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**Deliberation in the Age of Algorithms:
A Comparative Analysis on Prevalence of TikTok-Mediated
Political Communication Among Young Adults Across Countries**

Master's Thesis

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List of Abbreviations

- **BLM:** Black Lives Matter
- **COVID-19:** Coronavirus Disease 2019
- **FYP:** For You Page (TikTok algorithm feed)
- **ICT:** Information and Communication Technologies
- **LGBTQ:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer plus other sexual orientations and gender identities.
- **NGO:** Non-Governmental Organization
- **SNS:** Social Networking Service
- **USD:** United States Dollar

ABSTRACT (English)

Kim, Y. (2025). *Deliberation in the Age of Algorithms: A Comparative Analysis on the Prevalence of TikTok-Mediated Political Communication Among Young Adults Across Countries* [Master's Thesis, Vilnius University, Faculty of Communication, Supervisor Prof. Dr. B. Grebliauskiene]. 71 p. (150 800 characters). Figure, Tables, Summary in Lithuanian, List of References (93 titles) p. 58–66.

This thesis aims to examine the impact of TikTok's unique features on political communication among young adults. It analyzes user interaction with content and evaluates how the platform's algorithmic curation, especially on the "For You Page (FYP)" influences the exposure to and understanding of political messages among youth. A qualitative research approach is employed to fill a gap in existing studies, which have predominantly concentrated on political actors or have been limited to single-country contexts.

The empirical analysis draws on eleven semi-structured interviews with young adults aged 19 to 26 from a range of national backgrounds. Participants were purposefully classified into groups of Non-, Light-, Moderate-, and Heavy-User according to their screen time, in order to accurately reflect variability in platform engagement. Following an inductive coding approach that focused on patterns of political content consumption, as well as its perceived influence on both political views and further engaging activities, the data were transcribed for thematic analysis using software tool.

The findings of the study suggest that TikTok serves mainly as a platform for unpremeditated political exposure to a degree rather than deliberative engagement with political information, involuntarily leading to the production of unpredictable algorithmic content. Those contents often increase political awareness of peripheral issues without the user's knowledge or intent. Such exposure rarely results in long-term deliberation or deeper political engagement, even though it can raise awareness encouraging low-threshold forms of participation—often resulting in slacktivism such as content sharing or informal discussion.

Furthermore, it was discovered that conversational battle or debate, making superficial impression of conflict dynamic made possible by the platform's comment sections, was most commonly observed form of political attitudes among active users. Despite TikTok's ability to rapidly distribute political content to a wide audience and impact traditional media, its

structural limitations—such as algorithmic curation and short video format—restrict its capacity to facilitate the mutual exchange of ideas necessary for democratic deliberation. According to the empirical findings, it turns out that TikTok plays the role of fragmented mediator in public discourse, which can be a potential tool for calling attention to political issues.

Keywords: *TikTok, Political Communication, Social Media, Young Adults, Political Engagement*

ABSTRACT (Lithuanian)

Kim, Y. (2025). "Svarstymai algoritmų amžiuje: Lyginamoji TikTok tarpininkaujamos politinės komunikacijos paplitimo jaunimo tarpe analizė" [Tarptautinė Komunikacija magistro programa, Komunikacijos Fakultetas, Vilniaus universitetas, Darbo vadovas prof. dr. Beata Grebliauskienė]. 71 p. (150 800 ženklų). Paveikslas, lentelės, paveikslas, santrauka lietuvių kalba, literatūros sąrašas (93 pavadinimai) p. 58–66.

Šioje disertacijoje siekiama ištirti „TikTok“ unikalių funkcijų poveikį jaunimo politinei komunikacijai. Čia analizuojama vartotojų sąveika su turiniu ir vertinama, kaip platformos algoritminė kuratorystė, ypač „For You Page (FYP)“ puslapyje, įtakoja jaunimo susidūrimą su politiniais pranešimais ir jų supratimą. Siekiant užpildyti esamų tyrimų, kurie daugiausia buvo sutelkti į politinius veikėjus arba apsiribojo vienos šalies kontekstu, spragas, taikomas kokybinis tyrimo metodas.

Empirinė analizė remiasi vienuolika pusiau struktūruotų interviu su 19–26 metų jaunuoliais iš įvairių šalių. Tyrimo dalyviai buvo metodiškai suskirstyti į grupes pagal ekrano laiką: nenaudojantys, retai naudojantys, vidutiniškai naudojantys ir dažnai naudojantys, siekiant tiksliai atspindėti platformos naudojimo įvairovę. Taikant indukcinį kodavimo metodą, kuris buvo sutelktas į politinio turinio vartojimo modelius, taip pat jo suvokiamą įtaką politinėms pažiūroms ir tolesnei veiklai, duomenys buvo perrašyti teminei analizei naudojant programinę įrangą.

Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad „TikTok“ daugiausia tarnauja kaip platforma, skirta šiek tiek neapgalvotam politiniam eksponavimui, o ne apgalvotam politinės informacijos nagrinėjimui, o tai nevalingai veda prie nenuspėjamo algoritminio turinio kūrimo. Toks turinys dažnai didina politinį supratimą apie periferinius klausimus be vartotojo žinios ar ketinimo. Toks eksponavimas retai kada veda prie ilgalaikio apmąstymo ar gilesnio politinio įsitraukimo, nors ir gali didinti supratimą, skatindamas žemos ribos įsitraukimo formas, dažnai vedančias prie pasyvaus aktyvizmo, pavyzdžiui, turinio dalijimosi ar neformalių diskusijų.

Nepaisant „TikTok“ gebėjimo greitai platinti politinį turinį plačiai auditorijai ir daryti įtaką tradicinėms žiniasklaidos priemonėms, jo struktūriniai apribojimai, tokie kaip algoritminis turinio atrinkimas ir trumpas vaizdo įrašų formatas, riboja jo gebėjimą palengvinti abipusę idėjų mainą, kuris yra būtinas demokratiniam svarstymui. Remiantis empiriniais duomenimis,

paiškėjo, kad „TikTok“ atlieka fragmentuoto tarpininko vaidmenį viešajame diskurse, kuris gali būti potencialus įrankis atkreipti dėmesį į politines problemas.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *TikTok, politinė komunikacija, socialinė žiniasklaida, jaunimas, politinis aktyvumas*

SANTRAUKA

Svarstymai algoritmų amžiuje: Lyginamoji TikTok tarpininkaujamos politinės komunikacijos paplitimo jaunimo tarpe analizė

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71 puslapiai, 1 paveikslas, 6 lentelės, 2 priedai ir 93 šaltiniai.

Šis magistro darbas skirtas analizuoti, kaip socialinių tinklų platforma „TikTok“, pasižyminti algoritmiškai kuruojamu turinio srautu ir trumpo formato vaizdo įrašais, formuoja jaunų suaugusiųjų politinę komunikaciją. Temos aktualumą lemia augantis jaunimo politinės informacijos vartojimas socialiniuose tinkluose bei ribotas mokslinių tyrimų skaičius, nagrinėjančių kasdienę jaunų naudotojų patirtį „TikTok“ platformoje, ypač lyginamuoju ir vartotojais grįstu požiūriu.

Darbo tikslas – ištirti, kaip „TikTok“ platformos algoritminės savybės ir skirtingi naudotojų įsitraukimo modeliai (ne naudotojai, mažai, vidutiniškai ir intensyviai naudojantys asmenys) daro įtaką politinio turinio vartojimo, interpretavimo ir dalyvavimo politinėje komunikacijoje formoms, taip pat nustatyti medijų raštingumo vaidmenį šiuose procesuose.

Siekiant įgyvendinti darbo tikslą, buvo išskirti šie uždaviniai:

- 1) išanalizuoti politinės komunikacijos ir socialinių medijų teorinius požiūrius, susijusius su algoritmine medijacija ir deliberatyvia demokratija;
- 2) parengti kokybinio tyrimo metodologiją, leidžiančią atskleisti jaunų suaugusiųjų politinės komunikacijos patirtis „TikTok“ platformoje; surinkti ir išanalizuoti empirinius duomenis, taikant pusiau struktūruotus interviu;
- 3) nustatyti politinio turinio vartojimo modelius ir jų sąsajas su politiniu sąmoningumu bei dalyvavimu;
- 4) interpretuoti gautus rezultatus atsižvelgiant į medijų raštingumo aspektą.

Tyrime taikyti šie mokslinio tyrimo metodai: mokslinės literatūros analizė ir sintezė, pusiau struktūruoti interviu, teminė kokybinių duomenų analizė, taikant MAXQDA programinę įrangą, bei nuolatinio palyginimo metodas. Empiriniai duomenys surinkti atlikus 11 interviu su 19–26 metų jaunuoliais, gyvenančiais Lietuvoje ir kilusiais iš skirtingų šalių.

Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad „TikTok“ dažniausiai veikia kaip atsitiktinio politinio turinio pasiekimo erdvė, o ne kaip sąmoningos politinės informacijos paieškos priemonė. Algoritminis turinio rekomendavimas reikšmingai prisideda prie politinio sąmoningumo didėjimo, ypač tarp vidutinių ir intensyvių platformos naudotojų, tačiau retai lemia ilgalaikį ar aukšto lygio politinį įsitraukimą. Nustatyta, kad medijų raštingumas yra esminis tarpininkaujantis veiksnys: aukštesnį medijų raštingumo lygį turintys naudotojai dažniau kritiškai vertina turinį ir ieško papildomos informacijos už platformos ribų, tuo tarpu kiti reiškia skepticizmą arba politinį pasyvumą.

Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad „TikTok“ veikia kaip hibridinė politinės komunikacijos erdvė, jungianti pramogą, socialinę sąveiką ir politinės prasmės kūrimą, tačiau jos potencialas skatinti deliberatyvią demokratinę diskusiją išlieka ribotas dėl algoritminės logikos ir trumpo formato komunikacijos ypatumų.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a qualitative study of young adults who use TikTok and their reported experience concerning political communication in which they interact with the TikTok algorithm, especially in light of different engagement level and national contexts. The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate how TikTok, with its distinctive platform features—particularly the algorithmic feed—shapes the political communication patterns of young adults. The analysis also examines the prevalence of political communication from users with no previous experience of engaging with TikTok to those who are frequent users, exploring how different degrees of media literacy impact this shift and consequently shape political awareness.

The following tasks were designed to guide the structure of the thesis in order to achieve the aforementioned objective. Initially, to identify the specific gap in empirical research that this study seeks to address, Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 are dedicated to a theoretical examination of social media's role as a contemporary political communication tool, contrasting TikTok's algorithmic features with those of traditional social networks. Second, in Chapter 3, a methodological design using semi-structured, in-depth interviews for creating a qualitative framework that categorizes young adult users according to their behavioral engagement levels is presented. Lastly, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 examine the phenomenon of algorithmic affordance and informants' exposure to political content through the presentation of coding schemes, thematic narratives and analytical tables along with the implications of the findings. Those chapters are for analyzing the relationship between TikTok and political engagement and for interpreting the empirical patterns.

In recent years, TikTok has evolved from a simple entertainment application into a dominant global platform where young adults increasingly consume news and engage with public discourse. Nowadays, a considerable number of young people get news directly from that platform, where politicians, activists or even celebrities all together try to discuss political issues they believe are important. Given how quickly TikTok has risen to prominence as a leading social media platform, understanding its impact on political discourse and youth engagement is more crucial than ever. This study addresses a notable gap in existing literature by providing comprehensive insights into the influence of TikTok on political communication and activism, especially considering the declining participation of young individuals in conventional political processes (Zhang, 2022). The extensive user base of the platform and

the shifting nature of political discourse, which diverges from traditional methods, enhance the relevance of this study.

It is commonly known that public dissatisfaction with government and other political institutions is often reflected on political communication in democratic countries. The shortcomings of mainstream political party or social division may be the cause of this resentment. Some extremists often take advantage of these recurring issues, pushing social movements backward if it is not forward. Scholars like Lawless and Fox (2015) and Norris (2011) have been concerned about the alienation between citizens and politics since the beginning of the millennium. This has a negative impact on the likelihood of future political engagement, especially among young people. There is a huge amount of scholarly research on young people's democratic beliefs and behaviors, including analyses of the decline in party involvement and voting turnout (Foa et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, as Collin (2015) highlights, young people are not disengaged from politics but rather, they are concentrating on different policy goals and embracing new modes of participation. Young people's associations with the new digital forms of politics and involvement would be inexplicable if the development of new technologies and the subsequent reconstruction of public space were not taken into consideration (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). In other words, when it comes to younger generations, as Rainsford (2017: 2) stressed, "it seems as if the problem of youth political participation is less a matter of whether they participate, and more a matter of where they participate".

As we are in the "fourth age of political communication", as claimed by Blumler (2015; 2016), marked by an abundance of communication and even greater complexity. A wider range of viewpoints, content, and viewers than in the past are influencing public communication, politicians can now speak to audiences without journalistic intervention, and public service television's civic purpose has waned. While continuously operating press systems and political institutions frequently fail to effectively engage or represent citizens (Bartels, 2017), previous studies show that social media is increasingly influencing political opinions and collective action, especially among youth.

Since the number of people using Facebook, YouTube, and X— which formerly known as Twitter— on a daily basis is innumerable, experts have concluded that these three social media

platforms are the most politically significant. Meanwhile, the relatively new social media platform "TikTok" has been reshaping political discourse with over 1 billion monthly active users worldwide. Cervi et al. (2021) once pointed out that TikTok, a new political communication platform, gained enormous popularity among younger audiences and could serve as a unique case study to investigate how young people disseminate and comprehend political messages. On top of that, the use of TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on public health appear to be a thoroughly researched topic that has attracted a lot of attention from scholars. (Rejeb et al. 2024).

In terms of political engagement, discussion participation, opinion sharing and rallying around social issues, the central argument this study aims to address is the lack of comprehensive knowledge regarding how TikTok affects political communication patterns among young constituencies—the young adults in the study. Despite the fact that TikTok usage is rapidly growing worldwide, case studies and literature reviews on political communication on the platform are geographically restricted and focus on the specific online political environments in US (Medina et al., 2020; Karimi & Fox, 2023), Spain (Cervi et al., 2021), Germany (Classen et al., 2024), or Peru (Cervi et al., 2023). Additionally, there are limitations with regard to two-way communication model, examining how particular political parties use the platform in their election campaigns (Ali et al. 2024). Researchers usually examined the political rhetoric and tactics of candidates who actively communicate on TikTok, while no study has thoroughly looked at how this medium affects young voters' or electorates' political communication in actual situations.

Despite the platform's current ubiquity, the research so far largely focuses on examining the quantitative aspects of content creation or how politicians strategically communicate in certain national contexts. Few studies have qualitatively scrutinized the reception side—how young adults actually experience, interpret, and discuss political content pushed by the "For You Page (FYP)" algorithm. In line with earlier research that suggested TikTok has the potential to act upon political attitudes and behaviors, this study is to fill in the gaps in the literature currently available regarding youth engagement on short-form video platforms. In order to observe and interact with young TikTok users in their natural environments, the study uses exploratory data analysis, which can provide valuable insights into how the platform affects their sense of self and their interactions with others in respect of political engagement and activism by utilizing the lens of the theoretical framework derived from Gabriel Tarde (1901 [1989]) and adapted

by Katz, Ali, and Kim's (2014) fourfold typology of conversation modes and their functions for democracy, as well as Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) concept of a two-step flow of communication.

Moreover, the research aims to comprehend TikTok's capacity to combine political discourse with entertainment has on young adults' political communication patterns. By examining the use of social media TikTok in political communication, this study will be able to offer novel perspectives on how modern social media shapes political discourse and promotes deliberative democracy among young adults. After a discussion of the theoretical framework and research method, the researcher will provide a general description of how young adults use TikTok and discuss several ways in which this personal use of TikTok would associate with the examination of the shifting "real-life" circumstances surrounding political communication (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The research focuses on understanding how young adults develop mutual understanding, generate public reason, and formulate thoughtful opinions in everyday political discourse that is informal and unintentional. This allows for the assessment of the platform's potential in terms of deliberative democracy rules and resources.

1. USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION TOOL

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework for the research by examining the general tendency of political communication from the era of mass media to the contemporary digital environment. It is essential to comprehend the transformation of communication modalities from unidirectional dissemination to interactive, network-based engagement, characterized by media proliferation and audience segmentation. In next sections, historical development of political communication will be briefly examined, followed by an exploration of social media's unique function as a medium that actively shapes digital natives' social networks and thought processes in addition to disseminating information.

1.1. Contemporary Trends in Political Communication

From ancient Greece to varied political systems in the modern age, the history of political communication is as old as political action (Lilleker, 2006). The meaning of the word “political communication” is the interactive exchange of information between the public, news media, and political leaders. This can be regarded as the creation, dissemination and interpretation of symbolic messages related to the use of social power. And its historical trajectory was fundamentally shaped by the limitations and structures of mass media, a period often characterized by a unidirectional, linear model of information transmission (Jamieson & Kenski, 2017). The role of propaganda and the media's capacity to sway a passive, receptive public were the main theme of early research, which was motivated by concerns about international conflicts including World War and the development of broadcast media like radio and film.

Likewise, early era was dominated by a "transmission model" of communication, which was famously encapsulated by Harold Lasswell's formula of "who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect" (Lasswell, 1948) and placed more emphasis on the distribution of messages from elites to the masses than on interactive exchange. As the field developed into a distinct interdisciplinary domain, the emphasis shifted to understanding the constrained use of social power and the role of symbolic exchange in shaping political reality. As Jamieson and Kenski (2017) underlined, political science, sociology and psychology came together to form this "hybrid" field because they were all interested in how the media affected leaders and voters.

Before the rise of digital technology, the majority of research focused on effects such as agenda-setting and examined how information spreads through major channels of legacy media.

In the days of old media, the roles of those who creating and consuming political content were clearly divided. Although early studies quantified the impact of specific messages through techniques such as content analysis and surveys, these endeavors took place within a "mass-media era" characterized by a relatively predictable and steady flow of information. This historical context markedly differs from the current media environment, which is characterized by individualization and fragmentation, where the transmission model has largely been replaced by models that emphasize constitutive processes and the active creation of shared meaning by citizens themselves (Craig, 1999). Democratization of political systems changed the nature of political communication and political activity moved into the public sphere. The people became involved in politics because they were expected to have a political role. Equally, with increased access to information and greater levels of education, came a demand for greater political involvement and influence.

Taken together, pre-social media political communication was typified by institutional control over message production, hierarchical information flows, and comparatively few chances for common people to actively engage in public discourse. As Jamieson and Kenski (2017) note, the gradual decline of these structures led to the emergence of digital and social media platforms as influential players in political communication, altering the way political messages are spread, understood and challenged in daily life. The rise of social media has had a profound impact on politics by changing the way citizens, activists, and governments communicate in public. Political communication must have a political purpose and originate from the political sphere, according to traditional definitions of the term. However, given the role of the media, a number of modern states would not be entirely suitable for such definitions (Lilleker, 2006).

Social media, in particular, appears to have affected political views in a variety of ways, ranging from increased selective exposure to increased sensitivity to racial issues (Karimi & Fox, 2023). Lazaroiu (2018) concludes, based on data from the Pew Research Center, that most young people actively participate in social justice initiatives because social media platforms provide a goal-oriented and pressure-free space for political expression. Besides serving as a primary source of information for many citizens (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks & Ardèvol-Abreu,

2017), social networks are now function as the "central hub" of modern political communication (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016: 294). Over the past few years, political parties have also become increasingly active on social media. This change is consistent with Tarde(1901 [1989])'s theoretical work, which saw the formation of "public opinion" as a dynamic process driven by discourse and the media rather than as a static product. Social media sites have taken on the function of Tarde's "press" in the digital age, establishing the topics of subsequent "conversations".

The claim that social media platforms have a big impact on politics and social life became well-known after the 2010 Arab Spring as social media has sparked political discussion on so-called "revolution 2.0" (Ghonim, 2012). Notably, social movements—of which the Arab Spring is a prime example—have greatly broadened their scope since the 2010s. During this time, other movements have also emerged, including Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Occupy Wall Street in the US. Even though the majority of the movements tended to be leaderless, all of them used social media to connect protesters, motivate supporters, and gather resources. For example, in the same way that Tarde saw the "public" as a community bound together by common knowledge, Occupy Wall Street activists heavily relied on digital tools to plan events, spread their message of solidarity, and foster a sense of shared purpose among diverse communities (Gaby & Caren, 2012). In a sense, the online spaces developed into virtual meeting spots. Social media facilitated the mobilization of millions of people to stage street protests against their governments. These large-scale social protests brought about important social changes throughout the nations.

There is broad recognition in the media landscape and public opinion that the Internet and social networks were instrumental in the acceleration of the Arab Spring revolutions and other major social movements. Indeed, these occurrences are commonly referred to as "Facebook revolutions" or "Twitter revolutions" by scholars such as Joseph (2012). Similarly, Mundt and Ross (2018) contend that social media's capacity to mobilize a diverse group of activists and participants as a scaling up tool is the strongest connection between social movements and social media. Social media makes it easier for leaders and activists of social movements to find new members, enabling group members to interact with one another and expand their reach. The use of social media can help mobilize resources, like donations and crowdfunding, as demonstrated by the global social movements of the last few decades.

Political Mobilization and Digital Activism

Even though political petitions and fundraising efforts have existed in the past, the Internet has allowed citizens to access a vast amount of publicity and has facilitated faster social interaction than ever before. Digital technologies have made it possible for citizens to contribute to public information and express their opinions in ways that were previously unattainable. With the use of technology, everyone in society can now take part in political discussions and have a certain amount of influence over political decisions. However, as Soriano (2013: 337) indicated, the Internet also produces "democratic bubbles," even though the groups formed through it are characterized by weak ties that are solely created through cyberspace. Furthermore, populist movements, institutional trust, and polarization can all be exacerbated by digital media.

It is evident that social media is enabling new, widely dispersed protests despite its limitations. Protests that are planned and coordinated online draw attention to the goals of organized social movements while overcoming the challenges of strained relationships and a lack of trust among participants. For instance, dissent has long existed in Hong Kong, but the 2019 protests were unlike any other in terms of their scope and character. The use of social media as a communication tool contributed to this outcome (Zhang, 2022). Platforms help grassroots movements by enabling activists to quickly mobilize and spread their messages. As examples, hashtag campaigns like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter demonstrate how social media can be used to promote political causes globally. Since social media is typically integrated with political public relations, no political party, individual, or social movement can interact with people on the platform (Fuchs, 2022).

According to Fuchs (2014), the Occupy movements' protests showed that activists employ a range of media for communication aimed at mobilization. Facebook groups, Twitter, and email lists are examples of more publicly accessible channels of communication that have been used in addition to more conventional interpersonal communication techniques like phone calls, emails, in-person meetings, and private social media profiles. The use of the media to mobilize protests has been linked to their escalation, according to correlation analysis (Fuchs, 2016). Apparently, more people participating in protests has a positive impact on media-driven political mobilization. In the meantime, posts encouraging others on social media platforms such as Facebook tend to have a positive impact on other channels of mobilization communication (Fuchs, 2022). Without a doubt, social media plays a role in today's

revolutionary movements without as leader, and they might even need it no matter what the real cause is.

Election Campaigns and Political Advertising

There is no denying social media's importance in the context of digital campaigns. Politicians use social media as a platform for targeted advertising and direct voter interaction. Social media is occasionally used by political candidates to avoid traditional media. In the United States, for instance, the amount spent on online political campaigns rose from about USD 70 million in 2014 to about USD 11.8 billion in 2018 (Fowler et al. 2020). The GLES Candidate Study (2021) claims that politicians in Europe have also come to understand the importance of social media for their campaigns. According to the report, the majority of candidates in the German federal election of 2021 believed that social media could influence voters. On the other hand, some political actors allegedly have used computational propaganda (Elsawah & Howard 2020) or fake social media accounts (Axelrod, 2020) to spread misleading information, discourage political participation, and undermine opposition parties by taking advantage of the popularity and reach of these platforms.

The Reuters Digital News Report from 2017 revealed that one of the main reasons people follow politicians on social media is their desire for news that isn't filtered by the media or journalists. As a result, politicians can try modifying their agenda and public image to become media-friendly and social media has given them a new platform to demonstrate their sincerity (Enli, 2015; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Social media does have an impact on how voters may view politicians, according to studies on the subject and how people view them on Facebook and Twitter. On top of that, it is a tool for engaging and influencing potential voters. According to another study, voters' opinions of a candidate's credibility are influenced by media and political trust. To younger generation, politicians are more sincere and truthful on social media than in traditional media (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). When it comes to political advertising on social media, targeting is also essential because it allows marketers to target specific user groups and reach audiences who are particularly receptive to tailored political messaging (Goldberg et al., 2021; Matz et al., 2017).

As described in this subchapter, the shift from the mass-media era to the current dispersed environment has radically changed how information is shared between citizens and political

leaders, not to mention how power is negotiated. The stability of broadcast systems was the focus of early research, but contemporary trends place more emphasis on the behavioral and cognitive effects of a customized media environment. This development set the stage for comprehending how particular social media platforms—also known as Social Networking Service (SNS)—now act as the main infrastructure for these modern political exchanges.

1.2. Social Media as Communication Medium

Following the identification of overarching patterns in political communication, attention must then be directed toward the specific social network architecture. As an example of social structure among diverse actors, a social network illustrates the relationships or connections between individuals, organizations, or entities. Currently, social networks are frequently employed as analytical tools to uncover relationships both within and between organizations (Kilduff & Brass, 2010). Through social networks, people who are connected by a range of social familiarities—from intimate partnerships to casual acquaintances—can communicate and exchange information with people who frequently live far away. Smart devices and countless social mobile applications allow users of digital social networks to create distinctive associations (Rath et al., 2019). The rapid increase in Internet users has made global information and communication technology more accessible to more people.

Users of social media, in particular, can access features that are not available in conventional offline social networks, such as the ability to search for content using a network without the use of relational ties and visualize network structure. Social media platforms enable people to recognize and navigate the relational structure of a social network (Kane et al., 2014). In the context of social media platforms as modern-day social network intermediaries, the platform serves as a medium and mediates the connections between users by facilitating the sharing and communication of digital content. As an alternative to "social networking service," this paper will simply refer to those platforms as "social media (networks)" without distinguishing between social networks and social media. It also fails to consider the degree to which new social media technologies differ from conventional computer-mediated communication technologies or offline social networks.

Generally defined as web-based applications that facilitate online social networking by

utilizing user-generated content, social media is one of the essential components of the new digital communication culture. Young people generally find social media useful, which is to be expected considering how quickly the younger generation is embracing new communication technologies. Previous studies have shown that young adults and adolescents are likely to use social media at much higher rates (Feng et al., 2019), indicating that the age gap in social media usage is ongoing. Prensky (2001) dubbed the younger members of the current generation "digital natives," as they have been surrounded by digital technology since they were young. On the other hand, older generations had to learn how to use digital technology, which is why they are often referred to as "digital immigrants.". Nowadays, digital natives are drastically altering and upending almost every industry.

The rise of online social media platforms has fundamentally altered how people interact with one another. Social media today acts as a multifaceted, essential tool, facilitating communication, sharing opinions and providing access to a vast array of information. By nature, we are all socially interactive beings who have a strong desire to interact with others (Lieberman, 2013). This elucidates the reason behind the pervasive integration of social media into contemporary life, leading to a transformation across nearly all societal facets, particularly in daily interpersonal interactions. Some scholars propose that selective exposure, also known as confirmatory information search (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), may be facilitated by the extensive availability of information within this emerging media environment. People are not just recipients of the information they see on social media, even though the volume of information they are frequently exposed to can often become overwhelming. They find, analyze, and assess the information they are exposed to in a selective manner.

It has long been thought that information and communication technologies (ICT) can facilitate group or multichannel communication. Similar to how other mass media like radio, television, and newspapers did, social media has steadily developed into an effective platform for mobilizing people in all facets of social movements and organizing collective action. Using social media to facilitate group communication often has contentious social consequences. Youth were inspired and mobilized by social media during the 2011 "Arab Spring" protests and the 2014 "Occupy Central" demonstrations. As demonstrated by Obama's 2008 Facebook campaign, it has also been utilized to help engage voters. In certain countries, the pro-government media chose not to cover the news, and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter became crucial information sources for activists and protesters (Zhang, 2022).

Furthermore, many people are increasingly getting their news from social media instead of willingly visiting the websites of well-known news outlets. Users of social media merely happen to find news there where they are not actively searching for it. Based on empirical findings, most Facebook users discover news by chance while using the social media site for other objectives, not through news organizations or journalists (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014). News used to be regarded as being expertly prepared and presented from the perspective of powerful people, like media conglomerates. The ability to post, comment, share, and express opinions on news reports or stories is just one of the many options available to us today. Thanks to algorithms on social media platforms, we have the opportunity to follow news stories as they happen on social media, whether we like it or not. As the gatekeepers of news, traditional media were well known for their role in determining public policy agendas. Nowadays, looking into alternative information sources instead of traditional media has become easier than ever and mainstream media companies have also occasionally used user-generated content posted on social media websites..

This suggests that social media is displacing traditional news outlets as the media's main tool for setting agendas, as social media algorithms are clearly taking over some of the journalistic duties in determining what news the public should see. Compared to traditional news distribution, social media platforms present news in quite different ways. Algorithms are used by online platforms to provide users with personalized content. They can be also used to crop out viewpoints and data that they may wish to keep out of the public domain, like if it isn't appealing to users or advertisers (Presuel & Sierra, 2019). Social media may be the main way for people to learn about breaking news, but its accuracy isn't always guaranteed, which compromises its credibility. The algorithms and techniques commonly used to create fake news can effectively polarize people on social and ideological levels while also manipulating them directly (Flaxman et al., 2016).

As noted, social media platforms serve as modern-day intermediaries, mediating connections between users. This mediation is crucial when viewing social media through the lens of the "Public Space Framework" derived from Tarde and adapted by Katz, Ali, and Kim (2014). This framework consists of press, conversation, opinion, and action (See *figure 1* below). As Tarde suggests, the study makes the assumption that the casual conversations that take place in TikTok clarify opinions and spark discussion, leading to one or two public opinions. The outcome of this deliberative process is the action.

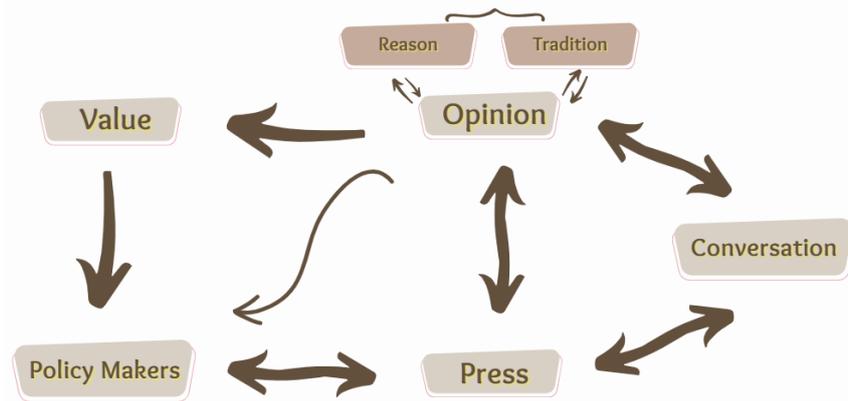


Figure 1: Author's Illustration of Public Space Framework (based on Katz, Ali & Kim, 2014, p.32)

In this model, Tarde argued that opinion is formed not in isolation, but through the mapping of one's views against others during conversation. Social media accelerates this process. However, in contrast to the conventional "Conversation-Exchange" which promotes mutual understanding (Tarde, 1901 [1989]), the digital environment frequently fosters "democratic bubbles" (Soriano, 2013). Ideally, as Katz et al. (2014) suggest, casual conversations clarify opinions and stimulate discussion, ultimately leading to a "considered opinion" and, eventually, to political engagement action. However, the unique structure of social media—where news is often discovered "incidentally" rather than sought out (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014)—complicates this linear progression. Algorithms now take over journalistic duties, curating feeds that may reinforce confirmatory information search (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), potentially distorting the "mapping" process essential for forming a true public opinion.

This chapter highlights the evolution of political communication into a sophisticated and interactive framework, primarily enabled by digital platforms. Currently, social media functions as a key intermediary, serving not merely as a channel for information dissemination but as a central platform for political mobilization. These structural transformations within the media landscape provide the necessary context for examining TikTok as a particularly algorithm-driven case. By applying the "Public Space Framework", we would see how these platforms disrupt the linear progression from press to conversation to opinion. The application of this theoretical framework becomes increasingly essential in next chapter for analyzing TikTok on how its distinctive algorithmic design sets it apart from other social media platforms.

2. IMPACTS OF TIKTOK ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Based on the background information about social media detailed in the previous section, this chapter investigates TikTok as a disruptive force in the digital political landscape. Its rapid growth to accommodate more than one billion users and its popularity among younger audiences are one of exceptional examples of social networking evolution marked by short-form video content and algorithmic curation. The subsequent sections will analyze the platform's background, its unique technical characteristics, and the specific methods through which it facilitates political discourse, thereby creating an environment where activism and entertainment jointly serve as modes of political engagement.

2.1. Rise of TikTok as Major Social Media Platform

To understand TikTok's impact on political communication, comprehending its origins and rapid ascent to worldwide popularity is essential first step. TikTok was first introduced by the Chinese company ByteDance in 2016 under the name "Musical.ly". The platform's growth in the United States was expedited through the acquisition and merger of this lip-synching app. It was rebranded as "TikTok" towards the end of 2017. This distinctive platform swiftly became one of the most popular Chinese-made apps in terms of global distribution. TikTok is mostly a platform for sharing videos, allowing users to create lip-sync and music videos. Verified users can create looping videos up to three minutes long (TikTok Newsroom, 2021). It allows users to "duet", which allows users to directly respond to an existing video and display the response and original side by side, and to "stitch", which allows users to compile and incorporate other users' videos into their own, in addition to live-streaming content, among many other features. Verified users can post looping videos up to three minutes long. TikTok is a dynamic, constantly changing platform that regularly releases new features and undergoes quick changes (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok, a relatively new social media platform back then, became extremely popular, partly because people were compelled to stay at home and avoid social situations (Li et al., 2021; Unni & Weinstein, 2021). TikTok downloads are fueled by people spending more time on their mobile devices and searching for new ways to keep in touch and pass the time during lockdown, as using media became a popular form of

entertainment during the pandemic. With 672 million downloads, it became the most downloaded app in 2022 (Omnicores, 2024) after really taking off during the lockdown in 2020. In 2024, there were about 11.6 billion active users on this platform globally (Statista, 2024). During lockdown, the importance of sharing practices as phatic communication seemed to be especially emphasized. People were able to communicate with their friends and remind them of their presence and relationship by sending them humorous TikTok videos (Schellwald, 2023).

Distinctive Features and Dynamics of Communication on TikTok

What distinguishes TikTok from other social media platforms is its capacity to integrate images and audio into videos, produce content through brief videos that are tailored to followers' interests, encourage more interaction, and involve users in an interactive process. TikTok has achieved unprecedented popularity in the global social media arena due to its algorithmically driven approach to content suggestion, which makes users go viral regardless of followers, in contrast to well-established platforms like Facebook and YouTube. In contrast to long chats or text-based responses, TikTok allows users to communicate through comments, duets, and reactions. This type of communication is very interactive but brief. By allowing users to directly remix and respond with videos, TikTok promotes continuous visual conversation. Most importantly, TikTok is very easy to use. The two most important factors are the length of the videos and the algorithm that was used to create them (Stokel-Walker, 2021).

The first thing the user sees when they open the app is the FYP, which is what the TikTok algorithm recommends. The "televisual medium," which has always been the most popular and effective social media trend, "algorithmic recommendation," which more strongly structures the user's experience than any other significant social media platform to date, and a "mobile-only" interface designed to make use of smartphones' user-facing cameras are all combined in TikTok (Guinaudeau et al., 2020: 467). Undoubtedly, TikTok and other popular social media platforms share some similarities. For instance, Facebook and Instagram, which are seen as the "older" social media platforms, allow live streaming and have been offering a feature called "stories" since 2016. This feature allows users to post brief looping videos that are less than 20 seconds long (Verstraete, 2016). The online video-sharing website YouTube, which made its debut in 2005, has also long permitted users to share brief videos known as "YouTube Shorts.". Additionally, it began providing live-streaming services in 2008.

Unlike Twitter's often text-heavy or static format and Facebook's networked curation, TikTok's visual and performative format emphasizes embodied communication, where gesture, tone, and emotion are key components. In particular, this promotes affective public engagement among young users (Hautea et al. 2021). Furthermore, the content that TikTok's algorithm regularly shows encourages user behavior, which may reinforce preconceived notions or preferences or foster communities centered around specific topics. Young adults' participation in public discourse is likely to be significantly impacted by its ability to personalize content feeds, raising concerns about civic awareness, political socialization, and group action in this algorithm-mediated digital environment. The algorithm's widespread use is yet another significant innovation that sets TikTok apart from other social media sites that seem to be comparable.

Algorithmic Discovery Over Social Networks

Depending on the kind of content users prefer, TikTok can offer more comparable short videos through manual finger swiping. TikTok gives algorithm-driven feeds and experiences a level of importance never seen before. TikTok uses a powerful algorithm to identify a user's interests and make accurate suggestions for short video content. The user usually experiences the "homogenization" of the content and sees brief video content with comparable labels as a result (Xu et al., 2019: 61). By customizing what the user consumes based on data from search queries, clicks, views, user comments, and ratings, the recommendation system provides them with content that best suits their interests, preferences, and beliefs (Rassameeroj & Wu, 2019). Users who interact with the customized platform then give the system additional information that can be used to further tailor the user experience and make relevant content recommendations.

The main tactic for becoming a successful influencer on YouTube or Instagram is to gain a lot of followers and use the feedback and comments from your audience to satisfy your audience's needs. For example, Facebook, which uses algorithms to help curate user feeds and promote targeted advertisements, keeps the appearance that users create their own feeds by choosing which friends or pages to follow (Willson, 2016). Users' consumption of content on TikTok, in contrast, is largely determined by the algorithmic recommendation system, which is highly blurred and changes in real time based on user activity (Schellewald, 2023). Simply put, if the algorithm works in your favor, even users without followers can create a viral video that receives millions of views on TikTok. Its other remarkable unpredictability has led to its

growing popularity, particularly among younger users.

This framework fundamentally revises the original "Two-Step Flow of Communication" model developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). In the traditional model, media messages are directed toward "opinion leaders," who interpret and subsequently relay them to the general public. On TikTok, this flow is consistently disrupted. The algorithm delivers content directly to users based on engagement metrics, often bypassing traditional opinion leaders. This creates an environment of algorithmic discovery (Guinaudeau et al., 2020), where users are continuously exposed to content that portrays an algorithmized reflections of themselves.. In this ecosystem, the "opinion leader" is often replaced or supplemented by the algorithm itself, which curates the political reality for the user.

Prior research has drawn comparisons between TikTok and other major social media platforms, which are generally considered social network sites where users engage with content from people in their various social circles. According to their argument, TikTok users are continuously exposed to content that portrays an "algorithmized self" in their portrayal (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022: 9). Likewise, Lee and her colleagues (2022) make use of the metaphor of an "algorithmic crystal" to comprehend the algorithmic system of TikTok. According to them, users who use TikTok are shown a nuanced, albeit imperfect, picture of themselves. Therefore, Lee et al. (2022: 17) argue that TikTok encourages self-creation by allowing for introspection as well as self-identification with the various TikTok communities and aesthetics that one encounters on FYP. Despite the vast amount of communication opportunities TikTok offers, it has never been free of controversy. This is especially the case with regard to privacy issues (Kang, 2019) or animosity within its online community, such as hate speech or discrimination (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

As illustrated in this section, TikTok stands out due to its transition from social networking to "algorithmic discovery," in which the distribution of content is determined by engagement metrics rather than personal relationships. This structure signifies that the algorithm frequently delivers content straight to the user, which produces an "algorithmized self" and a distinctive content ecosystem that prepares the platform for the particular kind of visually appealing, fast-paced political communication covered in the following section.

2.2. TikTok-Mediated Political Communication

TikTok offers peculiar features for user interactions compared to other social media platforms, and their algorithmic as well as interactive affordances can complement the political communication. Platforms that rely largely on user-selected networks are different from TikTok, which centers its content distribution around algorithmic discovery, particularly through FYP. With this discovery-driven approach, politically relevant content can be disseminated more quickly and widely since it depends less on preexisting social connections and more on engagement metrics. The researcher believes that TikTok's unique communication tools greatly alter how users interact with political content by fostering intertextual political discourse, mimicry, and artistic expression. By using personalization, TikTok creates a stream of content for each user based on their past interactions, engagement, and watch time. The value of novelty and virality is higher than that of institutional credibility.

Previous studies have shown that videos are a more effective medium than traditional media for capturing the interest of young people (Cervi & Marin-Llado, 2021). Moreover, younger generations are increasingly using TikTok for "playful activism," which makes it possible to create more entertaining content. Unlike the previous platforms, this one has a less serious tone of voices (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022). Using the proliferation of entertainment video platforms, parties have taken advantage of this trend to engage younger voters and draw them into their electorate (Cervi & Marín-Lladó 2021). Social media analysts and journalists claim that TikTok is becoming a new political hotspot for young people, especially "Gen Zers.". Live political event videos are available on TikTok in addition to electoral politics. Videos and images of international crises, like the conflict in Gaza and Ukraine, are frequently shared on TikTok, for instance.

TikTok became the most significant social media platform for forecasting political sentiment and participation among the younger generation, according to Karimi and Fox (2023). The fact that Generation Z favors platforms that encourage creativity and humor while they are drawn to short-form due to their shortened attention spans are two of the traits they discovered that contribute to this phenomenon. TikTok is the most popular app for getting information in a matter of seconds since it suits the information-gathering style and requires the least amount of time. On the other hand, TikTok videos that show dramatic or comical behavior typically get the most views. The ability of Generation Z to "market a rallying point for major issues, fact

check politicians and news organizations, and mobilize their counterparts for greater cause" (Karimi & Fox, 2023: 200) makes them unique in today's political environment.

In the most recent instance, young Israelis and Palestinians have been engaged in an online dispute over the platform, which has a lot of hashtags related to #FreePalestine. Younger people are also increasingly using the platform for grassroots initiatives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has surely been a major factor in the global #StopAsianHate movement (Zeng & Abidin, 2020) and the anti-caste protests in India (Subramanian, 2021). The app has been an essential tool for BLM movement both domestically and internationally, as noted earlier. Similarly, it appears that TikTok is a hotbed of climate change activism (Hautea et al., 2021), while LGBTQ+ activism has flourished on the platform (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). During the previous United States presidential election, TikTok users significantly contributed to organizing a false-registration campaign for Donald Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which ultimately led to numerous seats remaining unoccupied (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020). This is just one example of how the app has been used by online creators to influence election outcomes.

TikTok's original entertainment function is sometimes neglected by political parties, who use it almost exclusively to post political content. It is impossible to fully distinguish between TikTok's political and non-political uses, despite the platform's official ban on posting political advertisements, as Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021) point out. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which sparked TikTok's growth, political parties and institutions created accounts to explore new communication channels. With nearly half of its users being under 24, politicians hope to reach the youngest segments of politically active citizens on TikTok (Cervi et al., 2023; Haenlein et al., 2020; Weimann & Masri, 2020). Another reason why politicians support TikTok is that, as was previously mentioned, younger people believe that politicians are more sincere and truthful on social media than on traditional media (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018).

Despite a growing academic interest in the role of social media platform within digital communication, the literature examined by the researcher indicates that there is limited study exploring how TikTok's unique features influence political communication patterns among young adults at varying levels of user engagement and across different cultural settings. Few have integrated cross-cultural perspectives with empirical stratification based on user intensity or screen time. Because it is a media ecosystem and a platform for interactive communication,

TikTok has cultural and political significance. Users are able to create, modify, and disseminate political narratives that resonate with individual identities and broader social movements, facilitated by the application's algorithm-driven content delivery and its short, audiovisual format.

With its unique algorithm, TikTok is likely to continue engaging, influencing, and occasionally inspiring young people in ways that are different from those of other social media platforms. This research provides valuable insights into how social media affects young people and their political communication patterns. Apart from geographic restrictions, no research has looked closely at how TikTok affects young voters' or electorates' political communication in actual circumstances. Therefore, additional research can highlight the significance of understanding contemporary political communication and online deliberative processes in relation to social media dynamics, where TikTok becomes crucial for youth political engagement. Such research, which looks at TikTok's complex political algorithms and their effects on users with varying levels of engagement, could provide more insight into this largely unexplored subject.

The researcher of this paper considers that exploring deliberative communication, as a model of political communication, will be closely related to the mobilization or engagement of young adults in political processes using TikTok. Communication between individuals to discuss topics of shared interest that impact their lives is a key component of deliberative theory (Tarde, 1901 [1989]). Tarde was especially interested in the process of creating public opinion rather than its final product. He is well-known among communication theorists for foreseeing the "two-step flow of communication" (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and for his theories regarding the public's emergence in the context of deliberative democracy (Katz 2006).

As mentioned above with a specific framework, Tarde (1901 [1989]) conceptualizes the creation of opinion in stages. His analysis starts at the individual level. At this point, opinion is a transient, roughly rational collection of evaluations that address contemporary issues and are repeatedly expressed by others. A mapping stage comes next, during which one compares and contrasts other people's opinions that surface during discussion. An image of the distribution of opinions within the collectivity—usually split between the majority and minority—is the end result (Katz, Ali & Kim, 2014). He also examined the network of interconnected elements

that make up "public space."

Using this public space framework, the researcher will try to test the following propositions: (1) TikTok use increases conversation frequency; (2) conversation leads to more "considered opinion"; and (3) those with more considered opinions are more involved in the political process (Kim, Wyatt & Katz, 1999). Moreover, the researcher thinks the two-step flow of communication theory can be used to investigate the final proposition (4): how TikTok influencer or content creator, those who are supposed to be more concerned and articulate about any public issue than others, function as "opinion leaders" and mold public discourse among their followers as Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) suggested that the media frequently transmits ideas to opinion leaders, who then transmit those ideas to the less active segments of society. The researcher observes whether opinion leaders have a greater influence on users' decision-making process. However, the research does not take into account the face-to-face encounters with influential peers when it comes to having conversations in one's social circle.

In summary, TikTok signifies a paradigm shift in political communication by replacing the social graph of friends with an individual interest one that is determined by algorithmic discovery. The platform raises issues with polarization and the depth of discussion, but it also democratizes access to political discourse and opens up new venues for so-called "playful activism" and identity formation. According to the literature review on this chapter, TikTok upends established opinion leaders by substituting algorithmic feeds for them. But the author highlights a critical gap in understanding how these dynamics play out for users with varying levels of engagement across different cultures. Thus, an empirical study is necessary to comprehend how these theoretical influences appear in young adults' actual behaviors. This particular gap this thesis aims to fill through the qualitative research presented in the following sections. The methodology for this study is covered in detail in the next chapter.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Question

While extensive scholarship exists on political influencers and country-specific political landscapes on TikTok, a critical white spot remains in current literature. What has not been adequately answered is how the mechanics of the platform—specifically its algorithm and comment architecture—interact with varying levels of user engagement to shape political reality. Furthermore, few studies have qualitatively examined how this interaction shifts when applied across different cultural contexts. This research addresses the shortcomings through classifying users based on their behavioral interaction with the platform's particular features.

To effectively address this gap, this study proposes a more specific and empirically grounded research question. The primary research question is “*How do TikTok’s platform affordances, specifically the algorithmic feed, shape the political communication patterns of young adults ranging from Non-User to Heavy User, and to what extent do cross-cultural factors—more precisely, media literacy level—mediate this relationship?*”. This research question seeks what are the primary motivations driving young adults' consumption of political communication content on TikTok and how do TikTok's unique affordances shape these consumption patterns. Plus, it explores how does the level of engagement based on screen time with political content on TikTok relate to young adults' subsequent involvement in political discourse both in and outside of the platform.

Research Type

Qualitative exploratory research has been chosen because it allows for a detailed analysis of young adults' real-life experiences and interactions on the social media platform TikTok and connects them to the development of public opinion and the igniting of political action in relation to a two-step communication flow. By relating social media content to individual experiences and past knowledge, it could investigate how young adults participate in daily political discourse and improve their comprehension of media messages. In turn, this inductive reasoning helps to clarify and refine opinions in political discourse. Lastly, political discourse moderates the association between TikTok use and political engagement. In line with previous studies on the political communication patterns common among young adults who use social media, this exploratory study will provide insight into a comparatively understudied field.

For this paper, the researcher used a narrative research design through interviews as the primary data collection method (Harris, 2022). In order to gather rich and open-ended conversations, the researcher worked with small samples of participants in order to conduct a thorough investigation of the meanings people ascribe to their experiences using the particular social media platform TikTok. This study examines how TikTok affects political communication among young adults by incorporating ethnographic elements into the research design. This research focuses primarily on understanding social influence, where interpersonal relationships and communication have fundamental effects, especially in Tarde's "L'Opinion et la foule [Opinion and the crowd]" (1901; republished 1989). For the assessment of primary data, the narrative analysis which facilitates the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data followed.

Research Methods and Samples

This study used qualitative, in-depth interviews as its research method. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), interviews allow the researcher to obtain information through both verbal and nonverbal language, making them a versatile tool for data collection. Key concepts were used to organize the topics, and the open-ended nature of the question allowed the interviewee and researcher to discuss some topics in greater detail while also specifying the topic under investigation (Kumar, 2022). Semi-structured interviews were the initial interview method used in this study in order to better understand the participants' perspectives and allow them to elaborate on significant topics (Dörnyei, 2007).

Since the research paper centered on the beliefs and experiences of young adults concerning political communication patterns and activities undertaken on the TikTok platform, one of the objectives of this study is to determine the extent to which young adults engage with political content on TikTok and the level of identification they have with political activities on this platform. Through interviewing young adults of different nationalities, the researcher was able to include various perspectives and responses in the study. Interviews allowed researcher to have a detailed understanding of young adults' perceptions regarding research questions (*Ibid*; Utibe, 2019). The researcher anticipates that any similarity between a heterogeneous set of cases has a higher chance of being a broadly generalizable phenomenon than one between homogeneous cases. To compare and look for similarities and differences, people from various cultures was chosen (Mason, 2002).

To conduct this scientific study, non-probability sampling is employed. With a particular focus on young adults aged 19 to 26 at the time of data collection, the sampling attempted to guarantee diversity in nationality, occupation, and TikTok usage levels. Cohen et al. (2007) explained that this purposive sampling is one of the techniques that chooses a particular subset of the population that will be able to provide answers related to the study. For the analysis, participants were categorized into four distinct groups: Non-User, Light User, Moderate User, and Heavy User (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. 2020), suggesting they were selected based on their level of engagement — the screentime — with the TikTok platform (See [Table 1](#)).

Table 1: Categorization of participants

Non User	Light User	Moderate User	Heavy User
Generally do not engage with TikTok content	Screen time: ≤ 1 h/day	Screen time: 1-2 h/day	Screen time: ≥ 2 h/day
Prefer traditional news source	Use TikTok primarily for entertainment	Engage with political content more habitually but do not get inspired to participate in real life	Spend significant time on TikTok and integrate political content into their daily consumption
Express skepticism about the reliability of social media for political information	Occasionally encounter political content due to its algorithm unspecified	Often use TikTok to follow updates and discussions about current political events	Frequently engage with political discourse but do not take a part in physical events or campaigns
Admit that social media has huge impacts on shaping political opinion	Their exposure to political engagement is usually incidental	Appreciate the platform's ability to provide live discussions with varied perspectives, which might influence people's political opinion	Do not necessarily follow certain influencer or channel
	Do not engage in comment section or follow specific account		

A wide range of nationalities and educational backgrounds were represented among the eleven informants in this study. They were briefed on the study's goals and purpose before consenting to participate in an audio-recorded interview. Interviewees are mostly undergraduates, graduate students, and professionals of various nationalities, including German, Chinese, Ivorian, Jordanian, South Korean and Lithuanian. Three of the informants are men, and eight are women. Participants are enrolled in courses or in the early stages of careers in communication, digital management, and business administration. Some held specialized positions in design engineering, telecommunications, and video editing, among others. The researcher anticipated that the interviews would highlight distinct viewpoints influenced by their cultural backgrounds and life experiences.

This research defines young adults as individuals aged approximately 18-26 and focuses primarily on this age range by taking into account recommendations from the Committee on Improving the Health, Safety, and Well-Being of Young Adults (Stroud et al., 2015). However, these particular cut-off points are not always justified, and it may occasionally make sense to modify the age range to account for special factors in a given policy context. Acknowledging that human development is continuous, some people might define typical "young adult" at slightly younger and slightly older ages.

Research Tool

By incorporating ethnographic elements into the in-person interviews, the researcher aimed to obtain a thorough grasp of the social contexts in which young adults find themselves as well as their perceptions and comprehensions of those contexts. The conversational style of the interviews allowed participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences regarding their regular interactions with political and TikTok content. Adapted from Spradley's work (1979), the interview guide in the proposed research paper is divided into four main parts for the interviews as follows: Introduction, Grand Tour Questions, Example Questions, and Experience Questions. The first part of the interview guide is Introduction. The interview is clearly defined as a friendly conversation by the researcher's speech acts, the casual nature of the encounter, and the greeting. Additionally, by establishing a positive tone, participants may become more relaxed and open while providing more genuine answers to greetings and brief introductions.

The second part of interview guide is Grand Tour Question. In this section, participants are asked a couple of questions that the researcher viewed as important to be able to continue the interview with key background information. The researcher asked for a description of how things usually are and perform some simple tasks that aid in the description. It also included asking questions about describing their daily routine. The Grand Tour questions are the following for the respondents:

- 1) On average, how many hours per day do you usually spend on TikTok?**
- 2) Could you describe a typical day with using TikTok?**
- 3) Could you show me/tell me how you usually using TikTok?**

Before generalizing and talking about their communication patterns, the researcher considers that these questions would be easy to answer and a good place to start. Example Questions made up the third section of the interview guide. Most of the time, example questions was more detailed. They were asked for an example of a single act or incident that the informant has identified. The purpose of the questions is to understand the functions of opinion leaders, the impact of content, and changes in their viewpoints. The Example Questions are the following for the respondents:

- 4) What kind of feature or content that were difficult/enjoyable for you while using TikTok? Could you give me an example?**
- 5) Are there particular TikTok contents creators or influencers that you associate with political content? Why?**
- 6) Can you recall a specific TikTok video that significantly impacted your views on a political issue? Can you provide an example?**

The last part of the interview guide is Experience Questions. The researcher simply asks informants if they had any prior experiences in a specific setting in this section. Although some of the questions are asked for detailed accounts of their experiences, none of them demanded lengthy responses. Because some of the questions are so open-ended, informants occasionally found it challenging to respond. The questions is posed in order to ascertain the influence of peer discussions as well as the relationship between political participation and the deliberative process. And instead of recurring, regular events, it tends to elicit atypical ones. The Experience Questions are the following for the respondents:

- 7) **You have probably had some interesting experience in changing your opinion on a political issue after viewing content on TikTok. Can you recall any of them?**
- 8) **Could you share an experience where TikTok motivated you to participate in a political event or discussion?**
- 9) **Can you describe a time when TikTok helped you connect with others who share your political views?**

Through the use of guiding questions, participants were able to share their daily activities, experiences, and the people or objects in their lives using TikTok. To ensure the informants were not misunderstood, the researcher also reiterated their statements if they were ambiguous. The researcher is given a broad understanding of how people perceive the world by these descriptions. As an interviewer, the researcher was able to learn what matters to participants by searching for answers to the descriptive questions. When an interviewer listens to responses to a variety of questions, the researcher might start to hear certain phrases or problems repeated for the purpose of narrative analysis. Important categories of knowledge are represented by these terms or problems. Understanding the connections between these categories was one of the researcher's goals.

In order to fully analyze the data, the recordings were listened to and transcribed by using transcription program "Sonix". According to Halcomb and Davidson (2006), transcription refers to "the process of reproducing words, such as those from an audiotaped interview, into written text." (p. 38). The researcher does not eliminate pauses, discourse markers such as "like" or fillers like "uhm" when employing this transcription technique in order to maintain the participants' meaning (Eppich, Gormley, & Teunissen, 2019). The researcher tried to focus on both what the participants said and how they said it. As a result, this transcription technique is selected for the proposed study in order to accurately represent the participants' responses while also making them readable. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the informant's meaning, the researcher might ask follow-up questions after the initial interviews. Designated inquiries were sent through email and messenger apps to elucidate the previous discussion.

After the data material was transcribed, it was coded and analyzed by using qualitative data analysis program "MAXQDA". A set of coding scheme was used to thematically analyze the data material. As Cohen et al. (2007) suggested, words, phrases, sentences, and other units of

analysis are categorized and coded into meaningful categories. After coding and categorizing, the following sequence that the researcher used: comparing — creating links between categories — and making theoretical conclusions from the text. The coding scheme (see *Table*) categorizes the responses based on consumption of political content, impact on political views, and perceived influence on political participation. It aims to provide a structured way to analyze the interview data.

Research Duration and Ethical Considerations

Interviews were carried out in-person, face-to-face settings, such as libraries and cafes, based on participants' availability and preferences, between October 22 and November 13, 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes on average, with session durations ranging from 25 to 90 minutes. All participants gave their verbal consent to participate in the study after being informed of its objectives and methods prior to data collection. Aside from basic demographic information, such as age, nationality, and occupation, no sensitive personal information was collected to ensure the confidentiality of participants and maintain their anonymity.

There was no collection of any sensitive information, including identifiable contact information or political affiliations as well. Only the media habits and perceptions of the participants were examined. Voice recordings of the interviews were made after the participants gave their express consent. Only anonymized transcripts were kept for analysis, and all original audio files were safely erased right away after transcription. The information was kept in digital folders that were password-protected and only the researcher could access. Ensuring full compliance with ethical guidelines, the whole process took all necessary steps to provide adequate protection for confidential information and protect participants' privacy.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

According to interview data, most interviewees who use TikTok described it primarily as an entertainment platform and among those, Light and Moderate Users reported incidental exposure to political content, while Heavy Users described more conflictual relationship with political content. They acknowledged that political agendas made their way into the platform, often when they least expected it to appear. A few respondents pointed out that TikTok had altered their stances on particular political issues, underscoring its potential as a platform that enables users to be politically informed. The interviews show differences in the patterns of TikTok's effects on political communication across various user categories characterized by the driving force of both positive interactions and risks of misinformation around political agenda.

As outlined in [Table 1](#) above Methodology section, the categorization of participants reveals that "engagement" on TikTok is not merely a function of time spent but of intent. Informants 5 and 6 are examples of Non-User who actively avoid the platform because they have serious doubts about its credibility as a news source. Light User, like Informants 7 and 11, on the other hand, were exposed to a digital environment where the algorithm unavoidably gets involved even though they do not actively seek out political content. Moderate User, such as Informant 2 and 9, and Heavy User including Informant 1 and 8, consume content to stay informed about current events but deliberately step back from engaging in the comment sections.

After the user types have been identified, it is necessary to map how political content reaches them by asking about TikTok's affordance and, more specifically, its algorithm. In order to test the algorithmic feed's indiscriminate nature, researcher classified these consumption modes through thematic coding (See [Table 2](#)). Participants with an entertainment-focused approach to TikTok and little to no political exposure are classified as having an "Entertainment Focus" category. Participants within this category highlighted their engagement with humorous material or leisurely browsing as their key motivations. For example, Informant 11 (Light User) stated that he primarily looked for so-called "memes and jokes", while Informant 2 (Moderate User) clarified that she is "*just scrolling through [the] For You page and stopping until something is interesting.*"

Participants who occasionally come across political content due to algorithmic recommendations rather than conscious decision-making are represented by the second

category, “Haphazard Algorithmic Content”. For instance, according to Informant 1 (Heavy User), she encounters political content "*very rarely, only if [it] pops up in For You Page.*" This kind of consumption suggests that user intent is not as important as TikTok's recommendation system when it comes to exposure to political content. And it demonstrates how TikTok can introduce political elements into the viewing habits of users who don't express overt political interest, thereby generating chances for unintentional political communication.

Participants who frequently come across political videos in their feed—either because they follow accounts that share political content or because the algorithm has detected political interest based on previous interactions—are included in the third category, “Frequent Political Exposure”. Informant 4 (Moderate User), for instance, mentioned that she follows "*daily informative pages on TikTok,*" which implies that such content "*pop[s] up*" on their FYP on a regular basis. In a similar vein, Informant 7 (Light User) stated that they come across political content "almost every time" they use the app. These could be a result of whether algorithmic reinforcement or user behavior. The recurrence of political content popped up in users' feeds suggests that TikTok is providing them more relatable information even though they aren't actively searching for it.

The fourth and most engaged category, “Targeted Political Consumption”, users who deliberately look for political content on TikTok and actively interact with relevant content creators or topics. These users indicated that they intentionally engaged in activities such as relying on TikTok as their major source for political news updates, following political accounts, or browsing the Explore page to stay informed about current events. As an example of actively curating their feed, Informant 9 (Moderate User) made it clear that they use TikTok "*to know latest info on...current affairs happening in my country and foreign countries*", while Informant 3 (Moderate User) stated, "*My For You page and Explore sections are related to history... and political subjects.*" This category illustrates TikTok's features, including its search functions, follow options, and personalized feed, can support systematic political information-seeking among users who regard the platform as not only a source of entertainment but also a civic or educational resource.

Overall, the data shows a haphazard nature of algorithmic content that impacts nearly every user, regardless of intent. Specifically, the information shown in [Table 2](#) validates the TikTok algorithm's agenda-setting ability. That is, the algorithm forces political content upon them

regardless of their intent. Desultory algorithmic content is ubiquitous phenomenon where users could not avoid political exposure, even if they made it clear that they only used TikTok for entertainment. For instance, Informant 7 (Light User) noted that despite using the app for fun, "almost every time I end up encountering some political content." This implies that the FYP introduces political narratives into non-political spaces, acting as a mandatory public sphere.

Table 2: Coding Scheme (1) - Consuming Political Content on TikTok

Code	Description	Example Quotes from Informants
<i>Entertainment Focus</i>	Primarily uses TikTok for entertainment, rarely for politics	"Just scrolling through <i>For You</i> page and stopping until something is interesting." (Informant 2) “(I try to find) Memes and jokes mostly” (Informant 11)
<i>Haphazard Algorithmic Content</i>	Encounters political content infrequently while using TikTok	"Very rarely, only if (political content) pops up in <i>For You</i> page." (Informant 1)
<i>Frequent Political Exposure</i>	Regularly sees political content on their TikTok feed—FYP	"I follow the daily informative pages on TikTok so whenever they pop up on my (<i>For You</i>) page." (Informant 4) "For me... almost every time I end up encountering some political content." (Informant 7)
<i>Targeted Political Consumption</i>	Actively seeks out and engages with political content on TikTok	"My <i>For You</i> page and <i>Explore</i> sections are related to history...and political subjects." (Informant 3) "I use TikTok to know latest info on current affairs happening in my country and foreign countries" (Informant 9)

When it comes to the nature of political conversations, as one of the most important sources of opinion (Katz, Ali & Kim, 2014), respondents perceive that TikTok is a platform where political conversations take place in a less formal setting and frequently feature relatable content and humor, which makes it simpler for casual users to get involved with political issues. Numerous interviewees acknowledge its role in unconscious exposure to political opinions and facilitating connections with like-minded individuals. This is in the same vein with what Katz (2006) explained that scholar like Tarde sees conversations as purposeless; so, political talk is unplanned, and likewise, reason and problem solving are incidental consequences rather than prerequisites or goals for talk (p. 386). Tarde (1901 [1989]) argues that the agenda for these “non-purposeful” conversations is where opinions are formed, which then leads citizens to take action. It seems that the abundance of voices on TikTok talking about different political topics can confuse users, highlighting the need for more discussions (i.e. fact check) to aid in the clarification of pertinent subjects.

Then, the researcher sought to determine if the haphazard content identified above section leads to substantive shifts in political opinion by categorizing these cognitive impacts (See [Table 3](#)). These categories capture how participants described the perception changes involved in coming across political content on a highly customized platform, in addition to whether opinions changed. Participants in the first category, “View Reinforcement”, stated that TikTok reinforced rather than changed their preexisting political beliefs. For example, Informant 11 (Light User) was adamant that their *“key political view is based on strong beliefs (that) can't be affected by social media.”* while Informant 9 (Moderate User) explained, *“It didn't change my mind”* despite acknowledging that the information reassured her about what she already knew. This finding highlights the way TikTok's algorithm consistently shows users content that supports their confirmation bias.

The second category, “View Shift”, captures participants who described moments of reconsideration or heightened awareness of certain viewpoints, where political content functions as a trigger for reflective thought. Informant 1 (Heavy User) set example of this incidental learning by acknowledging, *“I found out about terrible situation with woman rights in Afghanistan only thanks to TikTok.”* In this case, a knowledge gap was effectively filled by the platform. Similarly, Informant 3 (Moderate User) noted that content *“impacted my view on the issue of division that exists in Moldova”*, thereby indicating the platform's usefulness in education of regional politics. However, this influence hits a hard wall of the last category,

"Critical Perspective", when it encounters deeply held values. while Informant 5 (Non-User) warned that without fact-checking, users are prone to believing false information that *"aligns with one's worldview."* Thus, TikTok appears to function less as a tool of persuasion and more as a tool of awareness-raising, limited by the user's pre-existing skepticism.

Table 3: Coding Scheme (2) - Impact on Political Views

Code	Description	Example Quotes from Informants
<i>View Reinforcement</i>	TikTok content reinforced existing political views	"... key political view is based on strong beliefs (that) can't be effected by social media." (Informant 11) "It will maybe not change my opinion but will make me more open-minded, I think. " (Informant 9)
<i>View Shift</i>	TikTok content led to a change in political views	"I found out about terrible situation with woman rights in Afghanistan only thanks to TikTok." (Informant 1) "I remember certain politicians gained my sympathy." (Informant 2) "It impacted my view on the issue of division that exists in Moldova." (Informant 3) "That (content) made me reconsider my views on the topic of US interfering in Taiwan issue." (Informant 4)
<i>Critical Perspective</i>	Maintains a critical perspective on political content from TikTok	"I do not think TikTok plays a crucial role in shaping political opinions." (Informant 10) "If the false information aligns with one's worldview, then the person is prone to believing it without fact checking." (Informant 5)

The cognitive changes in *Table 3* show that TikTok's impact on political opinions is neither consistent nor unidirectional—its influence varies based on users' personal belief or baseline interest, which it is highly effective at view shifts regarding new or peripheral topics. The researcher found that TikTok's role in increasing awareness and changing political stance is highlighted by the fact that some respondents said that exposure to particular content on the platform expanded their horizons on political issues. For instance, two of the respondents newly learned about women's rights issues in Afghanistan or foreign interventions by the United States through TikTok. Some respondents mentioned that TikTok content could help them better understand political figures and their behavior, which occasionally changed their opinion on certain social issues or their sympathy for certain politicians during elections.

Meanwhile, the visible impact of influencers or content creators. The opinion leaders who guide discussions of media or pass on information received in the media to other people in society (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), was relatively small, at least for respondents of the research. While respondents could not recall any specific names of influencers or creator accounts, they thought there were no major influences on their decision-making process. That is, neither of them experienced a disproportionate impact on their vote intentions exerted by influencers or content creators, nor were they aware of any mediation or intervention per se between media stimuli and the ensuing opinions, decisions and behaviors of opinion leaders.

What was seen were certain kinds of self-proclaimed opinion leaders in the comment section, trying to steer the narrative and opinions on political issues in the comment section on certain TikTok videos. Respondents said these opinion-leader-type users are likely to be more exposed to the political content on TikTok than a regular user. But most of them were viewed as illogical, unreasonable, and even ridiculous according to the respondents, whose conversations would not be able to fit into one of Tarde's typology of conversation modes, the "Conversation-Exchange", that incorporates mutual informing and promotes the understanding in community (Tarde, 1901[1989]). Rather, it seemed that those discussions were more likely to turn into "Conversation-Battle [Conversation-Lutte]" or debate, in which participants bring arguments to the table.

The final step in the user journey is further engagement by exploring whether the view shift identified among informants translate to further participation or not. In contrast to the previous tables that concentrated on exposure and cognitive influence, this coding scheme records

participants' assessments of whether TikTok motivated them to take action, engage in conversation, or look for more information. *Table 4* presents an overview of participants' perceptions regarding TikTok's impact on their political engagement, broadly defined to encompass online interactions and information-seeking behaviors. Through systematic coding, three primary categories emerged, illustrating the varying degrees to which exposure to political content may lead to further action.

The first category, "Encouraging Participation" includes participants for whom TikTok served as a motivational force. Informant 2 (Moderate User) explained that TikTok contributed to their involvement during major social movements by saying she "*felt encouraged to support them and gained more insight*" yet this did not necessarily translate into further political action. Similarly, Informant 3 (Moderate User) described how TikTok stimulated intellectual curiosity stating "*(TikTok content) had encouraged me to talk to relevant experts and ask more questions.*" While not all engagement resulted in formal activism, the platform undoubtedly inspired these users to learn more or show support for social causes—a crucial type of low-threshold political engagement.

The second category, "Discouraging Engagement," which results from the platform's communication design elements, is contrasted with a type of minimal form of low-effort activism. Informant 9 (Moderate User) observed that "*sometimes it can discourage deep political discussion because everything's so short and fast-paced.*" This draws attention to a structural paradox—brevity, the very aspect of TikTok that makes it interesting—where platform's fast-scrolling layout and short videos can make it difficult to engage in sustained political discourse. For these users, TikTok's format appears to hinder rather than facilitate thoughtful interpretation and nuanced discussion. The third group, labeled "Neutral Impact," comprises users who asserted that TikTok exerted no substantial influence on their political engagement. Their answers highlight their disengagement and lack of interest in the platform's politics with Informant 7 (Light User) described himself as a passive consumer who does not engage in politically charged behavior by saying "*I have no such experience that TikTok content triggered me in any ways.*" As stated by informant, this claim imply that TikTok rarely encourages political participation on its own unless users were already prepared themselves for acting on it.

Table 4: Coding Scheme (3) – En/Discouraging Political Engagement

Code	Description	Example Quotes from Informants
<i>Encouraging Participation</i>	TikTok helps motivate political participation and engagement	<p>“When BLM movements happened or boycotts for Palestine, I felt encouraged to support them and gained more insight.” (Informant 2)</p> <p>"I've watched a video about Soviet Communism and it had encouraged me to talk to relevant experts ask more questions.” (Informant 3)</p>
<i>Discouraging Engagement</i>	TikTok hinders meaningful political participation	"Sometimes it can discourage deep political discussion because everything's so short and fast-paced." (Informant 9)
<i>Neutral Impact</i>	TikTok has little to no impact on political participation	<p>"I am a passive user... I have no such experience that TikTok content triggered me in any ways." (Informant 7)</p> <p>"It actually didn't make me practice politics in my country whatsoever." (Informant 10)</p>

For respondents, TikTok acts as a unique platform that impacts the presence of political agenda along with the way of communication that trickles down to normal users, therefore increasing the access to discuss politics in an engaging mode. While it can facilitate an array of voices and noteworthy conversations, it also poses challenges in discerning credible information. This can complicate discussions, particularly when people present contradicting information. Meanwhile, with examples of users feeling inspired to support or share content related to social movements like Black Lives Matter or to participate in discussions about historical events like the imperial nature of the Soviet Communist Regime, some respondents suggested that TikTok encourages political participation.

According to interviewees’ responses, some of the viral content may influence public opinion and motivate further action (i.e. share the content, discuss it with friends, etc.) implying

that young adult can be inspired to support political causes by TikTok. However, it does not necessarily motivate participation in real-world political activities, such as taking part in street demonstrations or political campaigns. Regarding whether TikTok promotes or hinders youth political engagement, there were differing views. Some contend that it offers a forum for activism, while others voiced worries about shallow, superficial involvement in political matters.

To understand why those aforementioned patterns exist, the researcher analyzed user perceptions of the platform's specific features (See [Table 5](#)). This connects the findings back to the "Platform-Specific" features. The analysis provides the explanatory key for the study. The participants' reflexive evaluations of TikTok's function in political communication are summarized in [Table 5](#). Those four categories that capture TikTok's perceived social and discursive affordances demonstrate how users are both aware of platform's creative potential and concerned about its limitations. The first category, "Informal Public Sphere," describes how some users view TikTok as a convenient way to express their political opinions. This category highlights the platform's ability to convert civic subjects into innovative short-form formats that reduce participation barriers. Informant 8 (Heavy User), for instance, noted that "*politics can be fun if every politician is reflected as a character in a short video*" implying that the format allows for different ways to interact with political content.

This first category contains informants' concerns that the short-video format and viral dynamics can deepen implicit bias and oversimplify complex issues. This was expressed by Informant 10 (Light User) pointing out "*it (TikTok) spreads bias...*" Although the platform democratizes voice, it runs the risk of giving particular framings precedence over subtlety. The second category, "Ground for Conversational Battle," came up frequently when informants talked about the comment section. Comment threads, according to some informants, are contentious spaces where disagreements turn into insults or acts of outrage. Informant 3 (Moderate User) stated that she finds "*...a lot of unconstructive comments and sometimes very dumb ideas*" while Informant 2 (Moderate User) noted that "*people in the comment sections mostly don't care about...whatsoever*". These comments were grouped together because they often mentioned the same phenomenon, which is that comment sections serve more as venues for dispute than as forums for deliberation.

According to the interviewees, the most controversial feature is the comment section, which has some drawbacks. Informants frequently characterize it as a chaotic "Battleground" of ideas

resulting from a lawless environment. This is supported by Informant 1 (Heavy User) who noted that *"there will be always people who have different opinion and will try to debate"* characterizing the exchange as inherently contentious. On the other hand, TikTok's social affordances for building affinity networks are highlighted in the third category, "Connection with Like-Minded Peers". The platform assisted them in finding and interacting with people who shared their identity, nationality, or even political beliefs. As an example, Informant 11 (Light User) utilized the platform to find *"some people with the same nationality as mine from different countries "* illustrating how the algorithm can foster networked communities of interest along with an affordance that can maintain informal discussion within comparatively homogeneous groups.

Table 5: Coding Scheme (4) – Perceived Role of TikTok in Political Communication

Code	Description	Example Quotes from Informants
<i>Informal Public Sphere</i>	Users view TikTok as a space where politics can be discussed casually and creatively, but at the same time, they perceive the short format can oversimplify complex political issues and discourage deep, nuanced discussion	<p>"Politics can be fun if every politician is reflected as a character in a short video." (Informant 8)</p> <p>"It provides a platform for diverse voices but also spreads bias." (Informant 10)</p>
<i>Ground for Conversational Battle</i>	Users identify especially the comment section as a primary space for political "Conversation-Battle," often perceived as argumentative	<p>"There will be always people who have different opinion and will try to debate" (Informant 1)</p> <p>"People in the comment sections mostly don't care about political correctness whatsoever." (Informant 2)</p> <p>"(I find) a lot of unconstructive comments and sometimes very dumb ideas " (Informant 3)</p>

<p><i>Connection with Like-minded Peers</i></p>	<p>Users describe the platform's ability to help users connect with others who share their political views, often in response to social movements</p>	<p>“Sometimes it felt nice to connect with people who have similar views and discuss topics that I like” (Informant 9)</p> <p>“I found some people with same nationality as mine from different countries through TikTok” (Informant 11)</p>
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5. DISCUSSION

In light of the selected theoretical framework, this chapter attempts to present the key findings. Speaking of public opinion, people must map other people's opinions as both similar and different from their own (Katz, Ali, & Kim, 2014). It is also crucial that each of these people be somewhat conscious of how similar their opinions are to those of others. The interviewees think TikTok is important because it provides a platform for a range of viewpoints and conversations along with short videos that simplify difficult political topics. They reported varying degrees of engagement with political content on TikTok, whether they passively consumed political videos that appeared on their FYP or actively followed political issues by participating in comment discussions. That is, willingly or unwillingly the frequency of TikTok use increases the frequency of conversation. This can be related to Lazarsfeld et al. (1948)'s explanation of the casualness of political conversation that can appear in a casual setting where people are more receptive to the discussion and less likely to have their defenses up.

It is also essential that each of these individuals was “more or less distinctly aware of the similarity of his judgments with those of others while the conversation make this similarity possible” (Katz, Ali, & Kim, 2014: p. 115). Tarde (1901 [1989]) assumed that this "mapping" process appears to be predicated on the assumption that personal opinion, like identity, exists before conversation, which exposes and reflects it. He and other academics came to the conclusion that the distribution of other people's opinions is mapped and that individual opinions are crystallized during conversation. Some informants noted that sharing informative TikTok videos with friends enhances understanding and helps connect the content to personal experiences. This aligns with the idea that “open-minded citizens, who are interested in public affairs and attentive to the several sides of issues engage in conversation with each other — the process of mapping, form considered opinions after weighing the competing arguments on an equal and mutually respectful basis” (Katz, Ali, & Kim, 2014: p.12).

The research can verify through interviews that political discourse on TikTok facilitates one of the purposes of dialogue proposed by Tarde and others, namely "to deepen awareness of belonging" (Katz, Ali, & Kim, 2014: p. 190) where individuals learn about their own interests and those of others. However, it is challenging to determine whether TikTok-moderated political discussions led to forming considered opinion as a direct consequence of non-purposive conversation. Apart from the development of understanding among themselves,

there is a limitation to draw strong conclusions on how daily political talk generates public reason and formulates considered opinions, as Kim and Kim (2008) suggested. Plus, it is challenging to pinpoint specific individuals on the platform who are very interested in a political topic, frequently discuss the issue, and consider themselves better at persuading others to convince them to take certain opinions or actions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948).

From Screen Time to Engagement Quality

As mentioned in previous chapter, initial categorization of informants was based on self-reported screen time, but analysis of interview data revealed that a more accurate distinction lies in the quality and nature of engagement. The categories were thus slightly refined as follows (See [Table 6](#)). This table serves as the analytical bases of this study, synthesizing the relationship between user behavior and political content on TikTok. It illustrates that the transition from Light to Heavy usage is not merely a quantitative increase in screen time, but a qualitative shift in the nature of political communication. Moreover, the analysis further implies that heavy usage of TikTok leads to an absorption in the algorithm's performative practice of curating conflict rather than necessarily more profound deliberation.

Table 6: Improved Categorization of Informants by Engagement Level

Code	Behavioral Characteristics	Relationship to Political Communication Content
<i>Non-User</i>	Individuals who do not use or deliberately keep away from using TikTok, often because of distrust	A certain level of skepticism about the reliability of TikTok and a preference for traditional news sources
<i>Light User</i>	People who use TikTok mostly for entertainment purposes, but have not curated feed for political information	Exposure to political content forced by algorithms, which occurs sporadically and unintentionally, and largely remained passive
<i>Moderate User</i>	Regular users who value the platform for raising awareness but remain mostly as observers	Showing unintended awareness that follows events and informative pages but actively avoids any kind of toxic disputes in comments or content sharing

<i>Heavy User</i>	High screen time users who integrate TikTok into daily information routines	Display of deeper immersion, most exposed to "Conversation-Battle" and often involved in observing conflictual political discourses
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As shown in *Table 6*, a relationship of avoidance defines “Non-User” group. Their deliberate refusal to interact with a medium they believe to be unreliable is their behavioral trait, rather than ignorance. The incidental political communication is represented by “Light User” group. They unintentionally define their relationship to political content. They do not proactively pursue news but rather, they encounter it passively through the algorithm, which functions as a form of “press” within the author's Public Space Framework, leading to a baseline of minimal, involuntary engagement. The “Moderate User” group may be the desirable engagement model found. They are prone to stay informed while using dynamic platform to efficiently understand rather complicated political subjects. Upon recognizing the toxicity present in the comment sections, they could deliberately avoid engaging in the “Conversation-Battle.”

On the other hand, a paradoxical nature of political participation is revealed by the “Heavy User” group. Discordance continues to be a defining characteristic of their relationship with political content despite their high level of engagement. Owing to their active viewership, they are particularly susceptible to the misinformation and polarization as the findings highlight. This shows that rather than leading to better deliberation, increased engagement on TikTok often leads to firmly entrenched algorithmic cycles. *Table 6*, so to speak, could be understood as a spectrum of immersion. As user category moves from "Light" to "Heavy," their relationship with political content is superseded from accidental to intentional, and their role shifts from observer to participant. This distinction is crucial because, as the findings show, the "Heavy User” who engage most deeply are also the ones most exposed to the platform's polarizing conversational battle dynamics. The researcher developed the alternative categories to better represent the type and quality of engagement, resulting in a typology that forms the basis of the analysis that follows.

Media Literacy and Contextual Nuance

While the findings suggest a general trend toward "non-purposive" (Katz, 2006) political consumption, the cross-cultural data from the informants complicates this picture. The very

definition of "political content" appears to be mediated by media literacy and national context. For instance, Informants from countries with high media literacy indices (e.g. Lithuania, Germany, and Spain) demonstrated a higher capacity for source criticism. The "short and fast-paced" nature of the app, which reflects a sophisticated understanding of media form, was specifically criticized by one of the informants as impeding in-depth discussion. Not without skepticism, these users tended to use TikTok as an addition to other news sources. However, informants from nations with complicated or restrictive media environments engaged with the platform differently. An informant from Moldova and China acknowledged the specific constraints of censorship, whereas another utilized the platform to actively address knowledge gaps concerning the nation's history or political divide.

Furthermore, the nature of skepticism varied. For example, informant from US and Northern Europe, compared to others from Asia and Africa, was highly skeptical of "fake news" and algorithmic dependability. According to Ipsos KnowledgePanel survey (2025), in both the US and Europe, fake news and the dissemination of misleading information are considered to be among the biggest threats to democracy. The critical perspective of informant was rooted in a concern about misinformation and its potential to align with pre-existing worldviews, which perhaps shaped by a different regional media and political dynamic. It is suggested that although the peculiarity of TikTok's algorithmic feed has achieved worldwide popularity, the way in which its political content is interpreted remains deeply rooted in local contexts. This research thus indicates that the cross-cultural factors act as a powerful mediating variable, influencing what is perceived as political and how it is received.

This discrepancy that author captured points out that a user's offline media environment serves as a crucial filter for what they consume online. Therefore, media literacy factor on TikTok involves more than just spotting fake news or misinformation, but also it entails comprehending how the platform's features interact with user's distinctive political reality. So it seems that the relationship between the algorithm and the user is partly mediated by cross-cultural factors. While active user in a polarized setting might be drawn into the "Conversation-Battle" as a participant, the others under same category in a high-literacy setting might use the platform as a skeptical observer of events.

Reconsidering Opinion Leadership and Algorithmic Affordance

One of the key results of this research is the apparent dislocation of the traditional two-step flow of communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Within the theoretical context, it is expected that "opinion leaders" or influencers who might act as primary conduits for disseminating political ideas would not be visible in the political content. Informants did seldomly note the visible impact of influencers. Rather, this study found the "opinion leadership" hub in the comment sections. According to informants, "self-proclaimed" opinion leaders are other users rather than well-known creators who are frequently viewed as *"illogical, unreasonable, and even ridiculous"*. This result implies that the two-step flow is broken up and flattened by TikTok's architecture. The less active segments—the users in this case—receive content directly from the algorithm (the "first step"), eschewing a conventional, reputable opinion leader.

The "second step" then becomes similar to a chaotic battleground in the comments, which aligns with Tarde's (1901 [1989]) "Conversation-Battle." On TikTok, it seems that influence on TikTok comes from the affective intensity and visibility of one's comments rather than from the established authority or the opinion leader. This suggests that the platform is designed for performative conflict rather than the "Conversation-Exchange" necessary to foster mutual understanding, which has significant implication for deliberative democracy. Based on researcher's public space framework (See *Figure 1*), the "Press" is a crucial agenda-setter that fosters "Conversation.". For its users, TikTok's FYP algorithm has perhaps evolved into the "Press.". But unlike the "Press" as traditional media, the FYP is a completely customized, haphazard and algorithmically-driven feed rather than a single source.

The results of this study show that this new "Press" is optimized for engagement, which frequently translates to "emotion-driven" or affective content. The respondents' experiences with haphazard algorithmic content and unconscious exposure indicate that they are not actively seeking political discourse. Rather, the algorithm incorporates political content—which frequently lacks context—into an entertainment stream. This decontextualized "Press" does not prepare users for Tarde's "Conversation-Exchange" but for "Conversation-Battle". That is, the algorithm's affordance influences both what users see and how they are ready to discuss it, establishing a clear link between algorithmic discovery and the divisive, emotion-driven discourse that informants saw.

In the meantime, those who have experienced the shifts in their opinions do not necessarily participate in politics more, especially when it comes to more conventional forms of participation like voting or party affiliation. According to Lazarsfeld et al. (1948), people act to vote based on the media, conversations, and perceptions of other people's opinions. While TikTok possesses the potential to motivate individuals to engage in political activities or activism, concerns have been raised about the platform's neglect of opposing perspectives and users' tendencies to respond emotionally without verifying information. Additionally, it was difficult to fully assess the peer influence or impact of opinion leader's prominence, which was initially considered more persuasive in convincing respondents to adopt an opinion or course of action. However, the research emphasizes that active users typically take on the role of opinion leaders and try to influence the opinion discourse in certain areas like comment section of TikTok.

Overall, the research findings suggest that the algorithmic nature of TikTok's feed curation, the FYP, makes users more likely to encounter political content and, via hyper-personalization, reduces the diversity of viewpoints encountered. While entertainment and social connection are the two main drivers that make people scroll over the TikTok content, political awareness tends to occur as a side effect. Media literacy factors such as political openness and information landscape affected whether TikTok functioned as a discussion forum or as a distraction, and the results demonstrate the way in which, in an era of platformized communication, algorithmic affordances enhance both the potential and the hazards of youth political engagement.

In contrast to previous research that focused mainly on larger demographics, this study specifically looks at how young adults, aged 18 to 26, interact with political content on TikTok. Young adults' distinct political engagement patterns are examined in this study, which hasn't been thoroughly discussed in previous research, which usually investigated how politicians use social media TikTok for political purposes while focusing on explaining how services are used for personalized advertising campaigns (Cervi et al., 2021, 2023; Classen et al., 2024). It appears that the pandemic, which attracted those who used social media to find amusement and connections, compelled political campaigns that involve official candidate campaigns, political action groups, and political discourse to take place primarily online. This study examined how young adults have been affected by the recent political climate on TikTok.

Furthermore, according to the findings, using TikTok for political messaging might increase

the political awareness — here, it not only indicates an awareness of elections and political parties, but also a variety of other political elements, such as knowledge of political events or social issues — yet it does not always enhance effectiveness of voter mobilization efforts. This contradicts current research that indicates TikTok has a greater potential to affect participation in conventional political activities (Karimi & Fox, 2023). This study might shed light on the notable influence of social media in terms of how political conversation is carried out, particularly on the interactions with peers or users. Moreover, the study suggests that educators and lawmakers address the issues of misleading information that are prominent in the political sphere on social media platforms in order to encourage youth to promote critical thinking that leads to making informed decisions and participation accordingly.

Given that the present study employs a qualitative research approach through in-depth interview methods, a primary limitation is the relatively small sample size. This means that it is difficult to generalize the findings to the majority of the population. The findings concerning TikTok platform and political communication patterns that can be drawn can therefore only be tentative. However, qualitative study allows for in-depth exploration of young adult's beliefs, which contributes with thorough responses and greater insight into their beliefs and experiences. This study may serve as a groundwork for future research focused on articulating the influence of TikTok on the political participation of young adults. Researchers might further explore the ways in which particular users, serving as informal opinion leaders on TikTok, influence political discourse, and delve into which types of user-generated content are more likely to inspire substantive political discussions.

CONCLUSIONS

TikTok is a capable platform for raising awareness. Increased political awareness, albeit it was unintended most of time, was the main effect of algorithmic exposure in the sample. Respondents were frequently exposed to subjects or events they had never or barely heard of before through video clips. They described specific learning experiences—such as learning about global crises or social movements through brief videos—and the group of Moderate User in particular mentioned about using TikTok as a catalyst for additional research. However, the interviews provided evidence that the platform more often encourages behaviors aligning with patterns of slacktivism and micro-participation observed in the data, such as sharing content, engaging in shallow conversations with peers, or expressing oneself online in a fleeting manner. These findings address assertions about TikTok's limited capacity to mobilize extensive offline activities directly, while highlighting its role in shaping agendas and facilitating the spread of ideas.

Although the algorithmic feed influences what informant sees on their FYP, this is mediated by other factors like media literacy and user behaviors. Repeated exposure loops are produced by the FYP's recommendation logic, which feeds more political content to users who engage with it even infrequently. This increases familiarity and the likelihood of additional engagement. Yet, to what extent a user is familiar with the platform and whether they can verify the credibility or interpret political content can determine if this familiarity results in an informed, deeper political communication. For instance, Heavy User was prone to participate in comment thread, sometimes serving as opinion intermediaries but also being most exposed to misinformation or polarized comment dynamics. Non-User and Light User generally displayed heightened skepticism or indifference toward political clips while Moderate User frequently experienced occasional encountering of political content and intermittent view shifts on certain political issues. As a result, TikTok's algorithm increases exposure, but the political significance of that exposure varies depending on individual factors such as media literacy and prior knowledge.

TikTok's features both encourage and restrict deliberation. The study shows that TikTok remarkably influences young adults' political communication by increasing the frequency of non-purposive conversations and in turn, this everyday political talk further stimulates them to conceptualize connections with other like-minded users. In addition to allowing for horizontal

peer communication and kinship networks, the platform facilitates accessible political expression such as memes and commentary. However, real-time discussion and debate of political issues could be facilitated by interactive features in comments, it wasn't the case of being flooded with "Conversation-Battle". Rather than function as deliberative forum, volatile comment sections frequently favor affective reactions over healthy arguments because of the short-form format. In the absence of deliberative information-seeking, TikTok thus serves as an informal public sphere that can enhance political consciousness and social belonging, but it seldom creates the conditions for reflective, evidence-based deliberation.

While this study delves into correlation between users' exposure to political content on TikTok and subsequent political engagement activities, and its findings cannot conclude that these phenomena were solely caused by participants' use of platform. Additionally, the lower number of interview participants limits this explorative study's accuracy and credibility, as it largely neglects insights from a larger population aged 18-26. Since the findings derive from a small, purposive qualitative sample, they are not intended for statistical generalization. Despite its limitations, it is likely that TikTok will continue to engage, influence, and occasionally inspire youth in ways that are different from those of other social media platforms.

The interviews provide operational insight into how algorithmic exposure and individual agency produce political communication outcomes. The study's overall conclusions highlight how important it is to grasp the patterns of modern political communication and online deliberative processes, especially in light of social media dynamics where TikTok has been regarded as an outstanding platform for getting young people involved in political discourse. Adding to these qualitative insights in further researches, it should be more clearly examined the impact of platform moderation procedures as well as cross-national variations in media-literacy infrastructures. Such research could shed more light on this largely unexplored topic by examining TikTok's intricate political algorithms or the ideological and psychological impacts of the platform.

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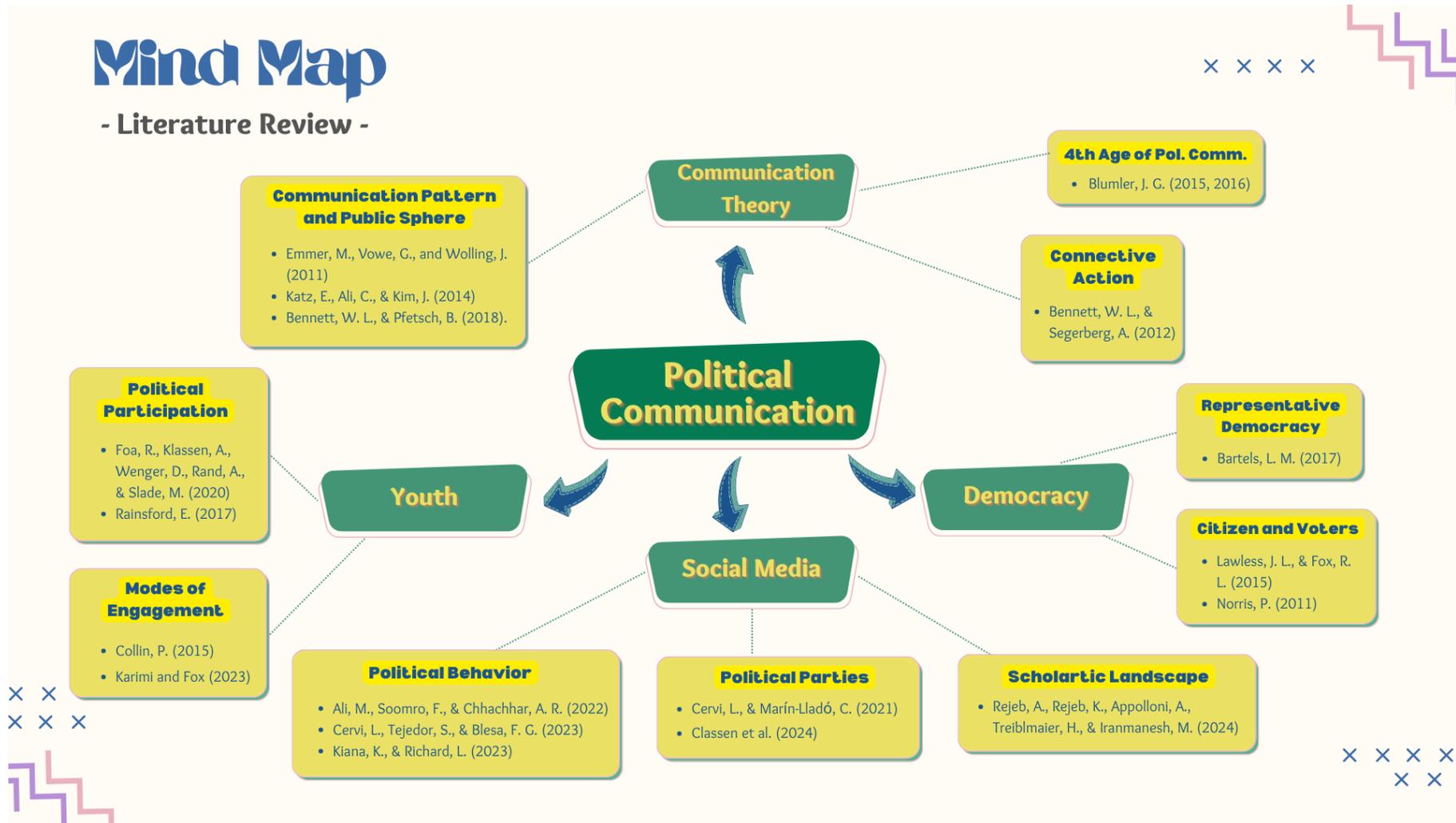
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Appendices

Appendix 1. Mind Map for Literature Review



Appendix 2. Information on Interview Participants

Participant	Background Information	Impressions	Notes
<i>Informant 1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 19 - Nationality: Lithuania - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Undergraduate student 	It was a smooth interview in terms of the first trial of the piloting interview. Interviewee corrected some of the terms using in TikTok.	Heavy User
<i>Informant 2</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 22 - Nationality: Germany - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Undergraduate student 	It was a little bit hard to follow the so-called Gen Z language, but it was absolutely unique experience.	Moderate User
<i>Informant 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 25 - Nationality: Moldova - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Video Editor 	It was quite a long interview since it took more than an hour and a half. But it turned out to be the most informative and fruitful time.	Moderate User
<i>Informant 4</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 26 - Nationality: China - Education: Bachelor 	There were a few constraints in answering the question since social media censorships in China is prevalent.	Moderate User

<i>Informant 5</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Occupation: Graduate Student - Age: 20 - Nationality: Poland - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Associate 	Since interviewee was not using TikTok at all, it took longer than I expected to explain backgrounds of research and to further raise relevant questions.	Non-User
<i>Informant 6</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 19 - Nationality: South Korea - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Undergraduate student 	Interviewee was trying to give a comparative view on different social media platforms, which I appreciated most.	Non-User
<i>Informant 7</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 23 - Nationality: United States - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: HR Manager 	Interviewee was prone to answer his questions very briefly and understandable as possible.	Light User
<i>Informant 8</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 23 - Nationality: Italy - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Job Seeker 	Interviewee came up with some excellent examples when she was trying to explain her answers on the follow-up questions.	Heavy User

<i>Informant 9</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 24 - Nationality: Spain - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Telecommunication Expert 	Interviewee shared a handful of insights on how social media affects young people, by providing accurate data.	Moderate User
<i>Informant 10</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 22 - Nationality: Côte d'Ivoire - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Graduate Student 	It took some time after listening to each question. It seems like he thought very carefully before saying something.	Light User
<i>Informant 11</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 24 - Nationality: Jordan - Education: Bachelor - Occupation: Graduate Student 	Interviewee was the friendliest informant in terms of using informal language and acquaintance.	Light User

Appendix 3. Declaration on the Use of AI Tools

FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION, VILNIUS UNIVERSITY DECLARATION ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS

Student's name, surname: Yunsu Kim

Study programme, year of study: International Communication, 2nd year (2025)

Title of the written work: Deliberation in the Age of Algorithms: A Comparative Analysis on Prevalence of TikTok-Mediated Political Communication Among Young Adults Across Countries

Type of written work (e.g., essay, term paper): Master's Thesis

Course / subject: Master Final Thesis

Date of submission of the declaration: 2025/12/27

The written work submitted for assessment has been prepared in accordance with the *Code of Academic Ethics of Vilnius University*¹, the *Methodological Guidelines for Written Works of the Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University*², the *Guidelines on Artificial Intelligence Usage at Vilnius University*³, and the *Recommendations on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Study Assignments at the Faculty of Communication, Vilnius University*⁴.

I confirm

I do not confirm

The following artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in preparing this written work (please mark appropriately and specify their purpose):

- ChatGPT: _____
- Grammarly: _____
- Midjourney: _____
- Gemini: _____
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

Additional information required:

1. Footnotes in the written work must indicate the specific parts of the text that were prepared with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) tools.
2. Footnotes must also specify the volume of the text that was prepared using AI tools.

¹ Code of Academic Ethics of Vilnius University: <https://www.kf.vu.lt/en/studies/documents>

² Methodological Guidelines for Written Works of the Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University: https://www.kf.vu.lt/dokumentai/VUKF_metodiniai_EN_Epdf.pdf

³ Guidelines on Artificial Intelligence Usage at Vilnius University: https://www.vu.lt/site_files/Vertimai/EN_Translation_Dirbtinio_intelektu_naudojimo_Vilniaus_universitete_gair%C4%97s.pdf

⁴ Recommendations on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Study Assignments at the Faculty of Communication, Vilnius University: https://www.kf.vu.lt/dokumentai/documents/2024/Recommendations_on_the_use_of_AI_in_assignments.pdf