

Article

Beyond Ideology: Political Behavior and Popularity in TikTok's Platformized Political Communication Environment

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Abstract

Many politicians heavily leverage social media platforms to further their interests and professional goals. TikTok, the widely popular social network established in 2016, has amassed a vast user following, especially among the younger demographic known as Generation Z. This study conceptualizes it as part of a platformized political communication environment that enables direct-to-audience communication beyond traditional journalistic gatekeeping. The current study aims to analyze high-visibility TikTok content produced by active Israeli politicians by scrutinizing the best-performing videos created by politicians representing diverse political ideologies. High-visibility content refers to videos that generated relatively high engagement, exposure, and platform presence, and therefore had greater potential to influence or impact audiences compared with less visible posts. The goal is to characterize and understand the content patterns and visibility dynamics of these successful TikTok videos posted by politicians. The findings suggest that the popularity of TikTok videos posted by politicians is associated with gender, age, and political affiliation. Men, older individuals, and those with right-wing affiliations tend to create content that garners the highest levels of popularity. Moreover, a considerable proportion of the sampled high-visibility videos do not engage directly with political subject matters. This suggests that, among best-performing political TikTok posts, visibility and engagement may sometimes outweigh explicit political or ideological discourse. This implies that politicians feel compelled to participate on the platform, even when their most visible content does not specifically revolve around promoting political messages. Consequently, the findings lend cautious support to the view that platform logic shapes political visibility and communication practices, even in politicians' use of TikTok. In doing so, this study contributes to understanding how commercial social media platforms such as TikTok shape political visibility, engagement, and direct-to-audience communication.

Keywords: TikTok; political communication; platformized visibility; Israeli politicians; platform affordances; algorithmic engagement; usage of social media; technological determinism



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1. Introduction

Social media networks enable politicians to communicate directly with citizens, thereby amplifying the influence of public opinion and reflecting real-time reactions to various political issues ([Bapitie and Carter 2022](#); [Howard et al. 2016](#)). Politicians frequently utilize social media networks to advance strategic interests and professional objectives and to cultivate emotional connections ([Yakovenko-Khokholieva and Styrnik 2021](#)). These platforms provide political parties with an avenue to bypass the traditional gatekeeping role of journalism, allowing direct engagement with the voting public ([Cervi et al. 2021](#)).

These networks should be understood as part of a hybrid and platformized political communication environment in which institutional actors rely on commercial social media infrastructures to reach audiences directly (Chadwick 2017; Enli 2015; Van Dijck et al. 2018).

TikTok exemplifies this environment. It is a commercial platform governed by algorithmic and engagement-driven logics that enables disintermediated political communication while simultaneously shaping visibility and interaction through its platform architecture. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes TikTok as a platformized political communication space embedded within commercial platform structures.

TikTok, the widely embraced social media platform introduced in 2016, has amassed an extensive user base across 150 countries globally (Lan and Tung 2024; Hendrickx 2025; Simões et al. 2023; Statista 2025b). It appeals in particular to the younger demographic, Generation Z, in part because it aligns with the preferences and characteristics of youth for concise, video-centric content (Lan and Tung 2024; Hendrickx 2025). At the core of the application's appeal are its brief videos, which have expanded somewhat in duration over time, presented in a continuous loop, primarily designed for entertainment and offering an avenue for escapism (Zuo and Wang 2019; Cheng and Li 2024; Su 2023).

Although TikTok's content is predominantly for entertainment, it is gradually transforming into a space for political discussion, offering political figures a distinctive opportunity to reengage with younger audiences (Cervi et al. 2021; Lan and Tung 2024). Although the platform's inherently playful and less serious nature might obscure its potential as a viable political arena for influencing opinions (Vijay and Gekker 2021), research indicates that political communication on TikTok exhibits notably high levels of interactivity compared to other platforms. This positions TikTok as a hybrid political communication arena where entertainment, visibility, personalization, and direct political communication intersect.

The primary objective of this research is to examine high-visibility TikTok content produced by active Israeli politicians by analyzing popular videos created by politicians across the political spectrum. High-visibility content refers to videos that generated relatively high engagement and exposure and thus had greater potential influence or impact than routine or lower-performing posts. Despite growing interest in political communication on social media, limited research has examined how politicians adapt their communication strategies to platformized political communication environments such as TikTok. The aim of this study is to identify the content characteristics of highly visible TikTok videos and to better understand the dynamics through which political visibility is produced on the platform.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the analysis is guided by a series of research questions. Specifically, the study examines whether popularity varies according to politicians' age, gender, political affiliation, and the use of entertainment-oriented content; whether political-ideological content varies according to politicians' demographic and ideological characteristics; and how these patterns may be interpreted in relation to TikTok's platform logic and the broader visibility of institutional political actors.

The novelty of this research lies in its examination of how TikTok's platform characteristics may shape patterns of political visibility and content presentation. McLuhan's concept of "the medium is the message" provides a useful historical point of departure for understanding why media form matters (McLuhan [1964] 1994). The present study uses McLuhan's insight cautiously and connects it to contemporary approaches emphasizing platform affordances, platformization, and the political economy of commercial digital platforms (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Van Dijck et al. 2018). From this perspective, TikTok is not merely a neutral channel for political messages; it is a platform environment in which algorithmic visibility, engagement metrics, short-form video conventions, and entertainment-oriented communication may influence how political actors present themselves and how their content circulates. This framework provides a basis for under-

standing how platform structures influence contemporary political communication and public visibility.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Virality on Social Media

Virality, a metric for gauging engagement on social media, refers to the scale and rapidity of content dissemination within a social network. For instance, on Twitter, virality is quantified by the frequency of retweets for a particular tweet (i.e., shared by other users, thereby expanding its audience) and the time interval between initial posting and subsequent retweets (Elmas et al. 2023).

Multiple factors influence potential content virality. Studies indicate that visual content, such as images and videos, generally possesses a higher viral potential than written content, with videos often exhibiting greater virality than static images (Bruni et al. 2012). Undoubtedly, the identity of the content sharer significantly influences virality, particularly when the individual is an “influencer” whose substantial following ensures wider exposure (Mohr 2014). Studies also indicate that negative messages tend to achieve higher virality than positive or neutral messages (Mousavi et al. 2022; Tsugawa and Ohsaki 2017).

The influence of virality expands significantly within the marketing sphere, through direct consumer influence via potentially viral content. This entails leveraging visual components and employing specific rhetorical styles to forge emotional rapport. Several studies indicate that by capitalizing on this viral potential, content managers can formulate more impactful marketing strategies on social networks (Himmelboim and Golan 2019).

2.2. The TikTok Social Network

2.2.1. TikTok and Its Usage Characteristics

Launched in 2016, the TikTok app has gained a considerable user base across 150 countries and 39 languages (Lan and Tung 2024; Hendrickx 2025; Simões et al. 2023; Statista 2025b). Primarily associated with short-form videos, which have gradually expanded in duration over time and are presented in a looping format, the app is tailored for entertainment and escapism (Zuo and Wang 2019; Cheng and Li 2024; Su 2023).

In 2025, TikTok ranked second globally in terms of leading mobile apps, with 37 million downloads (Statista 2025b), many of them among young demographics (Lan and Tung 2024). The United States holds the second largest user base, half of them from Generation Z (Statista 2025a). In Israel, TikTok ranks as the fourth most used social network among the general population (18+), after Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. Among adolescents, TikTok is the second most used platform after Instagram (Bezeq Report 2025).

Thus, young individuals seem more inclined to depend on the TikTok app more than on other platforms. Many factors may explain this inclination, including TikTok’s alignment with youthful users’ preferences for concise, video-centric content (Laor and Galily 2025; Zannettou et al. 2024). The platform also caters to their modern aspirations for self-expression while fostering their creative abilities (Yang et al. 2019).

The TikTok application is known for having attracted the largest number of active users within a remarkably brief period (Wang and Scherr 2022; Montag et al. 2021). Its success is partially attributable to the surge in social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many individuals were constrained to stay at home. This upsurge in social media engagement, TikTok included, reflected a form of pure escapism that social media engagement offered during that period (Abbasi et al. 2023; Feldkamp 2021).

One more factor contributing to its popularity is the freedom it offers users to generate content anytime and from anywhere. Because of its accessibility, users can interact with the app spontaneously, without requiring dedicated time slots. This flexibility enables brief

engagements, such as while waiting in line at the supermarket or during bus commutes, while still enjoying satisfying content (Omar and Dequan 2020; Tang 2019; Schellewald 2023; Zannettou et al. 2024).

The most engaged content on TikTok includes humorous storytelling, lip-syncing songs, and reenactments or imitations of other videos (Feng et al. 2019; Kurniawati et al. 2026). The most frequently shared content on the platform is TikTok dances (Cheng and Li 2024; Li et al. 2021; Yang et al. 2019; Zuo and Wang 2019).

The extensive popularity of TikTok and other social platforms among young users has raised concerns about negative content presented on the app, including cyberbullying, offensive material, violence, and challenges (Amidu 2025; Montag et al. 2021; Sylvain and Talpade 2024). To counter this threat, TikTok has introduced safeguards such as automated moderation systems that remove violative content, and a restricted mode for mature content. Default private account settings for users under the age of 16 further reduce opportunities for harmful interactions (Amidu 2025).

The motivations for using TikTok are similar to those observed in other social networks: escapism, entertainment, fostering social connections, and seeking or gathering information (Omar and Dequan 2020; Lan and Tung 2024; Montag et al. 2021; Kurniawati et al. 2026; Wang and Scherr 2022; Frăţilă 2021).

2.2.2. Characteristics of TikTok Usage Based on Age and Gender

As previously noted, TikTok is considered a “youthful” social network (Bizel et al. 2022), predominantly frequented by users under the age of 35 (Statista 2025a). In Israel, 41% of young individuals self-identified as active TikTok users, in contrast to 21% of adults (Bezeq Report 2023). Despite efforts to attract an older audience, TikTok apparently does not constitute a substantial presence in the lives of adults as compared to younger individuals (Bizel et al. 2022).

Gender disparities extend to the types of popular content and to what users upload. For instance, the majority of participants, particularly young participants, who uploaded dance challenges, were women (Klug 2020).

TikTok may also provide unique opportunities for women by facilitating enhanced self-presentation and visibility. Recent studies suggest that women scientists, who were historically underrepresented and largely “invisible” in public arenas, increasingly use TikTok to foreground both their professional identities and scientific knowledge, thereby significantly increasing their visibility (Huber and Baena 2023).

2.3. The Engagement of Politicians on Social Media Platforms

Social media functions as a direct communication channel between citizens and politicians, helping to amplify public opinion and immediately reflect public reactions to political issues, thereby highlighting the will of citizens (Boulianne et al. 2025; Howard et al. 2016; Theocharis et al. 2023). In contemporary political communication, this relationship should be understood as part of a hybrid media system marked by the interaction of older and newer media logics. In such a system, political actors, journalists, citizens, political parties, and digital platforms jointly shape the circulation, visibility, and interpretation of political messages (Chadwick 2017). Through social media, political parties can bypass traditional media barriers, according them greater control over the message and more direct communication access to the voting public (Cervi 2023; Cervi et al. 2021; Theocharis et al. 2023). This process is commonly associated with disintermediation, whereby political actors can communicate with citizens without relying exclusively on journalists, editors, or traditional news organizations to select, frame, and distribute their messages (Enli 2015). This is especially important for politicians holding extreme ideological positions, who may use

social media to strengthen visibility and mobilize audiences outside conventional media routes (Hong and Kim 2016; Hong et al. 2019).

Moreover, through social networks, groups can form around specific ideas, texts, or images. Elements such as memes and hashtags play a crucial role in connecting individuals and amplifying specific political ideas (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017; Laor 2023). These practices illustrate the hybrid nature of contemporary political communication, in which political messages circulate across institutional actors, platform users, and networked publics across multiple media forms. Rather than being confined to formal political speeches or journalistic coverage, political communication increasingly unfolds through visual, affective, and participatory formats that are shaped by platform cultures and audience engagement (Chadwick 2017; Theocharis et al. 2023).

Politicians may strategically leverage social media not only to promote their interests and professional ambitions but also to cultivate emotional connections with audiences (Gerbaudo 2012; Theocharis et al. 2023; Yakovenko-Khokholieva and Styrnik 2021). The integration of social media into political strategies is deemed essential for success in the modern era. These platforms help to empower politicians, who use visual content to preserve authenticity, engage their followers, and amass social capital for political advantage (Moir 2023). Enli's (2015) concept of mediated authenticity is particularly relevant in this context, as politicians often use social media to create impressions of sincerity, immediacy, accessibility, and personal proximity. Using visual platforms, authenticity is not merely stated but performed through style, tone, setting, language, and interaction with audiences.

Twitter and Facebook are two of the most popular social media platforms for political communication. Each exhibits distinct mechanisms for enabling engagement and political expression, which in turn produces different outcomes (Theocharis et al. 2023). For example, it has been found that politicians with extreme ideological positions have more Twitter followers (Hong and Kim 2016). These differences highlight the importance of platform affordances, which refer to the possibilities for action in a user–technological environment relationship. In social media research, affordances help explain how platform design, interface features, interaction tools, and visibility mechanisms shape how users produce, circulate, and evaluate content (Bucher and Helmond 2018). As previously noted, social media usage is predominantly associated with younger age demographics. Hence, it is reasonable to infer that a politician's age influences his or her approach to social media platforms (Larsson and Kalsnes 2014; Manning et al. 2017). Conversely, no notable distinctions are recognizable in the rhetorical style, authorial voice, factual presentation, or emotional tone of content posted by male and female politicians (Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018). However, disparities between male and female politicians were evident in the topics they addressed and in user engagement with their content, specifically in terms of likes and shares (Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018).

Despite TikTok's primary focus on entertaining content, it is increasingly evolving into a platform for political discourse (Cervi 2023; Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021). TikTok's accessibility as a platform for the younger generation enables its use for purposes such as activism, awareness raising, social engagement, and the promotion of specific agendas (Cervi 2023; Lee and Abidin 2023; Moir 2023; Zeng and Abidin 2023). From a hybrid media perspective, TikTok does not replace traditional political communication but becomes another arena through which political actors seek attention, recognition, and engagement (Chadwick 2017; Van Dijck et al. 2018).

Traditional media have long been conceptualized as gatekeepers that mediate between knowledge and the public, where audiences rely on professional news organizations to make sense of the world. Social media platforms, however, may weaken this gatekeeping barrier by broadening access to information and enabling individuals and public actors

to express opinions to potentially large audiences (Sevignani 2022). For politicians, this represents a form of disintermediation: they can speak directly to citizens, control the timing and framing of their messages, and construct an image of direct connection with audiences (Enli 2015). This view is not universally accepted. Social media may reduce dependence on traditional media institutions, it is argued, but it does not eliminate mediation altogether. Instead, one form of mediation is partly replaced by another: political visibility is now shaped by platform infrastructures, algorithmic recommendation systems, engagement metrics, moderation practices, and commercial attention logics (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Van Dijck et al. 2018). Some scholars argue that social media ultimately reproduces and amplifies the same dominant messages circulated by traditional media rather than fundamentally undermining them (Harder et al. 2017). Furthermore, platform algorithmic curation tends to expose users to content aligned with their existing lifestyles, preferences, and viewpoints, thereby limiting meaningful exposure to counter-attitudinal information that might challenge or complicate users' worldviews (Bakshy et al. 2015).

In political communication, hegemony refers to the ability of dominant actors and ideas to maintain influence not only through formal institutions, but also through cultural visibility, communicative practices, and the normalization of particular political meanings (Gramsci 1971; Sevignani 2022). In platformized environments, such influence may be reproduced, reinforced or contested through algorithmic visibility, direct-to-audience communication, and the strategic use of political-ideological content. This perspective helps contextualize differences between actors associated with dominant political positions and actors seeking to articulate alternative political positions. At the same time, these struggles unfold within commercial platform environments whose engagement-oriented and algorithmic mechanisms shape the distribution and visibility of political content (Van Dijck et al. 2018).

TikTok offers both benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, it serves as an accessible medium for conveying ideas to the younger generation, fostering political and social engagement, and supporting a diversity of opinions and social movements (Cervi 2023; Lee and Abidin 2023). On the other hand, concerns have been raised about increased "pop politics" or "politainment" (Cervi et al. 2023), which oversimplifies and trivializes political discourse in the same way that influencers and entertainment-oriented formats trivialize opinions on other issues (Cervi et al. 2023; Lee and Abidin 2023; Zamora-Medina et al. 2023). Thus, while this shift presents a distinct opportunity for political actors to establish or reestablish connections with younger audiences (Cervi 2023; Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021; Moir 2023), the platform's inherently "nonserious" nature may obscure its potential as a significant political arena (Vijay and Gekker 2021). Consequently, politicians may refrain from utilizing sponsored content on TikTok, recognizing that the format might not align seamlessly with the user experience. Additionally, a considerable portion of TikTok content is generated by influencers affiliated with political entities, further impacting the approach of politicians (Medina Serrano et al. 2020). These dynamics demonstrate that political communication on TikTok is shaped not only by political intention, but also by the platform's cultural norms, entertainment conventions, and visibility-oriented affordances (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Cervi et al. 2023).

In contrast to previous contentions, research suggests that political communication on TikTok exhibits significantly higher levels of interaction compared to other platforms. One mechanism facilitating this interaction is visual "duets," where users can engage in simulated public discussions online, using highly specific content highlighting one's own creative responses. This unique feature strengthens TikTok's standing as a noteworthy political player (Medina Serrano et al. 2020; Zeng and Abidin 2023). Duets, hashtags, comments, likes, shares, short-form video, music, sound, and algorithmic recommendations

are among the platform affordances that shape the production and circulation of political content. These affordances do not mechanically determine political communication, but they structure the conditions under which political actors and audiences interact, respond, and generate visibility (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Theocharis et al. 2023).

However, politicians must use this tool strategically. Failure to fully integrate into the platform by adapting to its affordances, vernaculars, and broader cultural environment may backfire, posing a significant risk to their public image by making them appear inauthentic and out of place (Cervi 2023). This point is closely connected to mediated authenticity, as perceived credibility on TikTok depends not only on the content of politicians' messages but also on the appropriateness of their performance to the platform's informal, visual, and participatory style (Enli 2015). Politicians do not yet appear to have fully leveraged the platform's potential for engaging followers and fostering interaction. Their approach remains rooted in "traditional" and conservative practices, without effectively utilizing TikTok trends or challenges, which are essential for success on the platform (Cervi 2023; Zamora-Medina et al. 2023).

Politicians can gain public support not only through political content but also through videos offering glimpses into their personal lives, families, and leisure activities. Such content aligns with the platform's ethos, as TikTok primarily features uncomplicated and casual videos that do not necessitate elaborate production (Cervi et al. 2021, 2023). Furthermore, research into trending subjects among American youth on TikTok reveals significant sharing of content related to pressing political concerns such as climate change, and what they perceive as insufficient efforts by politicians to address these critical issues (Medina Serrano et al. 2020; Zeng and Abidin 2023). However, on TikTok, youth participation in political content remains somewhat restricted. While young users are exposed to political subjects and information about political issues, TikTok's impact on active, real-world political engagement seems constrained (Sodani and Mendenhall 2021). This personalization of political communication reflects the convergence of institutional politics, platform culture, and audience-oriented self-presentation. Within a hybrid media system, politicians may therefore combine formal political identity with informal platform practices in order to maintain visibility and strengthen audience connection (Chadwick 2017; Enli 2015).

Medium Theory and Platform Logic

Technological determinism views technological development as a major force in shaping social organization, communication practices, and human behavior. From this perspective, technologies are not merely neutral channels for transmitting messages: they influence how information is produced, circulated, and interpreted. McLuhan's well-known formulation, "the medium is the message," emphasized that the form of a medium shapes patterns of perception, interaction, and social organization beyond the specific content it conveys (McLuhan [1964] 1994). While McLuhan's work remains foundational to medium theory, later scholars have argued that media technologies operate within broader social, cultural, institutional, and economic contexts. Rather than determining outcomes on their own, technologies interact with users, norms and existing systems of power. Consequently, McLuhan's emphasis on media form remains influential, but contemporary approaches often extend it by focusing on mediation, affordances, platforms, and media infrastructures (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Van Dijck et al. 2018).

In the context of social media, scholars argue that these platforms have substantially reshaped how individuals communicate, form relationships, and engage with public life since their emergence (Finley 2022; Jan et al. 2020). Contemporary technological determinist accounts often acknowledge the ambivalent nature of these transformations. On the one hand, social media facilitates the establishment and maintenance of social ties

across temporal and spatial boundaries. On the other hand, critics point to potential costs, including a decline in direct, face-to-face interaction as digitally mediated communication becomes a primary mode of social engagement. Over time, this shift may recalibrate interpersonal norms and reduce familiarity with, or reliance on, in-person communication practices (Finley 2022).

In the context of digital platforms, scholars argue that communication is shaped not only by media form but also by platform infrastructures, algorithms, user practices, governance mechanisms, and commercial logics. Van Dijck et al. (2018) describe platforms as connective infrastructures that organize social interaction through processes such as datafication, commodification, selection, and governance. From this perspective, platforms are not passive intermediaries; rather, they shape visibility, interaction, and attention through technological design and economic organization.

3. Research Question

Based on the literature reviewed above, the present study examines patterns of popularity and political-ideological content in TikTok videos posted by Israeli politicians. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited prior research on politicians' TikTok activity in the Israeli context, the analysis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the popularity of Israeli politicians' TikTok videos vary according to politicians' age, gender, political affiliation, and the presence of entertainment-oriented content?

RQ2: How does the presence of political-ideological content in Israeli politicians' TikTok videos vary according to politicians' age, gender, and political affiliation?

RQ3: How can patterns of popularity and political-ideological content in Israeli politicians' TikTok videos be understood in relation to TikTok's platform logic, platform affordances, and the visibility of institutional political actors?

4. Methodology

This study employed quantitative content analysis of publicly available TikTok videos posted by Israeli politicians. The sampling frame consisted of all sitting members of the Israeli Knesset at the time of data collection. A systematic search was conducted to identify their official TikTok accounts (e.g., via public profile verification, cross-links from official social media pages, and platform search). Accounts were included in the sample if they were active during the sampling period, defined as maintaining a TikTok presence and uploading at least one video per week at that time. Applying these inclusion criteria yielded 44 Knesset members with active TikTok accounts (Supplementary Table S1).

From each active Israeli politician's account, the top 7–8 most popular videos were sampled for analysis, based on TikTok's visible popularity indicators, including views, likes, and comments. This procedure produced a final dataset of 336 videos. The sampling strategy was purposive and visibility-oriented, designed to capture high-visibility and best-performing political TikTok content. Accordingly, the study presents patterns of visibility, engagement, and content characteristics among successful political TikTok posts produced by active Israeli politicians.

The coding process proceeded in three stages. First, a structured coding sheet (codebook) was developed based on prior research on TikTok content, virality, and political communication on social media (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021; Cervi et al. 2023; Lee and Abidin 2023; Zamora-Medina et al. 2023; Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018; Laor 2024). The instrument included 8 items grouped into two overarching categories: popularity and content characteristics. Popularity was operationalized through three engagement indicators available on TikTok: views, likes, and comments. For the main inferential analyses, the composite popularity score was calculated as the sum of three visible TikTok engagement

indicators: views, likes, and comments. This unweighted composite score represented the overall popularity of each video.

Content characteristics (primarily binary indicators) included entertainment-related elements and political and ideological elements. For the inferential analyses, an entertainment variable was constructed by combining three indicators: dance, lip-syncing, and music/singing. Videos that included at least one of these elements were coded as 1, while videos that included none of them were coded as 0.

In addition, a political-ideological content variable was created by combining the indicators of political content and ideological content for descriptive purposes. Videos that included either political or ideological content were coded as 1, whereas videos that included neither were coded as 0. Political and ideological indicators were also analyzed separately in the inferential tests in order to capture potential differences between the two types of content.

All popularity indicators were recorded as observed at a single capture point to ensure consistency (given that engagement counts may change over time).

Second, a reliability test was conducted on a randomly selected 10% subsample of the videos. Two trained research assistants independently coded the same set of videos to evaluate intercoder consistency and to identify categories requiring clarification. Following comparison, the coding scheme was refined where needed, and the intercoder agreement reached 90% (based on percent agreement). Because the content variables were primarily binary, Cohen's kappa was also calculated to correct for agreement expected by chance. The kappa values ranged from $\kappa = 0.73$ to $\kappa = 0.87$, indicating substantial to almost perfect intercoder agreement. Any remaining discrepancies were resolved through discussion to ensure consistent application of the coding rules in the full dataset.

Third, statistical tests were used to examine differences in video characteristics and popularity across predefined groups. Specifically, the analyses compared patterns by gender, age cohorts (see Supplementary Table S1), and political/ideological affiliation (right/center/left). The statistical approach included independent-samples *t*-tests for comparing continuous popularity measures across two groups, one-way ANOVAs for testing differences across multiple groups, such as age cohorts and ideological affiliation, and chi-square tests of independence for assessing associations between categorical variables and politicians' demographic characteristics. To account for the grouped structure of the data, in which several videos were sampled from the same politician, the bivariate group comparisons were supplemented with robustness analyses that addressed politician-level clustering. For the popularity analysis, the composite popularity score was log-transformed due to the skewed distribution of engagement indicators, and a linear mixed-effects model was estimated with a random intercept for politician. This model preserved the video as the unit of analysis while accounting for clustering within politicians. For political-ideological content, a clustered logistic robustness analysis was conducted to examine whether the main descriptive patterns remained after accounting for politician-level clustering.

4.1. Descriptive Patterns

The findings reveal a notable proportion of posts in the research uploaded by male politicians (62%), and only 38% of posts by female politicians. The majority of the analyzed content comes from politicians aged 35–65 (91%), with the highest concentration among those aged 36–45 (32.14%). Furthermore, a significant portion of the posts examined in the study originate from politicians aligned with the right side of the political spectrum (54%).

It is noteworthy that when considering the nature of the politicians themselves (excluding the quantity of their posts examined in the research), 52% of the study participants were classified as right-wing, 11% as center-aligned, and 36% as left-wing. Regarding

content characteristics, entertainment elements, i.e., music or singing, dance and lip-sync, were present in 44% of the videos. Most of the videos (56.5%) did not include political and ideological content. These descriptive findings indicate that political-ideological messaging was less common overall than entertainment-related content.

To investigate the research questions, analysis was conducted across three distinct content areas: the video's entertainment content metrics, its popularity metrics, and its political-ideological content.

4.2. Statistical Analysis

To address RQ1, which examined how the popularity of Israeli politicians' TikTok videos varied according to politicians' age, gender, political affiliation, and the presence of entertainment-oriented content, a composite popularity score was used to assess differences across these characteristics.

First, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether video popularity varied across politicians from different age groups. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between age groups, $F(4, 331) = 33.61, p < 0.001$. Politicians aged 65–75 exhibited the highest average popularity ($M = 465,637.93, SD = 519,465.82$), whereas those aged 30–35 showed the lowest average popularity ($M = 2748.50, SD = 3135.70$), indicating that at least one age group differed significantly in popularity from the others (see Table 1). Notably, this pattern shows that older politicians achieved greater visibility than younger politicians, despite TikTok's common association with younger users and youth-oriented communication (Lan and Tung 2024; Hendrickx 2025).

Table 1. Differences in Video Popularity Across Politicians From Different Age Groups.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	<i>p</i>	η^2
Between groups	3,268,757,251,920	4	817,189,312,980	33.61	<0.001	0.29
Within groups	8,048,738,082,798	331	24,316,429,253			
Total	11,317,495,334,718	335				

Note. Dependent variable: video popularity. SS = sum of squares; MS = mean square; η^2 was calculated as the between-groups SS divided by the total SS.

Second, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether video popularity varied between male and female politicians. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups, with male politicians exhibiting higher average popularity ($M = 85,267.61, SD = 225,251.37$) than female politicians ($M = 33,821.17, SD = 69,018.42$), $t(264.93) = 3.07, p < 0.01$ (see Table 2).

Table 2. Welch Independent-Samples *t*-Test for Video Popularity by Gender.

Comparison	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>	Mean Difference	SE	95% CI
Gender comparison	3.07	264.93	0.002	51,446.44	16,767.49	[18,431.94, 84,460.94]

Note. Dependent variable: video popularity. Because Levene's test was significant in the original IBM SPSS Statistics output, the unequal-variances (Welch) result is reported.

Third, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether video popularity varied across different political orientations: right-wing, center, and left. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between political groups, $F(2, 333) = 5.34, p = 0.005$. Politicians affiliated with the right exhibited the highest average popularity ($M = 95,422.74, SD = 240,364.25$), whereas those affiliated with the left showed the lowest average popularity ($M = 29,565.93, SD = 56,762.15$), indicating that at least one political group differed significantly in popularity from the others (see Table 3).

Table 3. Differences in Video Popularity by Political Orientation.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	<i>p</i>	η^2
Between groups	351,839,546,815	2	175,919,773,407	5.34	0.005	0.03
Within groups	10,965,655,787,903	333	32,929,897,261			
Total	11,317,495,334,718	335				

Note. Dependent variable: video popularity. SS = sum of squares; MS = mean square; η^2 was calculated as the between-groups SS divided by the total SS.

Fourth, an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether the presence of entertainment elements, including dance, lip-sync, or music, was associated with video popularity. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups, with videos without entertainment elements exhibiting higher average popularity ($M = 88,916.47$, $SD = 220,423.56$) than those including at least one entertainment element ($M = 36,138.35$, $SD = 116,675.68$), $t(296.09) = 2.82$, $p = 0.005$ (see Table 4). This finding is noteworthy due to prior research indicating that entertainment-oriented content generated higher popularity in political communication on TikTok (Feng et al. 2019; Kurniawati et al. 2026).

Table 4. Welch Independent-Samples *t*-Test for Video Popularity by Presence of Entertainment Elements.

Comparison	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>	Mean Difference	SE	95% CI
Entertainment-elements comparison	2.82	296.09	0.005	52,778.12	18,719.52	[15,937.96, 89,618.29]

Note. Dependent variable: video popularity. Because Levene's test was significant in the original SPSS output, the unequal-variances (Welch) result is reported.

To address RQ2, which examined variance in the presence of political-ideological content in Israeli politicians' TikTok videos according to politicians' age, gender, and political affiliation, a binary political-ideological content measure was used to assess differences across demographic and ideological groups.

First, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine levels of political-ideological content in videos across age groups: 30–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56–65, and 65–75. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups, $F(4, 331) = 2.72$, $p = 0.030$. Politicians aged 30–35 exhibited the highest mean level of political-ideological content ($M = 0.65$, $SD = 0.34$), whereas those aged 65–75 showed the lowest level ($M = 0.18$, $SD = 0.30$), indicating that younger politicians tended to include more political-ideological content in their videos (see Table 5).

Table 5. Differences in Political-Ideological Content of Videos Across Age Groups.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	<i>p</i>	η^2
Between groups	2.63	4	0.66	2.72	0.030	0.03
Within groups	79.93	331	0.24			
Total	82.56	335				

Note. Dependent variable: political-ideological content. SS = sum of squares; MS = mean square; η^2 was calculated as the between-groups SS divided by the total SS.

Second, the findings indicated no statistically significant gender differences in the combined political-ideological content variable, nor in the analysis of ideological content alone. However, a significant difference emerged in relation to political content. Specifically, an independent samples *t*-test revealed that videos produced by female politicians contained

a higher average presence of political content ($M = 0.34$, $SD = 0.477$) compared to those produced by male politicians ($M = 0.24$, $SD = 0.425$), and this difference was statistically significant, $t(245.704) = -2.103$, $p < 0.05$ (see Table 6).

Table 6. Welch Independent-Samples t-Test for Political Content of Videos by Gender.

Comparison	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE	95% CI
Gender comparison	−2.10	245.70	0.036	−0.11	0.05	[−0.21, −0.01]

Note. Dependent variable: political content (0 = no, 1 = yes). Because Levene's test was significant in the original SPSS output, the unequal-variances (Welch) result is reported.

Third, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the level of political-ideological content across political orientations: right, center, and left. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between groups, $F(2, 333) = 62.68$, $p < 0.001$. Politicians affiliated with the left exhibited the highest mean level of political-ideological content ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 0.44$), whereas those affiliated with the right showed the lowest level ($M = 0.20$, $SD = 0.40$), indicating substantial variation in political-ideological content across political groups (see Table 7).

Table 7. Differences in Political-Ideological Content of Videos Based on Political Orientation.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Between groups	22.58	2	11.29	62.68	<0.001	0.27
Within groups	59.98	333	0.18			
Total	82.56	335				

Note. Dependent variable: political-ideological content. SS = sum of squares; MS = mean square; η^2 was calculated as the between-groups SS divided by the total SS.

4.3. Robustness Analysis Accounting for Politician-Level Clustering

To account for the grouped structure of the data, supplementary robustness analyses were conducted for politician-level clustering. First, a null linear mixed-effects model was estimated for popularity scores. The model indicated substantial clustering at the politician level, with an intraclass correlation coefficient of $ICC = 0.81$. This indicates that a substantial proportion of the variation in popularity occurred between politicians rather than between videos alone, supporting the use of models that account for politician-level clustering.

In the mixed-effects model predicting log-transformed popularity, the direction of the results remained broadly consistent with the descriptive findings: popularity was higher among older, male, and right-wing politicians and lower among videos containing entertainment elements. After accounting for politician-level clustering, these effects did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Specifically, compared with the 30–45 age group, the 56–75 age group showed a positive but non-significant association with popularity, $B = 0.465$, $p = 0.536$; male politicians showed a positive but non-significant association, $B = 0.577$, $p = 0.364$; right-wing affiliation showed a positive but non-significant association compared with left-wing affiliation, $B = 1.076$, $p = 0.103$; and entertainment content showed a negative but non-significant association, $B = -0.219$, $p = 0.116$. Therefore, the popularity findings should be interpreted as descriptive visibility patterns rather than as independent video-level effects.

A clustered logistic robustness analysis was also conducted for political-ideological content. In contrast to the popularity model, political affiliation remained a robust predictor after accounting for politician-level clustering. Compared with left-wing politicians, center politicians were less likely to post political-ideological content, $OR = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$, and right-wing politicians were also less likely to post political-ideological content, $OR = 0.07$,

$p < 0.001$. Age and gender were not statistically significant in the clustered model. This finding supports the descriptive pattern that left-wing politicians were more likely to include political-ideological content in their high-visibility TikTok videos, while age and gender differences should be interpreted more cautiously.

Taken together, these findings address RQ3 by showing that popularity and political-ideological content do not follow identical patterns. The descriptive analyses indicated that older, male, and right-wing politicians achieved higher popularity, whereas younger and left-wing politicians tended to include more political-ideological content. The supplementary nested-data analyses refined this interpretation: the popularity patterns remained in the same direction but weakened after accounting for politician-level clustering, while political affiliation remained a robust predictor of political-ideological content. These results suggest a distinction between visibility-oriented communication and explicit ideological communication on TikTok, a pattern that is further interpreted in the Discussion in relation to platform logic, political visibility, and institutional status.

5. Discussion

This study examines how TikTok, as a commercial and platformized political communication environment, reshapes patterns of political behavior, visibility, and influence among Israeli politicians. The findings indicate that many Israeli Knesset members maintain an active presence on TikTok, regularly uploading content on TikTok and cultivating substantial follower bases. This engagement appears to reflect a strategic investment in reaching both current and future voters through a platform whose user base remains disproportionately young and continues to expand (Ng and Indran 2022). Such activity is consistent with research highlighting TikTok's importance for connecting with younger audiences (Lee and Abidin 2023; Moir 2023; Bezeq Report 2023). It also aligns with group socialization theory (Harris 1995), which emphasizes the formation of attitudes and political orientations during youth. At the same time, this investment must be understood within TikTok's platform logic: politicians do not communicate directly with audiences, but through a commercial infrastructure shaped by platform affordances, recommendation systems, engagement metrics, and algorithmic circulation. In this sense, TikTok facilitates both disintermediation and mediated authenticity, enabling politicians to bypass traditional journalistic gatekeeping while presenting themselves as accessible and authentic to voters (Chadwick 2017; Enli 2015).

A second key finding is that approximately 60% of the videos posted by Israeli politicians contained no explicitly political or ideological content. This pattern is consistent with prior research showing that TikTok privileges personal, entertaining, and hybrid forms of communication often described as politainment (Cervi et al. 2021, 2023; Li et al. 2021; Yang et al. 2019; Zuo and Wang 2019). At the same time, previous studies have demonstrated TikTok's potential as a venue for political engagement, particularly among younger audiences (Moir 2023; Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021; Zeng and Abidin 2023). Consequently, the relatively low prevalence of explicit political or ideological content should not be interpreted as an absence of politics. Rather, it may reflect a visibility-oriented communication strategy in which politicians use personal, familiar, or lightly political content to sustain attention and audience engagement while adapting to the platform's norms and algorithmic dynamics.

The examination of video popularity across age groups revealed a notable pattern, with the oldest age group, 66–75, achieving the highest levels of popularity. This finding is theoretically significant because it challenges the assumption that a youth-oriented platform necessarily advantages younger political actors. Although TikTok is commonly associated with younger users, short-form video culture, and youth-oriented communica-

tion, political visibility on the platform may not depend solely on demographic similarity between politicians and the platform's dominant audience (Hendrickx 2025; Lan and Tung 2024; Medina Serrano et al. 2020; Zeng and Abidin 2023). Instead, the greater popularity of older politicians may reflect their established public recognition, senior political status, accumulated media exposure, and offline political prominence. Conversely, lower popularity among politicians aged 30–35 may reflect their more recent entry into politics, lower public recognition, and more limited access to senior leadership positions. The lower volume of political and ideological videos among this younger group may likewise reflect differences in political experience and public visibility. These explanations, however, remain interpretive and should be treated with caution. Overall, the findings suggest that visibility among high-performing political TikTok videos is shaped not only by age, but also by broader factors such as algorithmic recommendation, audience engagement, and pre-existing political recognition (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Van Dijck et al. 2018).

In relation to RQ1, which examined whether video popularity varies by politicians' gender, the findings reveal that videos posted by male politicians achieved higher popularity than those posted by female politicians. This result contrasts with previous research suggesting that female politicians often receive greater engagement and support than their male counterparts (Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018). One possible explanation is the male-dominated nature of Israeli politics, where women remain underrepresented. Greater public familiarity with male politicians may therefore contribute to their higher visibility and popularity on TikTok. However, this interpretation should be viewed as a descriptive account of platform visibility rather than evidence of a gender-based preference among users.

The findings also revealed a significant gender difference in posting behavior: female politicians shared more political content than male politicians. This pattern may reflect efforts by female politicians to establish credibility and project a more serious public image. At the same time, TikTok may provide female politicians with opportunities for visibility that have not always been available through traditional media, thereby strengthening their public presence and political influence, consistent with similar patterns observed among female researchers (Huber and Baena 2023). Another possible explanation is that women, as a minority within Israeli politics, may approach content creation more strategically because they anticipate greater public scrutiny (Rheault et al. 2019). These interpretations remain speculative and should be regarded as possible explanations rather than causal conclusions.

Previous research suggests that entertainment-oriented content, such as dance, music, and lip-syncing, is often associated with higher popularity on TikTok. However, the present findings challenge this expectation. Videos without entertainment elements achieved significantly higher popularity than those incorporating entertainment elements. Rather than indicating a null relationship, this finding points to a pattern opposite to that predicted by the existing literature. One possible explanation is that audiences consuming political content on TikTok respond more favorably to direct, personal, or issue-oriented communication than to entertainment-oriented formats. While this result contrasts with studies emphasizing the appeal of entertainment content on TikTok (Kurniawati et al. 2026; Zuo and Wang 2019), it is consistent with research indicating that TikTok has become an important venue for political discourse, particularly among politically engaged young users (Lee and Abidin 2023; Medina Serrano et al. 2020). Users who follow politicians on TikTok may engage more with substantive or direct political communication than with content reflecting the platform's typical entertainment conventions. Nevertheless, this explanation should be treated cautiously because platform distribution, algorithmic visibility, and politician-level prominence may also influence video popularity. The findings also revealed substantial differences across political orientations. Right-wing politicians achieved higher levels of

audience popularity, while left-wing politicians posted more political-ideological content. These patterns are consistent with previous research documenting unequal adoption and performance of social media among politicians (Zamora-Medina et al. 2023; Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021). From a hegemonic perspective (Gramsci 1971; Seignani 2022), the greater prevalence of political-ideological content among left-wing politicians may reflect an effort to utilize TikTok to articulate alternative political alternatives. Conversely, the lower levels of political-ideological content among right-wing politicians may indicate a greater reliance on visibility, public familiarity, and platform-compatible communication rather than explicit ideological messaging. However, these interpretations remain tentative. TikTok is not inherently a counter-hegemonic medium but a commercial platform whose visibility is shaped by engagement-driven algorithms. Accordingly, these observed differences should be interpreted as descriptive patterns of platformized political communication rather than evidence of underlying causal processes.

6. Conclusions

This paper contributes to the literature by examining how Israeli politicians use TikTok and identifying patterns of video popularity and political-ideological content across gender, age, and political affiliation. Men, older politicians, and those aligned with right-wing ideologies showed higher levels of video popularity, although these patterns should be interpreted cautiously after accounting for the clustering of videos within politicians. The findings further reveal that much of the content posted by politicians does not directly address political issues, suggesting that TikTok is used not only for ideological communication but also to enhance visibility, audience engagement and political presence.

This study also contributes theoretically by revisiting Marshall McLuhan's concept of "the medium is the message" (McLuhan [1964] 1994) as a historical point of departure for understanding political communication on TikTok. Rather than adopting a technologically deterministic perspective, the findings are interpreted through contemporary theories of platformized communication. They suggest that politicians adapt their communication to the affordances and incentives of the platform, where maintaining visibility and relevance may be as important as advancing explicit political agendas. This interpretation is grounded in scholarship on hybrid media systems, disintermediation, platform affordances, and platform society (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Chadwick 2017; Enli 2015; Van Dijck et al. 2018).

Finally, the observed patterns suggest that TikTok may reproduce existing political hierarchies, as more established political actors, including older and right-wing politicians, achieved greater visibility than younger and less established politicians. This interpretation is consistent with hegemonic approaches to communication, which explain how dominant visibility can be reproduced through cultural and communicative structures (Gramsci 1971; Seignani 2022). At the same time, these patterns may also reflect algorithmic recommendations, platform dynamics, and politicians' prominence outside the platform. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as evidence of platformized political visibility, in which institutional position, audience engagement, platform affordances, and algorithmic distribution jointly shape which political actors and messages become visible (Bucher and Helmond 2018).

Limitations and Future Studies: While the quantitative content analysis in the current study provides valuable insights, it may not capture the depth of qualitative aspects such as the context, tone, or intent behind the content. In addition, popularity was measured through visible engagement indicators, including views, likes, and comments. These indicators should not be interpreted as a transparent reflection of audience preferences alone because TikTok's recommendation algorithm may also influence which videos receive

exposure and engagement. A further limitation concerns the sampling design: because the study selected the top seven to eight most popular videos from each active politician's TikTok account, the analysis focuses on high-visibility or best-performing content rather than on the full range of politicians' TikTok activity. Although politician-level clustering was addressed through robustness analyses, the popularity findings should be interpreted mainly as descriptive visibility patterns, whereas political affiliation remained a robust predictor of political-ideological content. This study also remains noncausal and cannot fully separate platform effects from pre-existing political prominence. Finally, highly prominent politicians may disproportionately influence popularity patterns. For example, Benjamin Netanyahu's exceptional public visibility and senior political status may partly shape the observed age-group and right-wing popularity effects. Future studies should extend this approach by incorporating longitudinal designs, follower-base measures, offline prominence indicators, and direct measures of algorithmic visibility.

A complementary future study with qualitative analysis could offer a more holistic understanding of politicians' TikTok usage and could offer a deeper understanding of politicians' motivations, perceptions, and strategies behind their TikTok content. Another future study could extend the research to include politicians from different countries to compare their TikTok usage and investigate how cultural and political contexts influence the content, engagement, and technical aspects of politicians' videos on TikTok. Future studies could also examine how platform algorithms and recommendation systems shape the visibility of political content, since algorithmic mediation may influence popularity independently of audience preference or content characteristics.

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