investing in platform-native formats such as memes, humour, and pop-cultural vernacular references (Harman & Wall, 2024; Wheeler, 2024). This article analyses how political parties used popular culture, pop culture, and digital vernaculars to adapt campaign messages to TikTok's platform affordances, combining message-first communication with vibe-first affective orientations.

Unlike earlier social media platforms, TikTok is not organised around explicit political discussion or follower-based networks, but around algorithmic circulation and entertainment-oriented discovery, meaning that political content often reaches users who are not actively seeking political information (Smith, 2024). For political actors, this creates opportunities to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and engage publics, especially younger ones, who are less likely to encounter politics through conventional channels (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). In the UK context, these dynamics were particularly salient in 2024 due to persistent generational divides in electoral participation and partisan alignment. Overall turnout fell to around 60%, one of the lowest levels in modern British history (Young Foundation, 2024). Younger voters were substantially less likely to turn out than older cohorts, with participation among 18–24-year-olds estimated at just over 40%, compared with around three-quarters of voters aged 65 and above (Global Citizen, 2024; Morris, 2024). However, when young people did vote, their preferences were highly structured. Post-election survey data show that younger voters overwhelmingly supported Labour and other progressive parties, with minimal support for the Conservatives (Cracknell & Baker, 2024; McDonnell, 2024). At the same time, younger and Labour-leaning citizens were significantly more likely to encounter political content on TikTok, often incidentally rather than through deliberate information seeking, reflecting the platform's algorithmic and entertainment-driven circulation logic (Smith, 2024). This combination of low turnout, distinct partisan preference, and platform-specific exposure makes TikTok a critical site for analysing contemporary campaign communication, not as a determinant of voting behaviour, but as an environment in which political actors are differentially visible and evaluable. In July 2025, the UK government announced that 16- and 17-year-olds will be granted the right to vote in all UK elections, adding an estimated 1.6 million potential voters to the electorate (UK Government, 2025). Therefore, TikTok campaigns are likely to become even more significant in future elections.

TikTok has played an increasingly visible role in electoral campaigns globally, reshaping how political actors seek attention and legitimacy in digitally saturated media environments (Cervi *et al.*, 2023; Grantham, 2024). In the 2024 US election, candidate-driven TikTok trends, such as Kamala Harris's "Brat" and "femininomenon" moments, demonstrate how platform aesthetics, affect, and pop-culture irony can evolve into powerful political symbols amplified by both campaigns and supporters (Connolly, 2025). During the 2022 Australian Federal Election, pop culture also functioned as a strategic communication tool (Grantham, 2024). TikTok has also been recognised as a powerful platform for political communication and election campaigns in regions such as Europe (Bösch & Ricks, 2021; Cervi, 2023) and Latin America (Figueroa Benítez *et al.*, 2022).

Empirically, the study examines how the two major parties, Labour and the Conservative Party, used TikTok during the 2024 UK general election through a content analysis of 175 videos posted on their official accounts between 30 May and 4 July 2024. Drawing on scholarship on digital culture, politainment, and affective publics (Cervi *et al.*, 2023; García Santamaría & Orchard, Forthcoming), the analysis approaches TikTok campaigning through the lens of cultural vernacularisation: the translation of political actors, claims, and conflicts into culturally familiar reference points drawn from popular culture, pop culture, and digital platform vernaculars. From this perspective, TikTok's political significance lies not only in persuasion but in how political visibility and evaluation are organised within hybrid public spheres shaped by platform-native affective norms (Abidin, 2020; Maares *et al.*, 2021).

The findings show that cultural vernacularisation operates across both symbolic (message-first) and pre-symbolic (vibe-first) registers, binding them together across campaigns. Labour's TikTok output more frequently emphasised transgressive performative styles within culturally saturated, humour-driven formats, while the Conservative campaign more consistently foregrounded explicit claims, warnings, and evaluative judgements, embedding these within culturally recognisable frames. In both cases, symbolic politics remained central; what differed was how cultural vernacularisation was mobilised. Analytically, this approach shifts attention away from debates over whether digital politics is becoming less ideological or more emotional, and toward an examination of how symbolic meaning and affective orientation are jointly organised under platform conditions. Arguments do not disappear but are reconfigured through cultural vernacular forms that integrate affective and symbolic logics within a single communicative architecture (Abidin, 2020; Maares *et al.*, 2021).

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on digital campaigning, politainment, and affective publics to situate the study within existing debates on platform-native political communication. This is followed by a methods section outlining the dataset and analytical approach. The findings section examines how cultural vernacularisation functions as an infrastructural feature of TikTok campaigning, and how the structures that affective orientation through humour, performative

style, and self- and other representation. A final findings section analyses how message-first and vibe-first orientations are strategically combined within distinct vernacularised affective modes. The article concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for understanding political campaigning and visibility in TikTok-mediated electoral campaigns.

2. State of the art

2.1. TikTok as a Political Platform

The use of TikTok in parties and leaders' online campaigning reflects a broader global trend (Bourne, 2025; Cartner-Morley, 2024; Ferguson, 2024; Ipsos, 2024). Recent studies indicate that political figures primarily use the platform for performative purposes, focusing on creating content that blends entertainment with politics, a phenomenon known as politainment (Cervi, 2023; Grantham, 2024). This trend suggests that TikTok is more often used as a promotional tool than as a direct channel for engaging voters. Its distinctive approach, which allows users to access content without an account, sets it apart from other social media platforms. TikTok's algorithm recommends content based on trends and a user's viewing history, helping users find their niche within diverse groups and creative styles (Zhang & Liu, 2021). This unique algorithm-driven approach fosters continuous engagement and personal discovery, making TikTok a potent tool for reaching a wide audience.

The concept of visibility labour (Abidin, 2020) is crucial on TikTok, where users must put significant effort into being noticed. This involves creating content that meets the platform's demands for performativity, interactivity, relatability, authenticity, and entertainment (Lewis & Grantham, 2022). TikTok's advanced algorithm, which tailors content to individual users, plays a significant role in retaining users on the platform for extended periods (Abidin & Lee, 2022; Fang *et al.*, 2019). This phenomenon, often termed the "anaesthetic effect" or an "algorithmic crystal", enhances the user experience by encouraging personal discovery and community engagement (Oden & Porter, 2023; Schellewald, 2023; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Similarly, the notion of "performances of relatability" (Abidin, 2020) highlights the importance of engaging relevant audiences, requiring authenticity and a genuine connection between content and its audience (Goldberg & Gustafson, 2023).

Drawing from these debates, there is a relatively recent body of work exploring the social media performances of populist leaders (Freistein *et al.*, 2022; García Santamaría, 2026) and their alleged authenticity in terms of performative transgression (Aiolfi, 2022) and "emotional excess" (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021, p. 51). The socio-cultural turn in populism (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021) sees politics moving beyond the right-left division and oscillating instead between a high and low axis, based on socio-cultural divisions (Ostiguy, 2017). The high refers to normative, elitist, and institutionalised ways of being in politics, performing what is proper and politically correct. The low

refers to populism's attempt to side with the people by appealing to aesthetic innovation, mobilising what is "culturally popular and native" (Ostiguy *et al.*, 2021, p. 11) by showing being ordinary (Casullo, 2021) as a way of transgressing (Aiolfi, 2022) the expected ways of performing politics. Other scholars associate "the low" with the excessive expression of emotions (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021, p. 51), the improper, the kitsch, and, in general, "poor taste" (Kurylo, 2022).

The mainstreaming of populism (Schwörer, 2021) and the confluence of influencer and vernacular digital cultures (Abidin, 2021) have led to a sort of "contagion" effect (Amado, 2024; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2014) that is changing how leaders and parties communicate on social media. According to this, aesthetic practices that were once restricted to influencers or far-right populists are now becoming common in politics. For instance, analysts have identified a "vibe shift" in social media campaigns, which have moved from bureaucratic posts to vibes of joy and greatness (Ferguson, 2024). A clear example is the deployment of camp aesthetics by leaders such as Donald Trump in the USA or Javier Milei in Argentina.

2.2. The rise of TikTok "politainment"

A defining feature of TikTok is its consistent link to pop culture, which manifests through music, visuals, or humour. Pop culture, shaped by generational preferences, can create generational divides, as seen in movements like #okboomer (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). In 2022, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) was found to have used popular culture trends targeted at Gen Z and Millennials. The ALP posts were distinct, as each generation was targeted quite differently. For instance, Gen Z was targeted using trending sounds or memes, whereas Millennials were targeted using popular culture references such as *The Simpsons* or *Star Wars* (Grantham, 2024). Political parties have begun using popular culture to drive content on TikTok (Grantham, 2024). The concept of civic imagination (Jenkins *et al.*, 2016; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021) highlights how social media can use popular culture to frame political issues, making them accessible and engaging for young, politically disengaged demographics.

TikTok, initially a platform for light-hearted content, has become a significant space for political communication. This shift has led to the "TikTokisation" of politics, where entertainment and political content merge, appealing especially to younger voters, who make up a substantial portion of TikTok's user base (Cervi *et al.*, 2023; Moir, 2023). Studies show that politicians leverage TikTok's performance affordances to engage in politainment, intertwining entertainment with political discourse (Bösch & Ricks, 2021; Zamora-Medina *et al.*, 2023). The concept of politainment is not entirely new; however, its prevalence has surged with the development of platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch. These platforms have provided politicians and political entities with unprecedented opportunities to engage with audiences in more relaxed, humorous, and visually appealing formats. Politainment has become a

1 By affordances, we refer to the platform features that configure how users engage with technology, with their meaning emerging through how people perceive and use them in practice (Schellewald, 2023).

critical tool in shaping public perceptions, particularly among younger demographics who are more inclined to consume information through entertainment-driven channels (Cervi *et al.*, 2023).

Within the broader logic of politainment, the fusion of politics and entertainment, humour has become especially prominent in negative campaigning, where it is used to undermine opponents through entertaining and culturally resonant formats (Mark, 2007). Unlike traditional political cartoons, memes circulate largely outside formal organisational channels, making them a distinctive vehicle for negative politainment in digital environments (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Research suggests that humorous political content on social media can attract individuals with low prior engagement in political news, drawing them into political discourse, while potentially distracting more politically attentive audiences from substantive debate (Heiss & Matthes, 2021). Humour, particularly in the forms of satire and parody, has long played a central role in political communication by testing the boundaries of free speech and exposing hypocrisy (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). On social media, this role is amplified through memes, whose participatory and shareable nature distinguishes them from traditional forms of political humour and enables engagement with audiences who might otherwise avoid political content (Heiss & Matthes, 2021; Ross & Rivers, 2017).

2.3. Post-Digital Intimate Publics

Rather than relying solely on ideological consistency or policy preferences, contemporary campaigns increasingly privilege cultural resonance, humour, and affect. This development aligns with Papacharissi's (2014) notion of the memetic and affective turn in political communication. Papacharissi's (2014) concept of "affective publics", the digitally networked collectives held together by shared emotion rather than shared ideology, captures how social media content creates belonging through mood and tone. The meme-fuelled aesthetics of vibe-first politics mark a reconfiguration of political communication, where tone trumps content through ironic viral content. This is not to say substance disappears, but rather that it is encoded aesthetically and affectively, not just ideologically.

Social media shape the digital affective practices people engage with, creating a sense of emotional alignment among users that fosters mutual identification and cultural and social belonging. In other words, digital "affective flows construct atmospheres of emotional and cultural belonging by way of emotional resonance and alignment" (Döveling *et al.*, 2018, p. 19)². Therefore, political campaigns try to convey vibes that align with young voters' affective atmospheres in a "we-vibe-the-same" manner, trying to connect through affective resonance and orientation.

Brown *et al.* (2025) distinguish between *digital* and *postdigital* intimate publics to describe different modes of audience formation in platformed political communication. Digital intimate publics coalesce

around explicit identities and affiliations, such as parties, fan communities, or movements, where popular and pop-cultural references operate symbolically to activate recognition and belonging. Postdigital ones, by contrast, are organised through algorithmic inference rather than self-declared identity. On platforms such as TikTok, these publics emerge around behavioural patterns, interests, and algorithmic proxies, privileging pre-symbolic forms of association grounded in affect and aesthetic alignment rather than explicit political identification (Brown *et al.*, 2025).

Within this context, several scholars defend the use of the term *vibe* to capture how algorithms actively mediate aesthetic experience and affective orientation in postdigital environments (Brown *et al.*, 2025; Lupinacci, 2024). Rather than referring to a subjective mood alone, *vibe* denotes a "human and non-human entanglement" in which platforms function as architects of affective modulation, shaping how content is sensed and felt as users scroll (Böhme, 2018; Brown *et al.*, 2025). The concept originates in music and platform studies, where *vibe* is understood as a form of "sympathetic resonance", an affective alignment that is collectively sensed but difficult to articulate (James, 2022). As Brown *et al.* (2025) note, *vibes* operate through associative, non-propositional logics that increasingly structure everyday media experience.

From this perspective, social media platforms function as mood-making infrastructures that curate and stabilise affective atmospheres over time, a process theorised as *vibescaping* or *moodscaping* (Highmore, 2017; Roquet, 2016). Lupinacci (2024) argues that the platformisation of *vibes* reflects the growing commodification of "the experience of feeling itself" (Highmore, 2017). Campaign strategies aimed at postdigital intimate publics therefore emphasise atmospheric modulation through cultural references, visual style, rhythm, or humour and affective alignments. While campaigns cannot control how *vibes* ultimately emerge, they can design content to seed algorithmic, affective, and non-narratable associations, enabling forms of "vibey" cultural politics oriented toward fluid, algorithmically assembled publics (Brown *et al.*, 2025). *Vibe-first* political memes generate both engagement and symbolic capital, positioning parties and figures as culturally relevant, normatively desirable, or socially acceptable within digital subcultures. This aesthetics-first approach is deeply native to platforms like TikTok, where users scroll through content at speed and "feel" a post's mood before decoding its meaning.

3. Objectives and methodology

This study examines how the UK Labour Party and the UK Conservative Party used TikTok during the 2024 UK General Election campaign. The dataset consists of all videos published on the official TikTok accounts of the two parties during the formal campaign period, between 31 May and 4 July 2024. These parties were selected because pre-election polling consistently identified them as the principal con-

² We use the term "affect" as different from "emotion" because of its relational and pre-cognitive nature, rather than a psychological and personal one (Döveling *et al.*, 2018). However, they are interrelated and interdependent processes.

tenders for government. In total, the dataset comprises 175 TikTok posts: 135 from UK Labour and 40 from the UK Conservatives.

The unit of analysis is the individual TikTok post. Posts were manually collected to ensure completeness and accuracy, given the volatility of platform content and the limitations of automated TikTok scraping tools. For each post, platform-level engagement metrics were recorded, including likes, shares, comments, views, and favourites, alongside a structured set of qualitative content codes (Annex II)³. The following variables were coded: (1) focus of the post (negative campaigning or own politics); (2) type of performance (high versus low style); (3) presence of humour; (4) type of humour; (5) cultural vernaculars (the presence of popular culture, pop culture, or platform-native vernacular references); (6) type of cultural vernaculars and (7) vibe-first delivery (posts in which affective priming clearly precedes or substitutes explicit political content).

In addition to analysing the full dataset, the study identifies a high-engagement “top-tier” of posts to examine which communicative features are associated with absolute peak visibility. The top-tier was defined empirically by identifying a clear drop-off point in the distribution of likes for each party. For Labour, posts exceeding 200,000 likes were classified as top-tier (five posts), while for the Conservatives the threshold was set at 50,000 likes (four posts). The links to the posts are available at Annex I. This asymmetric threshold reflects differences in baseline engagement levels between the two accounts and enables meaningful within-party comparison rather than imposing an arbitrary uniform cut-off.

The analysis employs a structured qualitative content analysis, following established approaches to platform-native political communication research (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Grantham, 2024; Grantham *et al.*, 2025; Medina Serrano *et al.*, 2023). A multi-dimensional coding framework was developed to capture (1) messages, (2) cultural references, (3) digital vernacularisation, and (4) affective orientation. Mechanisms. The coding scheme was informed by prior literature on political communication, digital campaigning, and TikTok-specific vernaculars, and refined iteratively through close engagement with the data (Grantham, 2024).

To ensure consistency and replicability, explicit recoding rules were applied. Playful excess was treated as a distinct humour-adjacent category rather than inferred affectively. Mixed or hybrid categories were resolved conservatively using explicit labels rather than subjective interpretation. Missing or unmarked values were treated as absent for the coded feature. All recoding rules were applied symmetrically across both datasets. These practices follow established best-practice guidelines in content analysis, which emphasise transparent operationalisation and rule-based coding decisions (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

Intercoder reliability was assessed through two pilot coding rounds. The first pilot yielded an average Cohen’s Kappa of 0.70, indicating substantial agree-

ment but revealing ambiguity in categories related to trends and performative features. Coding definitions were subsequently refined, and a second pilot coding round produced an average Cohen’s Kappa of 0.82, indicating strong intercoder reliability. The full dataset was then coded using the finalised codebook.

Analytically, the study integrates qualitative coding with quantitative comparison. Coded variables were analysed across the full campaign datasets and within high-engagement subsets to identify baseline strategies and features over-represented at peak engagement. This mixed inductive–deductive approach aligns with best practice in qualitative content analysis and mixed-methods research, particularly for platforms such as TikTok, where political meaning is produced through tone, humour, aesthetics, and cultural cues as much as through propositional content (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

Drawing from the above literature, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How did Labour and the Conservative Party mobilise (digital) cultural vernaculars to shape political communication in line with TikTok’s platform affordances during the 2024 UK general election?

RQ2: How did both parties employ cultural vernacularisation in their TikTok campaigns?

RQ3: How did the structure of cultural vernacularisation affect the affective orientation in TikTok political communication across the two campaigns?

RQ4: How did the campaigns strategically combine message-first and vibe-first strategies in their TikTok posts?

4. Results

The analysis shows that popular and digital pop-cultural vernaculars function as both symbolic and pre-symbolic affective infrastructures, situating users within instantly recognisable cultural shortcuts that orient users to how political content is felt, often before it is delivered. The following lines present the main findings, which are organised into three interrelated dimensions: cultural vernacularisation, affective orientation, and vernacularised affect.

4.1. Cultural Vernacularisation

This section examines how policy proposals and political debates are rendered intelligible on TikTok through references to popular and pop-cultural forms, including digital vernaculars. While political communication is always culturally mediated, this article focuses on cultural vernacularisation: the process through which political meaning is translated into everyday cultural reference points that operate both symbolically and pre-symbolically. Analytically, cultural vernacularisation shifts political communication away from formal authority and toward shared cultural knowledge. This shift allows political evaluation to feel intuitive, immediate, and self-evident rath-

3 Engagement data were retrieved on election day to allow metrics to stabilise while maintaining comparability across posts published at different points in the campaign.

er than requiring extended argument or policy explanation. Importantly, cultural vernaculars do not replace political meaning; rather, they structure the conditions under which it becomes legible and emotionally manageable, particularly in low-attention, high-circulation environments such as TikTok.

The data show that cultural vernacularisation functions as an infrastructural feature of campaign visibility rather than as an occasional stylistic choice. Across both campaigns, all top-tier posts are mediated by cultural references, indicating that vernacularisation is a baseline condition for high engagement. Both parties deploy a range of vernacular configurations, from high-stakes, serious posts with selective cultural anchoring to posts characterised by dense cultural layering and minimal propositional content. Together, these patterns demonstrate that cultural vernacularisation operates flexibly across symbolic and pre-symbolic registers.

4.1.1. Performative Style

If cultural vernacularisation establishes the conditions of visibility and legibility on TikTok, the performative style illustrates how political meaning is staged within those conditions. This section examines the performative register through which political content is delivered on TikTok, drawing on the “high” and “low” axis developed by Ostiguy (2017)⁴. In this study, the high-low distinction is treated as an ontological category, concerned with how political meaning is staged. Performative registers range from direct, declarative, and institutionally coded performances (such as policy explanations, data-driven claims, or explicit warnings) to highly coded, ambiguous, and transgressive performances, often mixing cultural humiliation, absurdist humour, and an aesthetically playful excess. Importantly, posts addressing substantive political issues may still operate within a low register when delivered in a transgressive style.

Table 1. Performative style of the posts.

Campaign	Performative Style	Number of posts	Percentage (%)
Labour	Low	89	66
	High	46	34
Tories	High	34	85
	Low	6	15

Source: Own production.

Empirically, the dataset reveals a clear divergence between the two campaigns. Labour posts predominantly operate within a low performative register, relying on memes, everyday situations, and culturally mediated performances. This is done even when discussing important topics. For instance, one of the posts features comedian Jon Richardson from *The*

Big Short discussing economic issues in a serious tone while the imagery is completely absurd. Richardson is lying in a luxurious room, in a bathtub, while drinking cheap beer in a champagne class.⁵ By contrast, Conservative posts overwhelmingly employ a high-performative register, foregrounding seriousness, urgency, and institutional authority through direct, declarative forms of address. When post function is collapsed into high- and low-register categories (Table 1), Labour content is primarily low register (66%), while Conservative content is predominantly high register (85%). This divergence is even more pronounced at the top of the engagement distribution: Labour’s most liked posts consistently operate within a low register, whereas Conservative top-tier posts rely exclusively on high-register performances. These findings indicate that TikTok does not impose a uniform performative style on political actors; rather, it affords different campaigns distinct pathways to engagement rooted in contrasting modes of political performance.

4.1.2. Multi-Vernacular Cultural Mediation

Across both TikTok campaigns, cultural vernacularisation facilitates a circulation between performative registers, rather than a simple shift from high to low. The data also shows that both the Labour and Conservative campaigns make extensive use of cultural vernacularisation, albeit in different ways and to different degrees (Table 2). Labour draws on pop, popular, and digital vernacular culture in approximately 90% of its posts, embedding political meaning within culturally familiar formats across both low- and high-register performances. Even posts that retain a serious or institutional style are frequently culturally framed, indicating that vernacularisation functions as an infrastructural feature of Labour’s TikTok strategy.

Table 2. Cultural vernacularisation patterns across campaigns (baseline and top-tier).

Dimension	Labour	Conservatives
Cultural vernaculars present (%)	90	75
Digital vernacular (Baseline)	84	45
Digital vernacular (top-tier)	100	100
Popular culture (Baseline)	54	50
Popular culture (top-tier)	80	75
Pop culture (Baseline)	46	10
Pop culture (top-tier)	60	25
Multi-vernacular (Baseline)	78	37
Multi-vernacular (top-tier)	80	50

Source: Own production.

⁴ In this study, “high” and “low” performance framing do not refer to the inferred importance of the issues addressed in the posts, but to how they are communicated. This distinction captures differences in communicative style rather than issue salience and reflects how political meaning is rendered legible on TikTok.

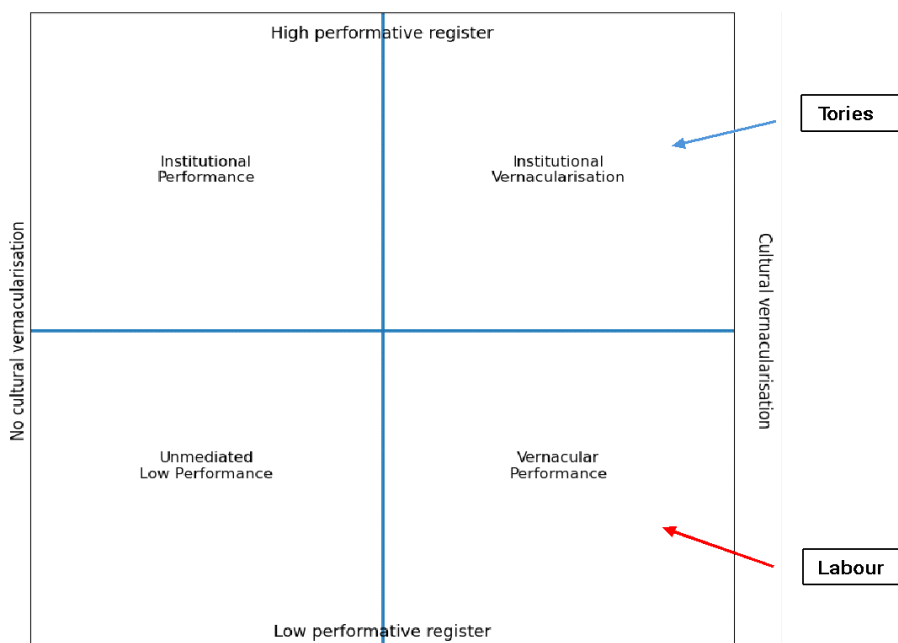
⁵ Posted by Labour on 3 June 2024, Jon Richardson offers an explainer of Sunak’s economic policy proposals: [Link](#).

Conservative posts also exhibit substantial cultural vernacularisation (75%), despite predominantly operating in a high-performative register. In these cases, cultural references are layered onto otherwise direct, declarative performances, softening institutional authority without displacing it. This pattern becomes especially clear when accounting for stylistic hybridity. While only 15% of Conservative posts operate primarily at a low register, three-quarters exhibit some degree of hybridisation between high-register performance and cultural vernacularisation. In both parties, cultural vernacularisation is prevalent in all top-tier posts. While cultural shortcuts are far more common in Labour’s content, they become a necessary condition for top-tier performance in both campaigns; no post without a cultural

reference reaches the absolute top of the like distribution.

Figure 1 distinguishes four cultural-performative configurations: institutional performance (high performative register without vernacularisation), institutional vernacularisation (high register with cultural vernacularisation), unmediated low performance (low register without vernacularisation), and vernacular performance (low register with cultural vernacularisation). The Tory campaign sits more comfortably within the top-right corner of institutional vernacularisation, while the Labour campaign predominantly inhabits the lower-right corner of vernacular performance. This typology highlights that cultural vernaculars enable distinct forms of hybridisation between high and low performative registers.

Figure 1. Conceptual map of the intersection between performative registers and cultural vernacularisation in Labour and the Tories’ campaign.



Source: Own production.

Cultural vernacularisation operates across three layers that differ in scope and form. Popular culture refers to broad, widely shared references grounded in everyday life, such as lifestyle, food, sports, or relationships. Pop culture is narrower and trend-driven, drawing on recognisable media references such as celebrities, fandoms, or influencers. Finally, pop culture vernacular denotes platform-native, digitally coded forms of expression, including memes, remixed content, slang, and aesthetic trends specific to social media environments. These dynamics are illustrated in Figure 2, used in the Conservatives and Labour campaigns.

Figure 2. Labour mobilises everyday habits, like walking the dog, to ridicule Sunak, who is deemed too elite and detached from people.

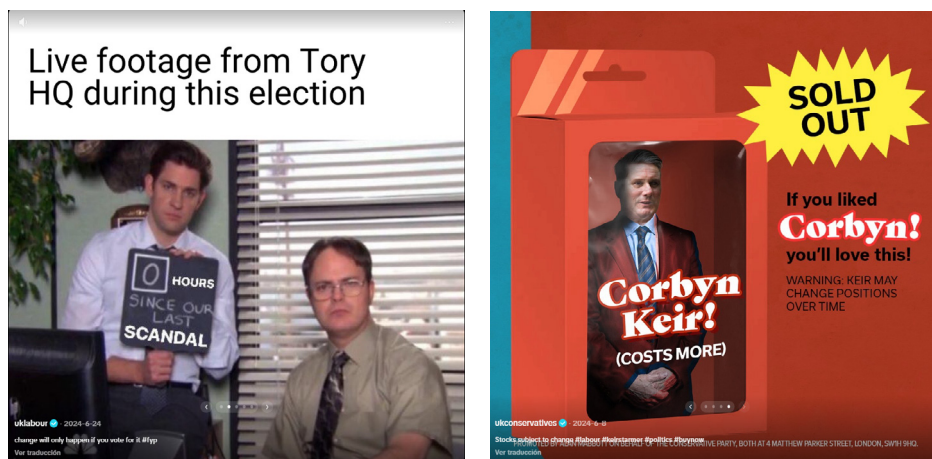


Source: Labour Party’s TikTok.

Across the full dataset, there are key differences between Labour and Conservative strategies. Labour relies overwhelmingly on digital vernacular culture (84% of posts), frequently combined with popular and pop-cultural references, each appearing in nearly half of the posts. Conservative posts display a more selective pattern: both popular culture and digital vernaculars appear in almost half of the posts, yet pop cultural references are rare (10%), and nearly one-third of posts contain no cultural mediation at all. Interestingly, at the top of the engagement distribution, both campaigns converge toward digital vernacular culture (Table 2).

The dataset shows that cultural references are frequently stacked (Table 2). In Labour's campaign, almost 80% of the posts involve multiple forms of cultural mediation, making single-register vernacularisation the exception rather than the rule. In contrast, less than 40% of Conservatives' posts exhibit multi-vernacular layering. In fact, most posts rely on a single cultural register or none at all. At the top-tier, this gap narrows but does not disappear: Labour maintains high levels of layering (80%), while Conservatives increase layering to half the posts. Figure 3 shows how cultural vernacularisation can be stacked within the same posts.

Figure 3. Both Labour (*The Office*) and the Tories (*Barbie*) use references to pop culture blended with digital vernaculars.



Source: Labour and the Conservative Party's TikTok accounts.

Taken together, these findings show that cultural mediation functions as epistemic outsourcing, shifting interpretive authority away from institutions toward vernacular cultural and everyday cues. For Labour, this outsourcing is systematic and infrastructural: political meaning is routinely embedded in dense, layered combinations of digital vernacular, popular knowledge, and pop-cultural reference, both at baseline and at peak performance. Conservative posts, by contrast, rely on thinner and more selective cultural mediation, converging toward digital vernacular only at the top tier while retaining a more limited layering.

4.2. Affective Orientation

This section analyses how affective orientation shapes Labour and Conservative campaigns on TikTok through practices of self- and other-representation. More precisely, it focuses on the role of humour as a central affective device through which parties simultaneously construct positive images of themselves and their leaders while delegitimising political opponents.

4.2.1. Self- and Other-Presentation

The data indicate that both campaigns prioritise negative campaigning over the promotion of their own policies, positioning political communication primarily in terms of opposition rather than self-articulation. Negative campaigning accounts for 65% of Labour's posts and 75% of Conservative content. At the top of

the engagement distribution, this pattern remains stable for the Conservatives, with roughly two-thirds of posts retaining a negative focus, while it intensifies for Labour, reaching approximately four-fifths. These patterns suggest that audience engagement clusters around content that frames politics as conflictual and antagonistic. Negative campaigning posts are typically structured through meme-combat formats, mobilising affective registers such as fear, ridicule, and humiliation to delegitimise opponents. By contrast, posts centred on a party's own politics tend to use calm, aspirational, or hopeful tones that position electoral participation as desirable and emotionally manageable. The distribution of self- and other-representation is not only a matter of content but of affective orientation. The following lines analyse how the antagonistic framing is made engaging and circutable within TikTok's platform environment. This is where humour becomes analytically central.

4.2.2. Humour as Affective Delivery

Analysing the use of humour is therefore key to understanding how antagonism and self-presentation are affectively structured and rendered platform-compatible (Table 3). At baseline, Labour's TikTok content is predominantly affect-driven: approximately 60% of posts are explicitly humorous, with nearly 20% relying on humour-adjacent formats. In contrast, the Conservative campaign is largely non-humorous, with nearly two-thirds of posts adopting a serious tone and no instances of hu-

mour-adjacent content. At the top of the engagement distribution, however, humour becomes more salient in both campaigns. Among Labour’s most-liked posts, humour is universal, indicating that affective amplification is central to peak performance. For the Conservatives, humour increases sharply to 75%, suggesting that it becomes instrumental in achieving high visibility.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that humour functions as a key mechanism through which antagonistic content is made engaging. In Labour’s campaign, humour operates as a primary mode of affective orientation, often preceding or substituting explicit political claims. In the Conservative campaign, humour is deployed more selectively, reinforcing rather than displacing message-driven communication. In both cases, humour enables negative campaigning to circulate within TikTok’s affective and algorithmic environment, transforming conflict into an engaging and shareable format.

Table 3. Humour ecology and distribution by campaign.

Dimension	Labour	Conservatives
Type of humour		
Humour present (%)	60	38
Humour-adjacent (%)	18	-
No humour (%)	22	62
Dominant humour type		
Absurdism (%)	39.5	26.7
Juxtaposition (%)	24.7	33.3
Satire (%)	24.7	-
Irony (%)	4.9	20.0
Other forms (%)	8.6	19.9

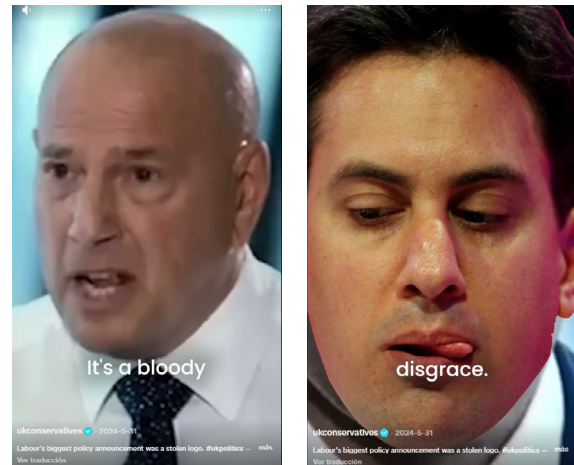
Source: Own production.

The type of humour deployed is also central to understanding how affective mediation operates on TikTok. Different forms of humour perform distinct communicative functions: some operate pre-symbolically by orienting affect before interpretation, while others function symbolically by reinforcing key campaign messages. Across the full dataset, Labour and Conservative campaigns display sharply contrasting humour ecologies (Table 3). Labour relies on a highly concentrated and repeatable set of meme-native humour types, whereas Conservative humour is heterogeneous and loosely structured, with no single type consistently driving engagement. Taken together, these patterns indicate that humour functions as a campaign-specific affective technology: in Labour’s campaign, it primarily orients affect prior to meaning, whereas in the Conservative campaign it primarily stabilises key messages through affective reinforcement. The posts below illustrate how the Labour and Tory campaigns use different types of humour.

At baseline (Table 3), Labour’s campaign is dominated by absurdism, which appears in approximately

40% of all humorous content. Satire and juxtaposition-based attack humour each appear in approximately one fourth of all humorous posts. In Labour’s top-tier posts, humour becomes universal, with absurdism increasing to around 60%, clearly dominating peak performance. Peak engagement thus correlates with high-energy, exaggerated, reaction-oriented humour, rather than commentary-based or cognitively demanding forms.

Figure 4. The video uses absurdist humour to humiliate Labour leader Ed Miliband, as a participant in the TV reality show *The Apprentice*.



Source: Conservative Party’s TikTok.

Conservative humour follows a markedly different pattern. At baseline, humour appears in approximately 40% of posts, with 60% remaining entirely serious. Among humorous posts, juxtaposition is the most common type, followed by absurdism and irony. Among the most-liked Conservative posts, humour rises sharply to approximately 75%, but no specific type of humour prevails. In the Tory campaign, humour is deployed asymmetrically and instrumentally, most often to delegitimise Labour through ridicule, emasculation, infantilisation, or meaning collapse, while Conservative self-presentation remains controlled and earnest. More precisely, juxtaposition allows ridicule to coexist with institutional authority, preserving a serious frame while contaminating it with symbolic mockery.

4.3. Vernacularised Affective Orientation

As shown above, the dataset indicates that some of the most visible and successful forms of political communication on TikTok operate at a pre-symbolic level, with minimal propositional content. This section examines how campaigns adapt political communication to TikTok’s platform-native vernaculars by privileging affective orientation over explicit argument. While cultural vernacularisation can operate symbolically, mobilising recognition, belonging, and interpretation, this section focuses specifically on its pre-symbolic function: the priming of affective conditions through what is here termed *vibe-first* communication. In this mode, popular and pop-cultural cues operate at an early affective register, orienting how political content is expected to be felt and evaluated before

interpretation. This orientation does not determine meaning, but it shapes the emotional conditions under which political claims become intelligible.

Figure 5. Vibe-first video. Posted by Tories, it features Starmer as a DJ, playing a song about raising taxes, while other Labour leaders dance.



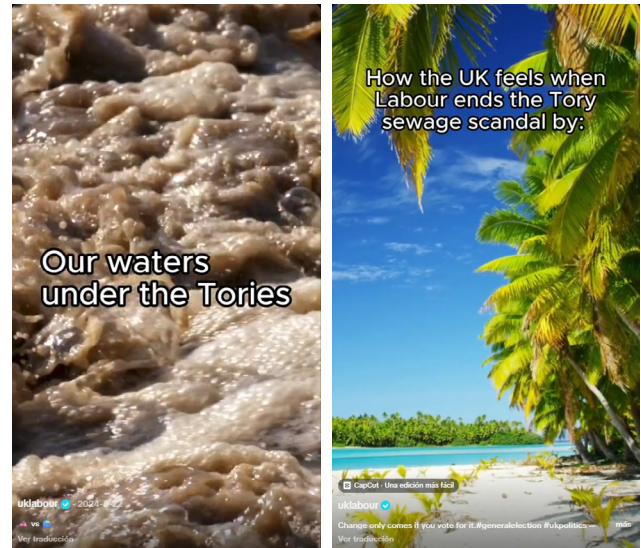
Source: Conservative Party's TikTok.

Empirically, vibe-first communication refers to posts in which mood, atmosphere, and aesthetic alignment clearly precede or substitute propositional content. Rather than guiding viewers through claims or policy explanations, these posts rely on music, meme formats, humour, and visual cues to establish affective readiness. Across the dataset, such formats include posts that circulate without policy reference, deploy humour without explicit argument, or anchor electoral choices in everyday symbols rather than empirical data. These configurations do not eliminate symbolic meaning; instead, they defer or compress it, privileging recognition and immersion over explanation. This distinction matters because it reveals how political authority on TikTok is increasingly mediated through affective orientation rather than deliberative persuasion. Labour sometimes refers directly to “good vibes” in its posts, using that exact concept (see example from 30 May 2024).⁶ However, the Tories often combine positive and absurdist vibes to discredit Labour leaders, as shown in Figure 5.

The Labour campaign developed a series of posts explicitly designed to convey what a Labour versus a Conservative victory would feel like, mobilising a contrast between positive and negative vibes. The data reveal two distinct vibe-based series. First, the “morning after” series consists of POV posts in which viewers wake up to the unsettling image of Rishi Sunak lying beside them, reacting with fear, discomfort, or horror, as if the real world had turned into a nightmare (for instance, posts published on 1 and 3 July 2024).⁷ These posts are contrasted with “happy ending” scenarios in which animals are shown enjoying a relaxed and pleasurable life under a Labour government, producing an affective shift from anxiety to ease. Second, the “water series” constructs contrasting politi-

cal futures through the sensory metaphor of polluted versus pristine water, evoking two incompatible sensory states. A Conservative victory is associated with a dirty, unsafe, and repulsive life through the metaphor of sewage waters. However, a Labour victory transforms Britain into a tropical paradise, appealing to the pleasurable and immersive sensations associated with holiday settings. Figure 6 illustrates how vibe-first posts depict opposite sensory worlds in Labour’s campaign.

Figure 6. Examples from the “water series”, posted by Labour, depicting Britain through sewage versus tropical waters.



Source: Labour Party's TikTok.

Quantitatively, vibe-first communication is distributed asymmetrically across campaigns (Table 4). In the Labour dataset, three-fourths of the posts are coded as vibe-first, indicating that affective priming constitutes a dominant communicative mode. By contrast, fewer than one-fourth of the Conservative posts adopt a vibe-first delivery, with the majority remaining message-first and propositionally oriented. This asymmetry intensifies at the top of the engagement distribution. All of Labour’s top-tier posts are vibe-first, whereas only one quarter of Conservative top-tier posts employ this orientation. In other words, vibe-first delivery functions as a necessary condition for peak engagement in Labour’s TikTok strategy, but it plays no comparable role in Conservative success, where high engagement remains compatible with message-forward, high-stakes communication.

Table 4. Vibe-first communication by campaign (baseline).

Campaign	Vibe-first: Yes	Vibe-first: No
Labour	97 (72%)	38 (28%)
Conservatives	9 (22%)	31 (78%)

Source: Own production.

6 Posted by Labour the 30 May 2024, showing how Keir Starmer is associated with “good vibes”: Link.

7 Some examples from the “morning after” series can be seen in the following links: Link 1, showing the vibe after a Conservative win, and Link 2, illustrating the vibe after a Labour win.

These findings indicate that vibe-first communication functions as an infrastructural strategy in Labour's digital campaigning, aligning political content with TikTok's affective and algorithmic logics. By foregrounding mood and atmosphere, Labour reduces the cognitive and emotional costs of engagement and facilitates rapid circulation through affective recognition rather than deliberative evaluation. For Conservatives, the limited and inconsistent use of vibe-first delivery reflects a strategic preference for message control and propositional clarity. Although Conservative posts increasingly incorporate digital vernacular forms at peak engagement, they do so without displacing a symbolic, message-first articulation. Taken together, the results show that TikTok does not privilege a single communicative logic but rewards different configurations of symbolic content and pre-symbolic affective orientation depending on campaign strategy.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This article shows that TikTok election campaigning is shaped not by replacing political messages with "vibes", but by the strategic hybridisation of cultural, affective, and symbolic cues. This mixture conditions how political meaning becomes visible, engaging, and emotionally resonant on platform-native media. The article advances contemporary debates on affective communication and politainment in TikTok campaigns by conceptualising the use of popular and (digital) pop vernaculars (what we call cultural vernacularisation) as an affective orientation rather than merely a stylistic or symbolic strategy.

Moving beyond descriptive accounts of politicians' use of memes, trends, or popular culture, the analysis demonstrates how popular, pop-cultural, and digital vernaculars function as affective infrastructure: they organise how political content is encountered and felt, often prior to political interpretation. In doing so, the article offers a transferable framework for understanding why political communication on platforms such as TikTok often appears vibe-driven and resistant to traditional models of deliberative persuasion, without assuming that affect displaces meaning or ideology (Brown *et al.*, 2025; Papacharissi, 2014). Rather than suggesting direct persuasive effects, the findings show how patterned configurations of culture, affect, and delivery shape the emotional conditions under which political meaning becomes legible and engaging (Döveling *et al.*, 2018).

The first major finding concerns the infrastructural role of cultural vernacularisation in TikTok campaigning. Across both Labour and Conservative datasets, all top-tier posts are mediated by cultural references, indicating that cultural vernacularisation is not an optional embellishment but a baseline condition for visibility on the platform. This aligns with existing research on TikTok politainment and visibility labour, which emphasises the platform's reliance on performativity, entertainment, and cultural recognisability (Abidin, 2020; Cervi, 2023; Grantham, 2024). The analysis extends this literature by showing that cultural vernaculars do more than illustrate political claims: they prime the conditions of legibility through which political content can circulate at all within an

algorithmically driven environment (Schellewald, 2023).

While cultural vernacularisation is necessary across campaigns, it is deployed in markedly different ways. Labour's campaign is characterised by dense, systematic cultural embedding, in which digital vernaculars, popular culture, and pop-cultural references form the communicative backbone of its political messaging. It operates as an infrastructural background rather than as a discrete tactic, shaping not only humorous or transgressive posts but also content addressing substantive political issues. By contrast, Conservative content exhibits a thinner and more selective use of cultural vernacularisation. Cultural references are frequently layered onto otherwise message-forward, stylistically institutional posts, enabling circulation within TikTok's algorithmic environment without displacing a serious tone. This contrast demonstrates that cultural vernacularisation is a necessary condition for peak engagement.

Cultural vernacularisation operates across both symbolic and pre-symbolic registers. At the symbolic level, cultural references provide recognisable frames through which political actors, claims, and conflicts can be interpreted. At the pre-symbolic level, they function as affective shortcuts that orient users emotionally before interpretation takes place. This distinction is particularly relevant on TikTok, where political content is often encountered fleetingly, incidentally, and without sustained contextual grounding (Schellewald, 2023; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Importantly, the findings show that symbolic articulation and pre-symbolic orientation are not mutually exclusive but strategically hybridised within campaign communication.

Across both campaigns, affective orientation is produced through a recurring configuration of performative register, oppositional framing, humour, and vibe-first delivery. These dimensions operate as interrelated mechanisms that position audiences emotionally toward political actors and outcomes prior to substantive evaluation. This empirically links to debates on affective publics and digital atmospheres by showing how pre-symbolic affects can function as organising principles of digital political campaigns on TikTok (Böhme, 2018; Brown *et al.*, 2025; Papacharissi, 2014).

Labour's TikTok output overwhelmingly operates through low performative registers, vibe-first delivery, and humour-rich formats. Political content is embedded in calm, playful, or post-sincere affective environments that lower emotional risk and reduce the cognitive costs of engagement. Even when addressing high-stakes issues, Labour content tends to mute urgency through cultural familiarity and a soft tone, positioning political engagement as emotionally manageable and socially normalised. By contrast, Conservative content predominantly operates through high performative registers, message-forward delivery, and heightened emotional intensity. Threat, urgency, and antagonism are foregrounded through direct address, warning aesthetics, and explicit evaluative judgment. Cultural vernaculars are selectively incorporated to render these messages platform-legible, but they rarely displace the underlying logic of escalation. These findings resonate with scholarship on the high/low axis in political perfor-

mance and the socio-cultural turn in populism, while demonstrating that such dynamics extend beyond populist actors alone (Ostiguy, 2017; Schwörer, 2021).

The analysis also refines existing debates on politainment and political humour. Rather than functioning primarily as entertainment or comic relief, humour on TikTok emerges as a mechanism for structuring affective orientation. In Labour's campaign, humour is predominantly meme-native, exaggerated, and repetitive, often operating at a pre-symbolic level through absurdism and affective intensity rather than through wit or irony. These forms aim to orient audiences emotionally before political meaning is articulated, lowering the interpretive and normative costs of engagement (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Conservative humour, by contrast, is less frequent and more constrained, operating primarily at the symbolic level through juxtaposition, irony, and closed-ended ridicule. Rather than opening affective space, it tends to stabilise evaluative closure by directing audiences toward specific judgments while maintaining a controlled, institutional tone, consistent with research on humour in negative campaigning (Heiss & Matthes, 2021). This pattern indicates that TikTok does not impose a single platform logic but rewards different affective configurations depending on campaign strategy (Cervi *et al.*, 2023; Maeres *et al.*, 2021).

Taken together, the findings provide clear answers to the article's research questions. First, they show how Labour and the Conservative Party adapted political communication to TikTok's platform affordances by systematically mobilising popular culture, pop culture, and digital vernaculars as conditions of visibility. Second, they demonstrate that cultural vernacularisation functioned not simply as stylistic adaptation but as infrastructural mediation, shaping how political content became legible and evaluable. Third, the analysis shows how cultural vernacularisation structured affective orientation by positioning audiences emotionally before interpretation through humour, a performative register, oppositional framing, and vibe-first delivery. Finally, the findings reveal that TikTok campaigning is characterised by strategic hybridisation rather than substitution: message-first and vibe-first orientations operate together, though in distinct configurations that reflect contrasting campaign strategies.

Situating these findings within the context of the 2024 UK general election helps elucidate why TikTok matters politically. As discussed in the introduction, younger voters were both less likely to turn out and

more likely to encounter political content on TikTok, often incidentally. In this context, the platform's significance lies not in persuasion but in shaping the affective conditions under which political actors become visible, recognisable, and evaluable to the electorates least reached by traditional political communication. Labour's emphasis on affective normalisation and cultural saturation aligns with younger voters' partisan preferences, while Conservative strategies aim to retain message authority in an entertainment-driven environment. These dynamics help explain why TikTok has become a focal point of campaign investment despite persistent concerns about youth turnout.

The findings speak directly to media and expert debates about the TikTokisation of politics, the rise of politainment, and the perceived dominance of "vibes over content." Rather than confirming fears that political communication has become an empty spectacle, the analysis shows that symbolic content and affective orientation operate together within hybrid communicative architectures. TikTok campaigning does not signal the erosion of political meaning but its reconfiguration through culturally vernacular forms that integrate affective priming and symbolic articulation. The democratic implications of this shift are ambivalent. On the one hand, cultural vernacularisation may lower barriers to engagement and render politics emotionally manageable in contexts of democratic fatigue. On the other hand, it risks privileging recognisability over debate and atmosphere over deliberation. Understanding this tension requires moving beyond moralised critiques of politainment toward empirically grounded analyses of how political meaning is organised, circulated, and felt in platform-native environments.

Future research would benefit from examining how cultural vernacularisation operates beyond its intended meaning by incorporating audience reception, algorithmic distribution, and interpretive meaning-making across different publics. This would deepen understanding of how TikTok political communication circulates and is experienced. More in-depth qualitative analyses would be particularly valuable in exploring how affective orientation and symbolic articulation are jointly experienced and negotiated through cultural anchors. Finally, it would be interesting to conduct longitudinal case studies to assess whether vibe-first strategies persist beyond campaign moments or vary across electoral and national contexts.

6. Authors' contribution

Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims.	Authors 1 and 2
Data curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later re-use.	Author 1
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data.	Authors 1, 2 and 3
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication.	Authors 1, 2 and 3

Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection.	Authors 2 and 3
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models.	Authors 1 and 2
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution.	Author 1
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools.	Authors 1, 2 and 3
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components.	Authors 1, 2 and 3
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team.	Authors 1 and 2
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs.	Authors 1, 2 and 3
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation.	Author 1
Writing / original draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).	Authors 1 and 2
Writing / review & editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision –including pre- or post-publication stages.	Author 1

7. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been used in this article for linguistic support. The tools used are the following: DeepL; ChatGPT.

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Sara García Santamaría. Dr. Sara García Santamaría is a Lecturer at the Universitat de València (Spain) and a former Marie Skłodowska-Curie-awarded UKRI fellow (the University of Bristol, UK). Her research focuses on digital political communication, examining the role of pop and popular culture in social media campaigns. Her work has been published in international journals such as *Digital Journalism*, *Media and Communication*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, or *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2340-4505>

Susan Grantham. Dr. Susan Grantham is a researcher examining how short-form video shapes organisational, political, and crisis communication, with a focus on political authenticity and the growing need for official disaster messaging. Drawing on more than 15 years of strategic communication and crisis-management experience, she applies this expertise to broader questions of digital reputation management and the impacts of emerging technologies. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1255-1590>

Kai Grant. Dr. Kai Grant is an emerging political science scholar and PhD candidate at Griffith University, whose current research area focuses on academic freedom and freedom of speech in Australian universi-

ties. His PhD dissertation examines three key contemporary Australian cases within this area, engaging with a culture wars framework and reflexive thematic analysis methodology. His teaching activities span a broad range of topics within the political science discipline including international relations; international political economy; public policy; and Asia-Pacific business, society, and geopolitics. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0556-489X>

Annex I. Links to Posts

Links to the original TikTok posts used to illustrate the data.

Links to Figures	
Figure 1	Graphic representation of data
Figure 2	Link
Figure 3	Link 1 + Link 2
Figure 4	Link
Figure 5	Link
Figure 6	Link 1 + Link 2

Links to top-tier posts.

Top-tier posts by Party					
Labour	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5
Tories	#1	#2	#3	#4	

Annex II. Coding Scheme

General coding scheme.

Codes	
Link	TikTok link
Date of publication	Date in which each post was published
Number of likes	Retrieved on the date of the election
Number of shares	Retrieved on the date of the election
Caption	Caption from post, if any
Focus of the post	Own politics versus negative campaigning
Performative style	High/Low
Presence of humour	Yes/No
Type of humour	Juxtaposition/ absurdism/ irony/ wit/ satire/ cringe/ playful excess
Vibe-first	Yes/No
Cultural vernacularisation	Yes/No
Hybrid cultural vernacularisation	Yes/No

Coding scheme and explanation of the types of humour identified in the data.

Type of Humour	Presence/Absence	Description
Juxtaposition	Y/N	Platform-vernacular of humour produced through the collision of a serious political frame with a contrasting visual, cultural, or symbolic element that improves self-image or lowers the status of the opposition. It can collide with hyper-celebrity, cinematic, or spectacular imagery. Humour arises from the contrast between institutional seriousness and exaggerated symbolic spectacle rather than from affective chaos.
Absurdism	Y/N	Platform-vernacular use of humour that collapses seriousness entirely by rendering political actors ridiculous through surreal, exaggerated, or artificial scenarios that abandon realism. Meaning is destabilised rather than critiqued, often using AI-generated imagery, fantasy logics, or non-functional evaluative systems.
Irony	Y/N	Humour produced through expectation reversal, where a political actor fails at a culturally legible performance associated with competence or strength, generating humiliation through outcome mismatch. The audience is invited to laugh at the reversal rather than experience discomfort or embarrassment. In deadpan irony, the visual reveal negates the premise without commentary, producing humour through withheld meaning rather than exaggeration. In meta-irony, a political actor knowingly participates in an awkward or vernacular format while retaining narrative control, signalling awareness rather than incompetence. Mild discomfort is allowed, but authority is not meaningfully undermined.
Wit	Y/N	Low-intensity, culturally coded humour that dismisses a political opponent through reductive labelling, wordplay, or shared assumptions. Meaning is compressed rather than developed, relying on cultural recognition instead of visual comedy or ridicule.
Satire	Y/N	Moralising humour that critiques power by embedding contemporary political actors within established traditions of social, cultural, or historical judgment. Unlike absurdism or juxtaposition, satire stabilises meaning by framing ridicule as diagnosis rather than affective dismissal.
Cringe	Y/N	Humour that produces second-hand embarrassment by exposing repeated failures to perform everyday normality or cultural fit. Judgment is based on bodily cues, posture, vibe, or patterned inauthenticity rather than policy substance or narrative reversal.
Playful Excess	Y/N	Affective subtle humour generated through exaggerated lightness, pop-cultural aesthetics, or sensory saturation applied to serious political content, producing alignment rather than critique. Meaning remains stable but is communicated atmospherically, treating politics as a felt state rather than an argument.