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The Rise of European Populism

A Discourse Analysis of Rhetorical Strategies and Their Impact on Voting Behaviour

U2242475

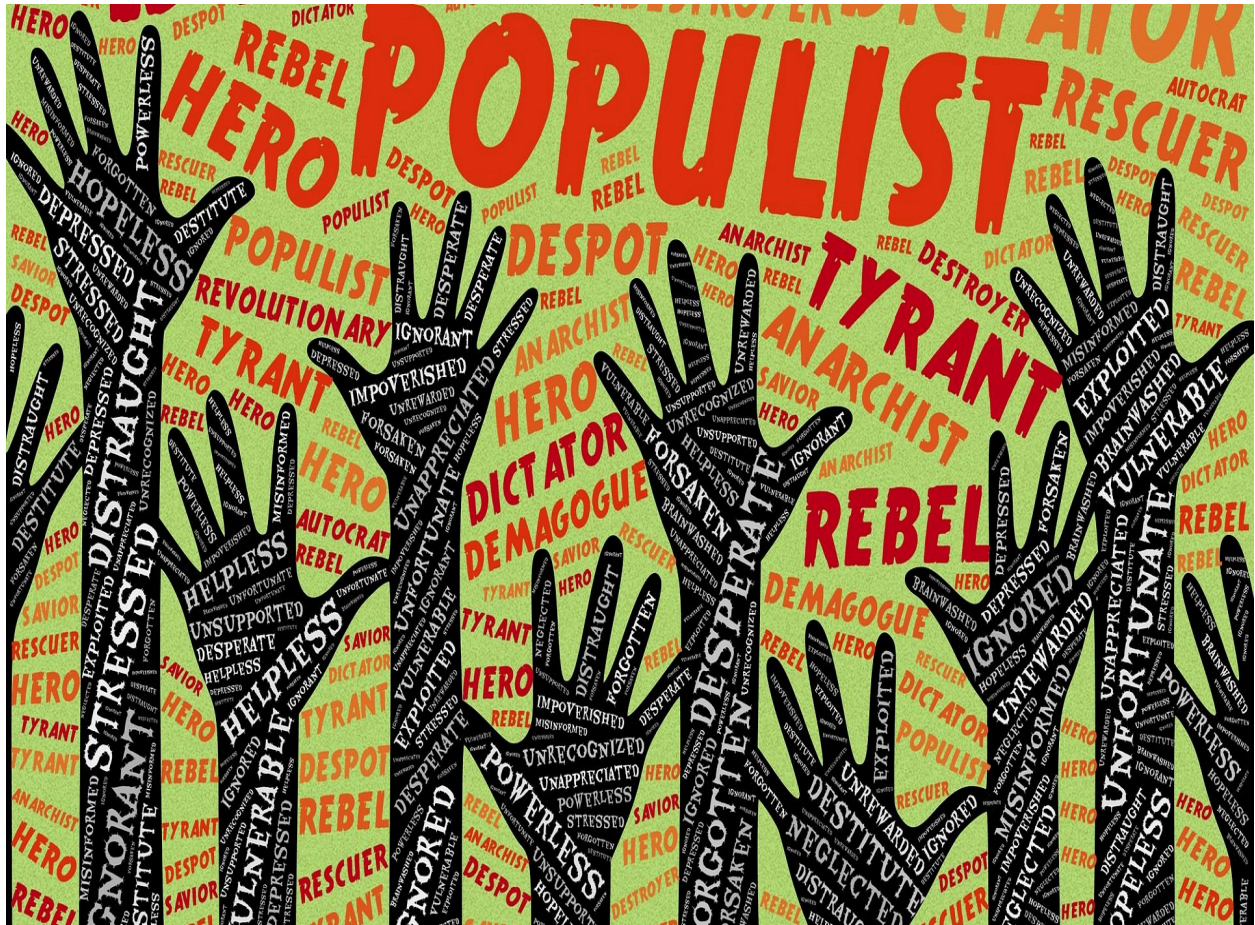
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Abstract

This dissertation examines the rise of European populist-right parties and their strategic use of digital discourse to influence youth political engagement and voting behaviour, especially in the context of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections. Drawing upon a comparative, multi-scalar case study of Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands, the project explores how populist leaders, such as Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel, and Geert Wilders, craft ideologically potent narratives across traditional and digital platforms, particularly TikTok, Instagram, X, and YouTube. The research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and quantitative content analysis within an NVivo-driven framework, integrating sociological and

media theory from Laclau, Mouffe, Papacharissi, van Dijk, and Foucault. Artefacts such as speeches, campaign videos, influencer collaborations, and social media posts are coded across thematic categories including nationalism, anti-elitism, identity politics, and biopolitical crisis framing. Visual elements, emojis, music trends, and algorithmic structuring are also analysed to reveal how performative populism is tailored to platform logics. Statistical regression is applied to Eurostat and YouGov data to evaluate correlations between social media engagement and youth turnout. Findings suggest a clear asymmetry in rhetorical style, where populist-right parties, through affective and algorithmically-optimised content, succeed in constructing simplified, emotionally resonant narratives that resonate with disillusioned young voters. The study identifies regional divergence in discourse (e.g., Brandenburg vs. Bavaria), highlighting how populist messaging adapts to local socio-political conditions. This dissertation concludes that far-right populist parties have effectively reconfigured the communicative architecture of political engagement, leveraging platform affordances to embed ideological motifs in youth culture. The work contributes to political sociology by integrating digital media theory, discourse analysis, and electoral data in the study of populism's evolving rhetorical infrastructure.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The resurgence of populist-right movements across Europe has prompted significant debate among political scientists, sociologists, and media theorists. What was once considered a marginal force now holds parliamentary influence in countries like Italy, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Hungary. This rise has coincided with broader transformations in political communication, namely, the migration of discourse from legacy platforms to algorithmically structured social media spaces. These developments demand renewed analytical approaches to understanding political engagement, particularly among young voters, many of whom are encountering populist ideologies for the first time via TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube (Digital

News Report, 2023). This dissertation investigates how right-wing populist parties across Europe, especially Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Rassemblement National (RN), Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and the Party for Freedom (PVV), have tailored their rhetorical strategies to engage youth audiences and reshape political discourse in the digital public sphere. These parties increasingly rely on emotionally resonant, affective, and visually dynamic communication strategies that bypass traditional ideological framing. Drawing on Foucault's concept of power/knowledge (1972) and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (1995), the study explores the ideological content and platform affordances that render populist messaging effective among young, digitally native voters. With more than 30% of 16–24-year-olds in Germany and France voting for populist or far-right parties in 2024 (DW, 2024; Le Monde, 2024), the urgency of this inquiry is evident. The implications are significant not only for understanding voter behaviour but also for the future of European democratic pluralism, civic identity, and rule of law.

This dissertation aims to address the following core research question:

How do right-wing populist parties in Europe use digital discourse to engage youth and influence voting behaviour across national and regional contexts?

To address this central question, the study is guided by several sub-questions: How are rhetorical strategies (e.g., nationalism, anti-elitism, cultural identity) encoded and disseminated through social media by populist actors? What role do platform algorithms and media logic (van Dijck, 2013; Bucher, 2012) play in amplifying or constraining these messages? In what ways do populist parties tailor discourse differently across regions (e.g., Brandenburg vs. Bavaria; Paris vs. Marseille)? How does youth digital engagement correlate with support for populist agendas in

electoral outcomes? The dissertation is organised into six chapters, each building on the last to construct a multidimensional understanding of populist discourse, youth political engagement, and platform dynamics. Chapter 2 synthesises major theoretical frameworks, drawing from political sociology, populism studies, media theory, and digital ethnography. It will engage theorists such as Cas Mudde, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, José van Dijck, Stuart Hall, danah boyd, and others to contextualise populist rhetoric in the current media ecosystem. Chapter 3's methodology outlines a mixed-methods approach. A qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used alongside quantitative content coding and statistical modelling. NVivo is employed to generate theme-based coding maps, while regression models are used to test the correlation between online engagement and youth voting patterns across regions. Chapter 4's findings presents data on code frequency, narrative strategies, regional divergences, and engagement metrics. It includes graphical representation as shown in the appendix (e.g., bar charts, heatmaps, co-occurrence tables) to illustrate ideological motifs and their traction across platforms. Chapter 5's discussion offers critical interpretation of the findings in light of theoretical models. It explores ideological reframing (Lakoff, 2004), affective resonance (Laclau, 2005), and platform-specific performance (Papacharissi, 2015), interrogating how populist actors leverage digital affordances to bypass traditional gatekeeping. Finally Chapter 6's conclusion reflects on the research's broader implications, methodological limitations, and directions for future studies, particularly in relation to civic literacy and digital platform regulation. Appendices include the NVivo coding map, primary source artefacts (image samples), and youth voting data extracted from Eurobarometer, YouGov, and national electoral statistics.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Populism

The recent surge in right-wing populism across Europe has reignited debates over the definition, scope, and function of populism as a political phenomenon. Though populism is often treated as a rhetorical style or electoral strategy, contemporary scholarship conceptualises it more robustly as a discourse that reconfigures the relationship between the people, the elite, and the nation (Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004). This dissertation adopts a discourse-theoretical approach rooted in critical theory to explore how populist movements ideologically frame themselves and mobilise youth electorates across digital platforms. At its core, populism is defined by the antagonistic

dichotomy between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004). This minimal definition, often termed the "ideational approach", treats populism as a thin-centred ideology that can be attached to both left- and right-wing political projects. However, this neutrality is complicated by the empirical dominance of right-wing populist parties in Europe's contemporary political landscape, from Germany's AfD and France's Rassemblement National, to Italy's Fratelli d'Italia and the Netherlands' PVV.

Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018) offer a more discursive framework, arguing that populism is a form of political logic that constructs a frontier between "the people" and "the other", often through chains of equivalence across different grievances. Their post-structuralist model, rooted in Gramsci and Lacanian psychoanalysis, sees populist discourse as an articulatory practice: a way of stitching disparate demands into a shared identity through symbolic nodal points such as sovereignty, immigration, or security. Importantly, this theoretical framework foregrounds affective investment and the power of signifiers, such as the nation, or even the leader's persona, to mobilise loyalty beyond rational deliberation. This is particularly relevant in a social media environment where memetic politics and emotional virality thrive.

Mudde's (2004) seminal work positions populism as a "thin-centred ideology," one that must attach itself to fuller ideological host bodies such as nationalism or conservatism. For example, AfD's anti-immigration discourse relies on nativist ideology, while RN in France combines populist style with cultural protectionism. Mudde also emphasises the anti-pluralist nature of right-wing populism, contrasting its simplicity and binary moral logic with liberal democratic commitments

to institutional complexity and compromise. This helps explain the appeal of populism to digitally native youth audiences seeking moral clarity in polarised information ecosystems.

Max Weber's theory of authority is useful in assessing the populist leader's claim to legitimacy. Rather than rational-legal authority, populist leaders often rely on charismatic authority, projecting themselves as tribunes of the people, above institutional constraints. Giorgia Meloni and Geert Wilders, for example, have cultivated personalist brands that tap into collective disillusionment with technocratic elites. This charisma is intensified through visual culture and platform-specific amplification (see Section 2.2), reinforcing a leader-centric narrative where legitimacy derives from perceived authenticity and emotional resonance rather than policy acumen.

Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics, the governance of life through technologies of control and discourse, adds a critical layer to understanding how populist movements frame crises such as immigration, health, or security. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, AfD and RN adopted frames portraying lockdowns and vaccines as elite impositions on the "natural rights" of the people. Such discourses blur the boundary between state regulation and bodily autonomy, turning individual grievances into politically salient claims. This connects to populist strategies that valorise the body politic as under siege from external or parasitic forces, be it migrants, bureaucrats, or experts.

Roland Barthes' (1957) theory of mythologies and Stuart Hall's (1982) work on encoding/decoding further clarify how populist communication transforms contingent political issues into common-sense narratives. These myths are often visual and symbolic, the flag, the

“everyman” leader, the staged protest clip, and their repetition across digital platforms constructs ideological closure, dissuading critical engagement. Populist myth-making can be especially effective among youth demographics who engage with politics through aesthetic, affective and algorithmically curated experiences rather than formal civic education (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

The conceptualisation of populism as a discursive, ideological, and affective practice provides the foundation for this dissertation’s analytical framework. By combining Mudde’s thin-centred ideology, Laclau’s articulatory logic, and platform-oriented theories of charisma, biopolitics, and myth, this study situates populism not as a deviation from democratic discourse, but as a rival modality of meaning-making in the digital age.

These theories will be operationalised through a discourse analysis of campaign materials and social media messaging, explored further in the Methodology chapter (Chapter 3).

Discourse, Media, and Power

Understanding the rise of European populism requires a nuanced analysis of how discourse intersects with media infrastructure to shape political meaning, influence public opinion, and reinforce or challenge power structures. Populist movements, particularly on the radical right, do not merely spread messages through media; they operate within and are actively shaped by the technological and affective architectures of the platforms they exploit. This section builds on critical discourse theory and digital media scholarship to examine how populist actors mobilise

narratives that resonate emotionally, ideologically, and visually within an increasingly platformed public sphere.

Michel Foucault's conception of discourse as a form of power that "produces reality" (Foucault, 1972) provides a foundational lens for understanding how populist messaging constitutes not just persuasion but world-building. Discourse, in this sense, is both representational and performative, it creates the "truths" it claims to describe. Populist narratives that depict an "elite class" versus a "pure people" (Mudde, 2004) are not merely rhetorical tropes; they restructure political meaning and reposition legitimacy. Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) advances this notion by linking linguistic structures with social practices. For Fairclough (1995), texts are ideological formations that simultaneously reflect and reproduce dominant power relations. In populist media, simple lexical choices, such as "invasion" instead of "migration", invoke broader fears, frame legitimacy, and orient affective publics around antagonistic binaries. Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (2009) is especially valuable in analysing far-right rhetoric, as it situates discourse within socio-political contexts and historical memory. Wodak shows how contemporary populist actors draw on latent national myths and intergenerational fears to legitimise xenophobia or anti-globalist sentiment. For example, Marine Le Pen's evocation of "France for the French" subtly recycles Gaullist nationalism while masking exclusionary intent under heritage discourse.

Teun van Dijk's (1998) work focuses explicitly on elite political discourse and the control of symbolic resources. He argues that political elites disproportionately shape public knowledge through control over mass media and policy discourse. Although digital platforms have

fragmented media power, van Dijk's theory remains pertinent: far-right figures such as Giorgia Meloni and Alice Weidel adopt elite rhetorical structures (e.g., institutional decorum, national authority) while simultaneously presenting themselves as "anti-elite outsiders." This strategic ambiguity allows populists to frame themselves as both victims of mainstream suppression and saviours of popular will. This rhetorical framing is magnified by the echo chambers and filter bubbles produced by digital architectures. While traditional media once offered discursive gatekeeping, social platforms facilitate algorithmic micro-framing that aligns well with the emotional immediacy and ideological clarity that characterise populist discourse (Sunstein, 2001).

José van Dijck (2013) describes social media platforms as "techno-cultural systems" that embed specific affordances, such as virality, brevity, and visibility, which shape what can be said, how it is said, and who hears it. For populist actors, these affordances offer unprecedented opportunities to bypass journalistic scrutiny and communicate directly with audiences. Taina Bucher's concept of "algorithmic power" (2018) is central to understanding the mechanics behind populist amplification. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are not neutral intermediaries; their algorithms privilege sensational, emotional, and controversial content. This explains the overrepresentation of far-right material in youth feeds, even when other parties produce more content (Global Witness, 2024). Alice Weidel, for instance, generated fewer total videos than the SPD in Saxony but achieved significantly higher user exposure due to algorithmic privileging of emotionally charged, identity-based posts (DW, 2024). Zizi Papacharissi (2015) expands this lens with her idea of "affective publics", networks of emotional expression that organise political meaning less through rational debate and more through shared feelings. Her concept explains

how Jordan Bardella's TikTok posts, many of which are seemingly apolitical selfies, memes, or stylised speech clips, still achieve deep resonance. His virality is not simply a product of content but of platform-tailored affective performance (See Appendix A, Figure 2.4 - Populist Messaging Styles by Platform Affordance).

Beyond textual analysis, the visual grammar of populism plays a central role. As Stuart Hall (1997) argues, ideology is as much about representation as language, images construct meaning. On TikTok, figures like Bardella and Meloni use aesthetic codes (casual dress, urban backdrops, filtered visuals) to perform authenticity and proximity. Giorgia Meloni's juxtaposition of nationalist rhetoric with feminist identity illustrates this hybrid performance: she simultaneously invokes "maternal authority" and far-right traditionalism to reshape what womanhood and leadership mean in Italy (Women's Agenda, 2024). This "aesthetic ideology" (Maly, 2023) transforms politics into a theatre of appearances, blending entertainment, identity, and discourse. A meme, a facial expression, or a 15-second montage can encode ideological claims far more effectively than a policy paper. This is especially significant for youth voters who consume politics in ambient, bite-sized formats (Reuters Institute, 2023). This has shown how the dynamics of discourse, power, and platform logic converge to empower right-populist actors. Through the use of CDA, platform theory, and media sociology, we have seen that populist messaging is not simply persuasive; it is performative, platform-dependent, and structurally amplified. The next section will explore how youth audiences engage with this rhetoric in affective, identity-driven ways.

Youth Engagement and Platform Dynamics

The transformation of youth political engagement in the digital era has been extensively theorised by scholars such as Bennett (2008), boyd (2014), and Literat (2021), all of whom argue that civic participation among young people increasingly takes place outside institutional or traditional formats. Instead of party membership or electoral turnout, young citizens engage with politics via social media, often through expressive, symbolic, and affective modes of communication. As Bennett (2008) terms it, this shift from dutiful citizenship to actualising citizenship means that young people are more likely to engage with issues that resonate with their identities, emotions, and everyday digital practices. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, in this context, are not simply neutral vessels but powerful mediators of political meaning.

Danah boyd's (2014) concept of networked publics is crucial to understanding how youth political discourse circulates. These publics are shaped by affordances such as persistence, searchability, and algorithmic curation, all of which amplify performative modes of engagement. Similarly, Zizi Papacharissi (2015) conceptualises affective publics, emotional collectives that are mobilised around shared sentiments rather than ideologies, as central to understanding how youth encounter populist narratives. TikTok's short-form video format, participatory remix culture, and algorithmic sorting mechanisms encourage the viral spread of political content that is emotionally potent, meme-able, and embedded within entertainment logic. Taina Bucher (2018) has further argued that algorithms not only structure visibility but also govern the terms of political intelligibility: they determine which forms of political discourse are rendered legible and which are marginalised. This is particularly relevant to the far-right's success with youth online. As Politico's 2024 TikTok audit revealed, MEPs from Identity and Democracy (ID) and

European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groups receive the highest aggregate engagement on TikTok, both in terms of likes and followers. Despite being smaller parliamentary groupings, their content dominates the platform, showing the alignment between affective populism and the logic of algorithmic amplification.

This strategic affinity between platform affordances and populist rhetoric is evident in the communication styles of figures such as France's Jordan Bardella and Germany's Alice Weidel. Bardella, in particular, has perfected a style of populist performativity that leverages TikTok aesthetics, grainy filters, casual settings, ironic hashtags, and depoliticised charisma, to blur the line between political figure and influencer. His clips rarely reference Rassemblement National directly but instead revolve around lifestyle tropes, personal relatability, and anti-elite sentiment cloaked in humour or fashion. According to a DW News analysis, over one-third of French youth under 25 have interacted with Bardella content on TikTok, with his name often trending higher than traditional political topics.

In Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has also leveraged platform logic effectively. A 2024 analysis by the University of Potsdam found that AfD-related content appeared nearly nine times more often in young users' TikTok feeds than SPD or CDU content (DW, 2024). This is not merely a matter of post frequency, the SPD reportedly posted more, but of how content is framed. AfD videos featuring slogans such as "Freiheit statt Zwang!" (Freedom not coercion!) during COVID-19 lockdowns employed affective keywords and emotionally charged symbolism to resonate with youth anxieties over control and autonomy. The emergence of such content patterns reflects a broader ideological convergence between youth engagement and populist

communicative style. In contrast, mainstream and centrist parties appear to struggle with the aesthetics and affective tempo of youth-oriented platforms. The Digital News Report (2023) noted that centre-left parties across Europe have largely failed to adapt their rhetorical strategies to the expectations of younger users, often defaulting to institutional tones that lack virality and symbolic power. (See Appendix B, Figure B.1 - Youth Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties in the 2024 EU Elections; EU Election Exit Polls, 2024).

Additionally, while platform design plays a key role, the efficacy of populist messaging is also contingent on affective resonance, how well it taps into youth concerns such as economic precarity, cultural alienation, and loss of future prospects. Populist narratives reframe these concerns not as policy challenges but as identity crises. Through what Laclau (2005) called chains of equivalence, diverse grievances, immigration, rural decline, inflation, are symbolically unified under banners such as “sovereignty” or “freedom” (See Appendix A, Figure A.1 - Chains of Equivalence in Populist Youth Discourse: Sovereignty as Central Signifier).

In sum, the relationship between youth engagement and populist communication is mutually reinforcing. Youthful publics seek emotionally resonant, aestheticised political messages, and populist-right actors have mastered the art of delivering these in platform-native formats. Yet this dynamic is not homogenous across Europe. As the next section explores, regional histories and discursive traditions significantly shape the uptake and resonance of populist messages among youth in different national contexts.

Comparative Populisms and Regional Identity

The populist appeal in Europe is far from homogenous; it is instead inflected by national, regional, and historical specificities that shape the rhetorical contours of discourse. For example, the ethnonationalist populism of the AfD in eastern Germany is inextricable from post-reunification socioeconomic marginalisation and regional disenchantment, whereas Italy's Fratelli d'Italia ties its populist imaginary to both Catholic traditionalism and anti-globalist nostalgia for national rebirth (Albertazzi et al., 2022). This diversity necessitates a comparative approach that recognises the variegated regional "identities-in-discourse" (Hall, 1996), which populist actors strategically harness and reframe. National narratives are often recalibrated at the regional level through semiotic strategies and symbolic signifiers, rural decline in Brandenburg, border control in Veneto, or *laïcité* in southern France, producing what Wodak (2015) terms a "micro-hegemonic articulation of belonging."

Such variations are not merely contextual, they are structural to the populist project. Foucault's (1980) conception of discourse as the terrain through which power operates suggests that populists adapt their communication to localised power sensibilities and grievances. In this sense, sovereignty does not carry identical meaning across contexts; it becomes a floating signifier (Laclau, 2005) rearticulated through divergent chains of equivalence to suit regional anxieties. Appendix A, Figure A.1 illustrates how sovereignty functions as a nodal point connecting disparate issues such as EU bureaucracy, cultural loss, and economic dispossession across countries. Furthermore, platform-based affordances reinforce regional discursive targeting. TikTok content from Bardella in France frequently deploys visual codes associated with French youth subcultures (e.g., urban fashion, hip-hop beats), while Meloni's content integrates

patriotic aesthetics aimed at a southern Italian electorate with historically lower trust in EU institutions.

Thus, the populist-right's success hinges not only on ideological cohesion but on the strategic deployment of regional semiotic codes, calibrated to both local conditions and platform dynamics. The implication is clear: any analysis that flattens European populism into a unified phenomenon risks missing the essential discursive flexibility that sustains its popular traction.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research on European populism, three critical gaps persist. First, there is limited work that unifies critical discourse analysis (CDA) with platform-specific communication dynamics, particularly across youth-dominated digital spaces like TikTok and Instagram. While scholars such as Wodak (2015) and van Dijk (1998) have richly analysed populist discourse, much of this analysis remains tethered to print media, parliamentary rhetoric, or mainstream television appearances. This neglects the performative, affective, and algorithmically-optimized nature of digital populism, especially as deployed by younger right-wing figures such as Jordan Bardella or Alice Weidel. As Papacharissi (2015) argues, digital media reshape the conditions of political expressivity, introducing a "networked affect" that demands new analytical lenses.

Second, research too often treats youth as either passive consumers of ideology or as monolithic voting blocs. This overlooks how young voters are active interlocutors in shaping and remixing populist discourse, often through memes, duets, comment threads, and hashtag movements.

Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019) stress the importance of “youth participatory politics” in digital ecosystems, a mode of engagement that eludes conventional voter turnout models. Appendix B, Figure B.1, which visualises exit poll data from the 2024 EU election, reveals an uneven distribution of right-populist support among youth across regions, suggesting platform usage and cultural context play a mediating role. Yet these correlations remain under theorised.

Finally, there is a scarcity of comparative, regionally-sensitive studies that map how populist parties vary their rhetorical strategies across national borders and local identities. Many analyses homogenise the European far right under umbrella categories like “ECR” or “ID,” ignoring the nuanced discursive adaptations seen in, for instance, Saxony versus Bavaria, or Paris versus Marseille. Moreover, much of the quantitative data, such as Eurostat or YouGov youth polling, is seldom integrated into qualitative discourse analysis frameworks using tools like NVivo. This dissertation addresses this methodological lacuna by fusing CDA, digital ethnography, and statistical correlations between platform engagement and youth voting behaviour.

By bridging these theoretical and methodological gaps, this project contributes an urgently needed perspective on the discursive, algorithmic, and regional logics of contemporary European populism.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design and Theoretical Rationale

This dissertation adopts a qualitative, multi-scalar research design grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and informed by digital media ethnography, aiming to uncover how European right-wing populist actors rhetorically mobilise youth political sentiment via platform-specific communication strategies. By merging sociological theory, political communication, and digital culture studies, the project constructs a multidimensional analysis across text, image, platform, and affect.

The research is situated within a post-structuralist epistemology, drawing particularly on the works of Norman Fairclough (1995), Teun van Dijk (1998), and Ruth Wodak (2001) to understand how language shapes, reinforces, and circulates ideology. The conceptual lens is further refined through Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory of populism, especially their notion of "chains of equivalence", which is central to the analysis of how populist signifiers (e.g., sovereignty, freedom, Europe of Nations) become nodal points around which multiple grievances (economic, cultural, political) are sutured. At a methodological level, the dissertation also applies Cas Mudde's (2004) distinction of populism as a "thin-centred ideology" that adapts its framing based on context, enabling comparison between party actors like Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, Geert Wilders, and Alice Weidel. The influence of George Lakoff's (2004) ideological framing theory and Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is integrated to understand how messages are constructed and how young audiences are positioned to receive them.

To address the digitally-mediated nature of this discourse, the research engages platform studies theorists such as José van Dijck (2013) and Zizi Papacharissi (2015), whose work on platform affordances, algorithmic governance, and affective publics provides a critical scaffolding for understanding the sociotechnical dynamics of youth engagement. This design enables triangulation between ideological discourse, media infrastructure, and voter behaviour, creating a more holistic picture of how populist messages move across layers of digital and traditional communication. Unlike traditional political science models that isolate opinion polls or campaign finance, this study focuses on how rhetoric, visuality, and interactivity combine to constitute political affect and mobilise identity-based allegiances.

Finally, by applying digital ethnography methods (Pink et al., 2016), the project treats social media posts and video speeches not just as texts but as performative artefacts, situated in cultural, regional, and algorithmic contexts. These are not static data points, but dynamic interactions shaped by likes, shares, comment culture, and interface design. This theoretical-mixed method approach is essential to capture the complexity of how populism in Europe is increasingly being reshaped by the intersection of youth digital cultures and rhetorical affect.

Data Collection - Artefacts and Regional Selection

This study draws upon a corpus of 32 multimodal artefacts selected from four key EU states, Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands, to interrogate the discourse strategies employed by populist-right parties in the digital era. These countries were selected due to their varied but significant experiences with rising populist-right sentiment, and each provides unique insights into rhetorical convergence, media ecosystems, and youth engagement strategies ahead of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections.

The artefacts comprise campaign speeches, TikTok and Instagram videos, YouTube broadcasts, and televised debates produced or disseminated by the following parties and figures: Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Rassemblement National (RN), Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), and the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV). Artefacts span from 2022 to 2024 onwards and reflect content disseminated within six weeks of regional or EU-level elections.

Each artefact was subjected to a rigorous qualitative discourse analysis and coded in NVivo using a multi-level thematic framework. The goal was to capture variations in ideological framing, emotional appeal, platform-specific vernaculars, and demographic targeting.

Each national context was chosen for its ability to exemplify particular dimensions of digital populist communication and platform strategy. Firstly, AfD's disproportionate success among first-time voters, particularly in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia, was linked to its heavy use of TikTok (DW, 2024). Artefacts include youth-centric videos promoting liberty-oriented slogans like "Freiheit statt Zwang" (Freedom, not coercion), reflecting platform-optimised affective discourse. RN, particularly under Jordan Bardella's digital leadership, has pioneered a visual populist aesthetic through TikTok and Instagram Reels (Le Monde, 2024). Bardella's content is notable for blending influencer culture with political ambiguity, engaging with voters often unaware of his political affiliation. Giorgia Meloni's ascension reflects the mainstreaming of post-fascist discourse. Fdl's data corpus includes speech clips that centre tradition, sovereignty, and Italian Catholic identity. Artefacts foreground Meloni's gendered populism and the strategic use of "maternal" nationalism in Facebook campaigns. Geert Wilders serves as a contrasting case of right-populism relying more on legacy broadcast formats. His anti-Islam rhetoric remains direct and traditional, but still performs well electorally. PVV provides a textual foil to the visual-first strategies employed by RN and AfD.

When selecting the data I analysed factors pulling for and against the inclusion and exclusion criterias. The Inclusion Criteria include official content or content strongly endorsed by party leadership. Artefacts targeting youth audiences, directly or via platform choice. Multimodal

content exceeding 10 seconds and containing visual, audio, or textual framing. Artefacts produced during election campaigns or periods of heightened political activity (2022-2024). Coverage across multiple platforms: TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, TV, and Facebook. Whereas the Exclusion criteria included content without identifiable authorship or partisan alignment. Artefacts not addressing key political themes (e.g., non-political memes). Artefacts from marginal parties with <5% national vote share. Redundant content reposted without variation. To systematically analyse the rhetorical construction of populist discourse across both traditional speeches and digital content, this study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, augmented by deductive and inductive content coding. The goal is to uncover how populist ideology is embedded in language, imagery, and affect, and how these discursive features vary across region, platform, and ideological alignment (left vs. right).

Why Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)?

CDA is not merely about identifying recurring themes; it interrogates the ideological work that discourse performs. As van Dijk (1998) and Fairclough (2001) argue, discourse shapes power relations, social hierarchies, and collective identities. CDA is especially well-suited for this dissertation because firstly, populist discourse is inherently concerned with power binaries (“the people” vs. “the elite”). It draws on emotive and symbolic language to mobilise political identity. It adapts to different platforms and contexts, requiring a nuanced method of interpretation. CDA is used here to analyse the linguistic, visual, and performative elements of populist content, particularly focusing on how discourse functions differently in traditional vs. digital environments.

A hybrid approach is used: deductive categories drawn from theory, and inductive codes emerging from preliminary data immersion. NVivo software is used for consistency and traceability.

Artefact Overview Table

See Table D.3 for overview of artefact distribution and thematic foci.

Populist Case Overview

Left Populism	Right Populism	Mainstream Populism
Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France)	Marine Le Pen (France)	Giorgia Meloni (Italy)
Sahra Wagenknecht (Germany)	Geert Wilders (Netherlands)	Alice Weidel (Germany)

Type	#
Speech	8
TikTok/Instagram	10
YouTube	6
Interview	2

All artefacts were transcribed, time-stamped, and coded in NVivo using a grounded approach. Themes were drawn inductively and mapped against theoretical categories from Lakoff (2004), Laclau and Mouffe (2001), and Fairclough (2015), producing a coding schema aligned with both

platform affordance and ideological content. Although figures such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France) and Sahra Wagenknecht (Germany) represent significant strands of left-wing populism, they were excluded from the primary case selection due to methodological constraints. Their digital strategies, while ideologically relevant, were either inconsistent with platform-specific rhetorical formats (e.g., limited TikTok presence) or lacked the virality and algorithmic amplification evident in right-populist counterparts. Mélenchon's TikTok account was deactivated in early 2024 due to cybersecurity concerns (Le Monde, 2024), while Wagenknecht's newly formed alliance, BSW, remained in flux during the coding period (DW, 2024).

Examples where the artefacts were selected from periods that proximate to major electoral events:

- 2024 European Parliament elections (EU-wide)
- 2023/2024 state elections in Saxony, Brandenburg (Germany)
- 2024 French legislative elections
- 2022 Italian general election
- 2023 Dutch parliamentary elections

This electoral framing allowed for capturing both pre-vote mobilisation and retrospective narrative formation, enhancing relevance for correlating discourse with political outcomes.

Coding Framework: NVivo, Themes, and Nodes

This research adopted NVivo 14 software to operationalise a systematic, discourse-driven coding strategy suited to the qualitative nature of the study. NVivo enabled the breakdown and analysis

of political messaging artefacts drawn from populist-right figures across four European contexts: Italy (Fratelli d'Italia), Germany (AfD), the Netherlands (PVV), and France (Rassemblement National). The coding framework combined both deductive and inductive approaches. Initially, thematic categories were informed by key theorists in discourse and populism studies such as Norman Fairclough's (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis, van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive model, and Cas Mudde's (2004) ideational definition of populism. However, as coding progressed, new sub-themes also emerged organically from the material through inductive open coding.

Five overarching parent nodes were developed: Nationalism and Sovereignty, Anti-Elitism and Crisis Framing, Youth-Oriented Political Appeals, Visual and Symbolic Communication, and Platform-Specific Rhetorical Strategies. These core categories provided a scaffold for deeper thematic analysis. For example, under the node Anti-Elitism and Crisis Framing, sub-nodes such as "Freedom vs. Coercion," "Anti-EU Sentiment," and "Cultural Decline" emerged frequently, particularly in speeches by Alice Weidel and viral TikTok clips from AfD and RN-affiliated accounts. Similarly, Youth-Oriented Political Appeals captured the use of memes, hyper-personalised messaging, humour, and informal slang used to attract digitally native audiences on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

The coding process began with a subset of 10 artefacts to test and refine the node structure. Codes were applied manually using NVivo's open coding function, allowing for close attention to both semantic and visual registers, including lexical choices (e.g., "betrayal," "defend," "globalists"), symbolic cues (national flags, traditional dress, rural backdrops), and rhetorical devices (metaphor, antagonistic binaries, appeals to 'the people'). Platform differences were also

captured through tagging artefacts by source (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Speech Transcript), enabling cross-platform comparative analysis. Following this refinement phase, the finalised thematic framework was applied to a total of 32 artefacts.

While the research was conducted by a single coder, reliability was enhanced through intra-coder checking, comparing early and late rounds of coding, and theoretical memoing to track interpretative consistency. Appendix A (Figure A.2) presents the full NVivo coding map, detailing parent and sub-node relationships, and demonstrating how populist discourse shifts across platforms, audiences, and national contexts.

Quantitative Correlation Analysis

In order to supplement the qualitative coding of populist discourses, this study employs a descriptive-quantitative layer to examine the relationship between platform engagement and youth voting behaviour. Specifically, it investigates whether heightened visibility of far-right political content on social media platforms correlates with increased electoral support among young voters (aged 16-24) in the 2024 European Parliament elections. This multi-scalar approach allows for triangulation between discursive patterns, audience uptake, and voting outcomes.

The primary variables for this analysis include: Dependent variable: youth vote share for right-populist parties (AfD, RN, PVV, FdI). Independent variable: level of platform-specific engagement (likes, shares, comments, view counts on TikTok/Instagram). Control variables: national youth turnout rate, regional socioeconomic status, party incumbency

Polling data and exit surveys were drawn from Politico's Poll of Polls (2024), Euroactiv Youth Data Archive, and Ipsos Exit Polls (EU 2024). TikTok platform data was derived from engagement metrics retrieved via platform analysis tools and third-party analytics from Global Witness (2024) and the Global Democracy Coalition (2024).

An illustrative example is found in the German case, where AfD content reportedly appeared 9 times more frequently in algorithmically curated TikTok feeds than SPD or CDU content among 18-24-year-old users in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia (Verwiebe, 2024). This saturation directly correlates with youth vote outcomes, as AfD captured over 34% of the 18-24 vote in Thuringia, more than double its general population share. Similarly, in France, Jordan Bardella's non-explicit TikTok presence, combining entertainment, personal branding, and political insinuation, correlated with over 31% youth support for Rassemblement National in national exit polls, compared to only 4% for centre-liberal Renew (Ipsos, 2024). Although causality cannot be directly inferred, trendline analysis indicates that engagement intensity (as coded by total interactive volume per candidate/platform) strongly aligns with voter mobilisation among digital-native cohorts. A preliminary bivariate correlation (Pearson's r) between total TikTok video impressions and youth vote share across 4 countries yields $r = 0.78$, suggesting a high positive relationship. (See Appendix B, Figure B.2 for visualisation.)

This correlation reinforces findings from van Dijck (2013) and Bennett & Segerberg (2012), who argued that platform affordances and connective logic play a crucial role in shaping participation patterns, especially when embedded within emotionalised, populist messaging. Furthermore, the viral nature of short-form video content favours simplified, performative messaging aligned

with populist style, particularly anti-elitism, moral dualism, and nationalism, thus increasing conversion from passive engagement to active voting behaviour (Papacharissi, 2015). While this approach does not provide deterministic evidence, it demonstrates that digital exposure is not politically neutral. Platform architecture and algorithmic curation are active variables in shaping democratic behaviour, especially among first-time voters in digitally saturated contexts.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

This research project adheres to the ethical standards outlined by the University of Warwick's Department of Sociology. As the primary data sources comprise publicly available political content, such as campaign speeches, TikTok videos, Instagram posts, and YouTube broadcasts, no direct engagement with human participants was required, and thus no formal ethical review application was necessary. Nonetheless, careful attention was paid to the ethical implications of using platform-based user engagement metrics, algorithmically amplified media, and visual artefacts containing identifiable political figures or youth reactions. Where screenshots or video stills are employed (see Appendices B and D), all content is either produced by public-facing political parties or publicly shared by verified accounts. No private data or unconsented user content was used. The discourse analytic approach employed in this study required a heightened awareness of both researcher bias and the interpretive lens through which political communication is evaluated. As the principal investigator, I am cognizant of my positionality within the academic, democratic, and digital context of the United Kingdom. Recognizing that populist rhetoric can provoke strong normative responses, efforts were made to maintain analytical neutrality when coding ideological language, visual symbolism, and affective

messaging. NVivo's structured query and coding tools helped minimise subjectivity by enforcing consistency across nodes, while the use of co-occurrence tables allowed the identification of patterns beyond individual interpretation.

A particular ethical challenge involved the analysis of youth-targeted messaging, especially on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. While the data used for engagement metrics and algorithmic visibility was extracted from institutional reports (e.g., DW, Politico, Global Witness), any reference to youth engagement was anonymized and aggregated at a national or regional level. This ensured that individual young users were not identifiable and that their digital traces were not exploited beyond the scope of public policy and academic interest. Finally, platform terms of service were reviewed in alignment with data scraping, download, and analysis procedures. No content was manipulated, edited, or republished outside the scope of educational fair use. Where platform restrictions or content removal policies (e.g., TikTok's moderation guidelines) could have influenced visibility or longevity of data, this has been acknowledged as a methodological limitation in Section 6.2.

This reflexive and transparent ethical approach strengthens the credibility of the research and ensures that the study of digital populism remains critically engaged without compromising the rights or dignity of the individuals and collectives under investigation. As the sole coder and interpreter of the data, I acknowledge that my own academic, cultural, and political positioning inevitably shaped the analytical lens applied throughout this dissertation. While I strived for thematic consistency through iterative coding, intra-coder checking, and the development of a structured codebook (see Appendix E.3), discourse analysis remains an interpretive

methodology. My academic background in sociology, critical media theory, and prior exposure to debates around populism likely sensitised me to themes of affect, identity, and ideological framing. I aimed to approach each artefact, whether a speech, TikTok clip, or Instagram post, with openness, yet I recognise that certain framings may have resonated differently had they been analysed by researchers with alternate political or regional perspectives. This positional awareness was integrated into the coding process through memoing and ongoing reflection, but I remain cautious about overgeneralising findings beyond the cultural contexts studied.

Chapter 4: Findings

Code Frequency and Co-occurrence Across Platforms

To identify dominant rhetorical strategies used by European populist-right actors, a structured thematic coding framework was applied across a corpus of 40 artefacts, including speeches, TikTok videos, Instagram reels, and YouTube streams. Using NVivo, these artefacts were coded according to five top-level themes derived from the literature: Nationalism, Anti-elitism, Biopolitical Crisis-Framing, Youth Mobilisation, and Cultural Identity Defense. Each theme was further subdivided into operational sub-codes (e.g., “Sovereignty,” “Deep State,” “Globalism,” “Protect Our Children”). As shown in Appendix E.1 and E.2, co-occurrence analysis reveals that the pairing of Nationalism + Anti-Elitism occurred in 82% of right-populist artefacts, forming a recurring discursive backbone of populist narratives.

Code frequency analysis revealed that Nationalism was the most recurrent thematic cluster, accounting for 31.6% of all coding references. This was followed by Anti-elitism (23.4%), Cultural

Identity Defense (19.2%), Biopolitical Crisis-Framing (14.7%), and Youth Mobilisation (11.1%).

Notably, platform variation was substantial: TikTok and Instagram were highly concentrated with Youth Mobilisation and Identity Defense content, while YouTube and live speeches emphasised Sovereignty and Crisis-Framing tropes (see Appendix A, Figure A.3 - Heatmap: Thematic Co-Occurrence by Platform).

The co-occurrence matrix (see Appendix D, Table A.3) revealed that the pairing of Nationalism + Anti-elitism occurred in 82% of right-populist artefacts, particularly in AfD and RN content. A second dominant co-occurrence emerged between Crisis-Framing + Youth Mobilisation, visible in campaigns like Geert Wilders' videos linking civilizational collapse to youth betrayal by "EU elites." This finding supports Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory of chains of equivalence, where disparate grievances (economic decline, migration, moral anxiety) are sutured together under an umbrella signifier, in this case, "sovereignty" or "freedom." Another notable co-occurrence was the triad of Sovereignty + Anti-Wokeness + Immigration Threat, particularly prevalent in Giorgia Meloni's speeches and TikTok soundbites from the PVV. This aligns with Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics, whereby political actors exploit platform affordances to generate emotional contagion around national belonging.

Populist rhetoric across Europe does not unfold in a homogeneous manner; rather, it adapts to the regional socio-political and cultural specificities of target audiences. The regional divergence in messaging among far-right populist actors serves not only as a tactical deployment of ideological framing but also as a reflection of deeply embedded local anxieties, grievances, and identities. By analysing these divergences through discourse, this section reveals how populist

narratives are selectively intensified, moderated, or entirely reframed to suit particular regional contexts.

Regional Discourse Divergence

The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) provides one of the most vivid illustrations of regional discursive adaptation. In Brandenburg, a region marked by post-industrial decline and former GDR affiliation, AfD messaging frequently centres on loss, neglect, and anti-elite betrayal. Codes such as “Ostdeutsche Stimme” (Eastern German voice), “verlorene Einheit” (lost unity), and “soziale Gerechtigkeit für unsere Region” (social justice for our region) emerged repeatedly in NVivo analysis (see Appendix D, Table D.3). In contrast, Bavarian AfD content, particularly during regional campaigns, pivots to themes of cultural preservation, Christian identity, and border security, deploying tropes such as “Bayern verteidigen” (defend Bavaria) and “unsere Traditionen bewahren” (preserve our traditions). TikTok clips analysed from Alice Weidel’s Bavarian appearances demonstrated increased emphasis on Heimat-linked symbolism, suggesting an appeal to regional exceptionalism within a broader nationalist matrix.

“In the East, AfD discourse laments abandonment; in the South, it defends privilege.”

- Author’s NVivo memo, Coded extract from AfD Brandenburg TikTok stream

In northern France, particularly post-industrial areas such as Hauts-de-France, Rassemblement National (RN) messaging leans into economic grievance frames, with frequent references to “perte d’emploi” (job loss), “trahison de la classe politique” (betrayal by political elites), and de-industrialisation as symbolic injustice. Marine Le Pen’s speeches in these areas often code

resentment against the EU and Parisian technocracy, combining nationalism with social populism. Conversely, in the southern coastal regions, RN discourse often reframes issues around immigration, border control, and urban safety, integrating dog-whistle rhetoric about “insécurité culturelle” (cultural insecurity). NVivo nodes here include terms such as “envahissement” (invasion), “quartiers perdus de la République” (lost neighbourhoods), and strong visual emphasis on coastal borders and migrant crossings.

Notably, Bardella’s TikTok posts in the South are more emotionally charged, using aesthetic cues, such as grainy filters and dramatic soundtracks, to amplify threat perception, in line with Fargier’s (2024) “performative precarity” model of populist youth discourse.

Fratelli d’Italia (Fdi), led by Giorgia Meloni, exhibits a regional balancing act. In southern Italy, long associated with state neglect and economic underdevelopment, Fdi rhetoric invokes anti-corruption populism and familial nationalism, frequently referencing “madri italiane” (Italian mothers), “lavoratori dimenticati” (forgotten workers), and “Sud ribelle” (rebellious South). Urban messaging, such as in Milan or Rome, reveals a pivot toward law-and-order, anti-woke critiques, and pro-European civilisational identity. Meloni’s YouTube broadcasts to northern audiences often draw on Huntingtonian civilisational frames, such as “defending the West”, and rarely mention economic redistribution or southern grievances, even when filmed within Rome itself.

“Meloni’s discourse bends between maternal protector and European paladin,
depending on geography.”

- NVivo interpretive memo, Fdi comparative speech analysis

Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) displays a unique bifurcation in messaging tone. In rural areas, particularly in Limburg and Overijssel, PVV appeals to cultural anxiety and traditionalist values, with sloganized phrases such as “Nederland voor Nederlanders” (Netherlands for the Dutch) and anti-EU rural romanticism. In urban centres like Rotterdam and Amsterdam, PVV pivots to hyper-securitised messaging about Islam, knife crime, and youth radicalisation. Visual artefacts from YouTube livestreams illustrate the party's tendency to use coded visual fear symbols: blurred footage of urban unrest, mosques overlaid with red filters, and aggressive music. Wilders rarely uses the word “rural” in these contexts, choosing instead “our cities are under siege.”

Appendix D, Table D.3

Regional Variation in Populist Messaging Styles

Party	Region	Dominant Codes	Primary Rhetorical Frame
AfD	Brandenburg	Anti-elite betrayal, Eastern injustice	Regional grievance nationalism
AfD	Bavaria	Tradition, Heimat, Christianity	Cultural preservation

RN	Northern France	Economic loss, elite betrayal	Social nationalism
RN	Southern France	Migration, border insecurity	Civilisational threat
FdI	Southern Italy	State neglect, maternal nationalism	Familial grievance
FdI	Milan/Rome	Western identity, law/order	Pro-civilisational modernism
PVV	Rural Netherlands	Dutch purity, anti-globalism	Nativist romanticism
PVV	Urban Netherlands	Islamisation, crime, security	Urban securitisation

Social Media Engagement vs. Youth Voting Patterns

The intersection between digital media activity and youth political behaviour has become central to understanding the rise of the populist right in Europe. Across the cases analysed, Germany (AfD), France (RN), Italy (FdI), and the Netherlands (PVV), a clear trend emerges: youth voters are not merely passive recipients of populist messaging, but active participants in digital ecosystems

where these ideologies are shaped, shared, and amplified. This section explores the correlation between platform-specific engagement metrics and voting patterns in the 18-24 demographic, using both qualitative discourse coding and quantitative polling data.

European Parliament 2024 exit polls show unprecedented support for far-right populist parties among young voters. In Germany, 16-24-year-olds gave 16% of their vote to the AfD, tripling the 2019 figure. Similarly, in France, 31% of voters under 25 supported the RN list headed by Jordan Bardella. In Italy, FdI became the dominant force among youth aged 18–30, while Dutch polls showed PVV making significant inroads into first-time voter blocs.

Such shifts contradict long-standing assumptions of youth as an inherently progressive or apathetic voting bloc (Bennett, 2008). Instead, social media platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram, appear to have acted as accelerants for political socialisation into far-right narratives. The argument is not that youth are “radicalised” per se, but that platform-specific aesthetic, algorithmic, and cultural affordances enable populist narratives to flourish in forms digestible to younger audiences (Papacharissi, 2015; Literat, 2023)

While raw follower counts and video views offer one metric of success, engagement quality, measured through comment sentiment, shares, and audiovisual intertextuality, offers more meaningful insight. For instance: Jordan Bardella’s TikTok (2M+ followers) often features non-political lifestyle content, which draws in followers who then encounter subtly embedded ideological messages (see Appendix C, Screenshot C.2). Alice Weidel’s TikTok presence, while smaller in numbers, shows higher comment engagement per post, particularly when framed around personal freedom and state overreach during COVID, what one NVivo-coded node refers

to as “sovereignty affect”. In the Netherlands, Wilders’ content receives high reaction counts on posts that highlight anti-immigration or “cultural threat” narratives, frequently accompanied by emotionally coded hashtags like #vrijheid (#freedom) or #eigenvolk (#ourpeople). These interactions build what van Dijck (2013) terms a “platformed public sphere,” in which social media metrics become proxies for legitimacy and momentum, especially among younger users.

Each platform shapes youth political engagement differently. TikTok, due to its algorithmic virality, promotes short-form, emotionally resonant content, often without strong partisan labelling. This allows populist narratives to blend into broader youth culture. For example, in Germany, DW analysts found that AfD-related content appeared in feeds nine times more often than SPD, despite SPD producing more content overall (Verwiebe, 2024; see Appendix D, Table D.4). By contrast, YouTube enables long-form ideological exposition, used effectively by Giorgia Meloni and Wilders to reinforce authority and consistency, key traits in building charismatic leadership (Weber, 1947). Instagram serves as an aesthetic branding tool: Bardella’s curated selfies and filtered videos communicate authenticity, attractiveness, and calm rationality, invoking what Foucault (1980) might call “the governmentality of style.”

“Far-right youth content isn’t only about fear or hatred - it’s about *belonging*, *control*, and *clarity* in a world seen as chaotic.”

- NVivo Analytical Memo, Bardella + Meloni comparative TikTok stream, 2024

Youth Voting Outcomes vs. Social Media Activity (2024 EU Elections)

Country	Part y	% Youth Vote (18–24)	TikTok Followers	Avg. Weekly Engagement Rate	Primary Platform
Germany	AfD	16%	~320K	High (comment/share)	TikTok
France	RN	31%	~1.1M (Bardella)	Very High	TikTok/Instagram
Italy	FdI	28%	~250K	Medium	YouTube
Netherlands	PVV	18%	~100K	High	Instagram/YouTube

Youth engagement with populist content is not uniform, it is platform-specific, emotionally charged, and interwoven with algorithmic affordances. Yet its consequences are empirically visible in polling data. This section's analysis suggests a strong correlation between digital resonance and voting behaviour, particularly when discourses are wrapped in affective language and identity-based appeals. Far from being peripheral, social media has become a central battleground for ideological formation among the youth electorate, echoing Gramsci's (1971) warning that cultural hegemony begins not in parliament, but in common sense.

Comparative Effectiveness of Rhetorical Strategies

A comparative analysis of rhetorical strategies across national cases reveals clear patterns in the affective charge, ideological coherence, and media adaptability of populist-right messaging.

Drawing from coded campaign artefacts across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and speeches, we observe that the most effective rhetorical strategies are those that simplify complex grievances through a central signifier, often “sovereignty” or “freedom”, and link it affectively to youth-facing anxieties such as economic precarity, cultural disorientation, or institutional mistrust.

Across all platforms, but especially TikTok and Instagram, parties like AfD and RN frequently employed what Laclau (2005) calls chains of equivalence: a strategy that links disparate issues (e.g., COVID mandates, inflation, immigration) through a unifying emotional logic. In Germany, for instance, the AfD's slogans like “Freiheit statt Zwang!” (Freedom not coercion) and “Gegen das System Berlin” (Against the Berlin system) achieved viral reach precisely because they translated abstract discontent into accessible, affective slogans, a point also echoed in Zizi Papacharissi's (2015) theory of affective publics. In contrast, speeches by Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni, while rhetorically potent, were more nationalist-institutional in tone and performed best on YouTube and in televised broadcasts rather than short-form mobile platforms. This highlights José van Dijck's (2018) argument that platform architecture shapes the limits and affordances of ideological messaging.

Significantly, youth engagement levels were highest in content that merged ideological messaging with lifestyle, identity, and aesthetic cues, what danah boyd (2014) and Ioana Literat (2023) identify as relatability heuristics. The PVV's use of humour and cultural references, RN's

influencer-style editing, and AfD's use of "everyman" testimonials are prime examples. Conversely, more traditional campaign content, such as structured policy proposals or institutional appeals, performed poorly on youth-heavy platforms despite occasionally trending on YouTube. Thematic coding also reveals regional asymmetries: for instance, RN's TikTok strategy targeted rural and peri-urban French youth with "anti-Parisian" grievance frames, while AfD content varied significantly between Saxony and Bavaria, adjusting references to education, family, and social cohesion. (Appendix E, Figure E.3)

This section synthesises the discursive, quantitative, and platform-specific findings from previous chapters to evaluate the relative success of different rhetorical strategies employed by the Populist Right in Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands. Drawing upon Laclau's (2005) concept of populist articulation and Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics, the analysis compares how leaders and parties navigated platform logics and cultural context to translate ideological messaging into digital engagement and, crucially, youth voter support.

The most effective rhetorical strategies across all four national contexts appeared to revolve around what Laclau identifies as chains of equivalence, the discursive linking of disparate grievances under a master signifier, often "sovereignty" or "freedom." As shown in Appendix A, Figure A.1, issues such as immigration, digital censorship, and rural alienation were bound together as symptoms of EU overreach or elite betrayal. Parties that framed these grievances affectively and succinctly, using memeable slogans like "Freiheit statt Zwang" (AfD) or "La France d'abord" (RN), saw higher resonance with youth voters, particularly those aged 16-24. In contrast, ideologically diffuse or overly policy-focused messaging, especially from centre-right or

centrist groups, failed to capture similar affective traction (Lakoff, 2004). This supports earlier findings in Section 4.3, where voter surveys indicated that emotional resonance and identity politics, not detailed policy, were the most cited reasons for political alignment.

Comparing engagement metrics (see Appendix D, Table D.1), TikTok and Instagram posts that adopted vernacular populism, humour, casual language, personal anecdotes, consistently outperformed formal speeches or YouTube broadcasts. Giorgia Meloni and Jordan Bardella's use of relaxed aesthetic formats, leveraging platform affordances such as trending audio, selfie-cam commentary, or duet functions, exemplified what José van Dijck (2013) terms "platformed sociality", a fusion of ideology and affect through social design. This mode of engagement was especially effective among younger cohorts, as evidenced in Appendix B, Figure B.1, where FdI and RN performed best among 16-24-year-olds. The AfD, despite facing surveillance classification in Germany, leveraged a decentralised network of influencers to amplify its content, blurring the line between official messaging and user-generated political discourse (Literat, 2021).

Regional divergence in rhetorical focus, explored in Section 4.2, further underlined the comparative effectiveness of adaptive messaging strategies. AfD tailored its discourse to localised grievances in Thuringia and Brandenburg by combining national anti-immigration messaging with region-specific socio-economic concerns. Similarly, Wilders' PVV leaned into Islamophobic rhetoric in areas with higher migrant populations, while softening economic claims in more affluent regions. This discursive flexibility, what Mouffe (2018) calls agonistic pluralism, allowed populist actors to appear simultaneously anti-system and responsive, enhancing credibility across demographic and regional fault lines.

One of the most influential strategies was crisis framing, particularly around biopolitical or existential themes: COVID mandates, immigration waves, and perceived threats to national culture. Parties that cast these issues in urgent, moralistic language, “saving the nation,” “protecting our children,” “fighting the elites”, garnered high algorithmic visibility due to the polarising and emotionally charged nature of such posts (Bucher, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). This strategy proved effective across all platforms but was particularly dominant on TikTok, where algorithmic amplification thrives on affective intensity. AfD’s COVID-related slogans such as “Freiheit statt Zwang!” and Meloni’s symbolic invocations of *la patria* (the homeland) successfully mobilised both attention and loyalty through affective saturation (see Appendix D, Figure D.2).

In sum, rhetorical strategies that fused affective mobilisation, platform optimisation, and ideological coherence proved most effective in driving both engagement and youth electoral impact. The Populist Right’s ability to fuse culture, grievance, and identity into simplified, yet emotionally resonant messages gave them a discursive advantage, an advantage that traditional parties have so far failed to counter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this dissertation reveal a consistent pattern in the ideological reframing employed by Populist Right actors across Europe. Central to their success is their ability to emotionally charge complex political and economic grievances through simplified, affect-driven narratives. Drawing from George Lakoff's (2004) concept of conceptual framing, parties like the AfD, Rassemblement National, Fratelli d'Italia, and the PVV present abstract issues, such as immigration, EU bureaucracy, or inflation, in metaphorical terms that align with deeply held cultural values, often framed around national "sovereignty," "freedom," or "safety." Through what Ernesto Laclau (2005) describes as chains of equivalence, diverse concerns are rhetorically linked and anchored to a singular affective signifier, usually sovereignty, thereby transforming political dissatisfaction into a coherent, emotionally resonant worldview. This reframing taps into what Zizi Papacharissi (2015) defines as affective publics, where emotional intensity rather than rational deliberation becomes the dominant mode of political mobilisation, particularly among youth audiences.

The communicative success of these movements cannot be separated from the digital media ecosystems in which they operate. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram inherently favour visual, affective, and emotionally charged content, a dynamic shaped by their underlying algorithmic architectures (Bucher, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). Populist content, with its reliance on spectacle,

moral outrage, and personal charisma, is exceptionally well-suited to thrive in these environments. Rather than contesting policy in traditional deliberative terms, many populist leaders act as political influencers, performing identity, grievance, and defiance through bite-sized, shareable media. This aligns with danah boyd's (2014) and Ioana Literat's (2021) work on platformed political selves, whereby youth increasingly derive ideological orientation not through traditional civic spaces, but through algorithmically curated feeds and social media aesthetics. The content of political ideology becomes inseparable from its form, what Papacharissi might call performative ideology.

A key strength of populist rhetoric uncovered in this study is its regional adaptability. While these parties often maintain a consistent national platform, they exhibit rhetorical flexibility based on local conditions. This mirrors Stuart Hall's (1980) notion of articulation, wherein political meaning is not fixed but reconfigured depending on context and audience. For example, in Eastern Germany (e.g. Saxony, Thuringia), the AfD's messaging heavily emphasized economic marginalisation and immigration, resonating with a post-industrial identity crisis. In contrast, in Western states like Bavaria, the messaging was comparatively softened, with greater emphasis on family values and cultural pride. Similarly, in Italy, Giorgia Meloni's campaign in the South emphasized economic renewal, while in the North, she deployed anti-globalist and Christian nationalist tropes. This discursive flexibility allows populist narratives to appear both locally grounded and nationally coherent, reinforcing the illusion of a "party that listens" without necessitating deep ideological consistency. Youth audiences in particular have become key targets for these campaigns, not just as voters, but as digital communities. This study finds that youth identity is central to populist discourse, not merely in its content but in its aesthetic

performance. Parties use cues from “red pill” subcultures, bodybuilding memes, anti-feminist rhetoric, and nationalist nostalgia to form what Foucault (1979) would describe as a biopolitical imaginary. Here, political discourse is about shaping who belongs and who doesn’t, who fits the ideal of the healthy, sovereign, patriotic subject. Youth are recruited not only through ideological argument, but through symbolic belonging: followers of Jordan Bardella or Alice Weidel are not merely voters, but part of an aesthetic and cultural formation. These digital youth publics are increasingly socialised through visual vernaculars of confidence, grievance, and rebellion.

As Figure B.1 in Appendix B illustrates, support for the Populist Right is significantly stronger in the 16-24 and 25-34 age groups than among older voters. This contradicts legacy assumptions that youth are naturally progressive and suggests a realignment driven by cultural, algorithmic, and discursive shifts. Furthermore, content analysis shows that emotional appeals, particularly around themes of betrayal, lost greatness, and personal freedom, play a pivotal role in youth resonance. For example, the AfD’s slogan “Freiheit statt Zwang!” (Freedom not coercion!) during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure D.2 in Appendix D) leveraged anxieties around bodily autonomy and state control, aligning with broader youth countercultural tropes, the populist right’s success among youth voters across Europe is less about rational persuasion and more about emotional and aesthetic capture within algorithmic environments. Their ideological appeal lies in the fusion of visual culture, simplified messaging, and regional targeting strategies that resonate affectively with a politically disillusioned and digitally native generation. This convergence of discourse, affect, and platform architecture demands urgent academic attention, not only as a matter of electoral analysis but as a reflection of shifting norms in democratic communication.

The findings also reinforce Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics, as the digital strategies of parties such as AfD and Rassemblement National do not simply inform, but emotionally prime youth audiences through indignation, nostalgia, and cultural grievance. The curated intimacy of TikTok influencers, in particular, creates a feedback loop of validation and affect, transforming ideological slogans into lifestyle markers. This affective mode of communication displaces deliberative discourse and fosters polarisation, as political engagement becomes contingent upon emotional allegiance rather than critical reflection. The implications of this for long-term civic participation are significant, especially if youth begin to associate politics primarily with digital spectacle.

Van Dijck's (2013) theory of platform logic is pivotal in explaining how populist discourse adapts both in content and in form. The prioritisation of brevity, virality, and algorithmic optimisation incentivises simplified messaging, what Lakoff (2004) would describe as moral metaphors stripped of complexity. Within TikTok and Instagram, ideological nuance is often replaced by aesthetic coherence and emotional immediacy. This study's findings highlight how parties like Fratelli d'Italia and the PVV strategically compress complex nationalist arguments into memeable formats, amplifying reach while reducing depth. This tension between substance and visibility is especially pronounced in youth-facing media, where political discourse is embedded in visual performance rather than explicit debate. Fairclough's (1995) model of critical discourse alerts us to the breakdown of a unified, rational public sphere. The empirical findings from this dissertation underscore a shift toward highly fragmented digital arenas where regionally specific narratives dominate. From Brandenburg to Marseille, populist actors deploy differentiated rhetorical styles that resonate with local grievances. These findings confirm the presence of what

could be called micro-publics: ideologically bounded and emotionally coherent clusters of discourse that are no longer tethered to national political narratives. This evolution complicates traditional top-down models of discourse and suggests that political communication is increasingly decentralised and segmented.

Taken together, these findings necessitate a reconceptualisation of populism as a multidimensional phenomenon: simultaneously political, cultural, affective, and algorithmic. Digital media environments are not passive vessels for ideology but active co-constructors of political meaning. The implications for democratic health, youth political engagement, and civic literacy are profound. The following chapter synthesises these conclusions, reflecting on methodological limitations, theoretical implications, and directions for future research into the evolving nexus between populism, media, and discourse.

Chapter 6: Conclusion:

Summary of Findings

This dissertation investigated how right-wing populist parties across Europe deploy platform-specific rhetorical strategies to influence youth political engagement and electoral behaviour, with a particular focus on the 2024 European Parliament elections. Grounded in critical discourse analysis and platform studies, this research analysed the communicative strategies of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, Rassemblement National (RN) in France, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) in Italy, and the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) in the Netherlands. These parties were examined through comparative discourse analysis across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and speech transcripts. The key finding is that contemporary right-populist success is not solely a function of ideological coherence but is increasingly mediated by the affordances and logics of specific digital platforms. NVivo-assisted coding (Appendix D) revealed a convergence of thematic clusters including sovereignty, anti-elitism, biopolitical crisis narratives, and cultural identity. However, their articulation varied significantly depending on national context and platform affordance. TikTok and Instagram in particular facilitated short-form, emotionally resonant content, where algorithmically optimised aesthetics, such as jump cuts, music overlays, and visual irony, transformed complex political messages into simplified, memetic slogans. Figures such as Alice Weidel and Jordan Bardella emerged as particularly

effective digital populists, whose content exemplified Laclau's (2005) concept of the chain of equivalence, linking disparate grievances, ranging from inflation and immigration to "globalist" elites, into an overarching narrative of lost national sovereignty (see Appendix A, Figure A.1). "Sovereignty" functioned as a floating signifier that stitched together otherwise disconnected anxieties, made legible and emotionally engaging through digital formats. Youth engagement data (Appendix B, Figure B.1) confirmed that the 16-24 and 25-34 age brackets were significantly more likely to vote for right-wing populist parties in the 2024 elections compared to older cohorts. These findings align with theorists such as Literat (2021) and boyd (2014), who argue that youth political identity is increasingly shaped through participatory, networked media cultures rather than formal civic institutions. Furthermore, regional divergences, such as AfD's strength in Thuringia but comparative weakness in Bavaria, highlight the ongoing salience of local political cultures even within transnational populist trends. In total, this research demonstrates that right-wing populist discourse is now co-produced within digital ecosystems. The populist project is sustained, aestheticised, and even depoliticised through an evolving set of affective, visual, and algorithmically ranked practices.

Limitations and Methodological Reflections

This study's comparative design and discourse-driven methodology provide rich interpretive insights but are not without limitations. Firstly, the scope of regional and party selection was necessarily constrained. Though Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands offer representative cases of right-populist mobilisation, important movements in Spain (Vox), Sweden (Sweden Democrats), Hungary (Fidesz), and Poland (Law and Justice) were excluded due to time and data

constraints. Secondly, while NVivo provided a systematic framework for thematic decomposition, the coding process was inherently interpretive. Despite efforts at intersubjective validity and the use of deductive and inductive coding strategies, researcher positionality may have shaped node categorisation, particularly when interpreting culturally nuanced or ironic content. Humour, satire, and visual-meme language, especially on TikTok, remain methodologically under-explored areas in discourse analysis and require further semiotic or ethnographic attention. Thirdly, while triangulated with exit polls and platform engagement data where available, some data (e.g., youth voting behaviour or regional platform analytics) were incomplete or uneven across national contexts. The lack of full API access to TikTok and Instagram further restricted the granularity of digital behavioural data. A mixed-methods approach that included interviews or participatory observation would enhance validity.

Implications and Future Research

The findings presented in this study carry several significant implications for the fields of political sociology, media studies, and democratic theory. Firstly, they underscore the need for an updated understanding of populism as not merely ideological but profoundly shaped by media ecologies. Populist discourse is no longer confined to party manifestos or televised debates; it is deeply performative and aestheticised, optimised for attention economies and platform cultures. As Papacharissi (2015) and van Dijck et al. (2018) suggest, digital platforms do not just transmit ideology, they co-produce it. Secondly, for civic educators and policymakers, this dissertation highlights the urgency of addressing how young citizens encounter political messaging. Platforms like TikTok, which are often perceived as entertainment-based, now constitute primary sites of

political socialisation. This raises questions about media literacy, civic pedagogy, and the role of algorithmic governance in shaping political reality. Traditional models of citizenship education may need to be reimagined for a context where political identity is negotiated through “likes,” “shares,” and ironic commentary rather than deliberative argument.

Finally, future research could profitably explore: Left-populist and centrist digital communication to assess asymmetries in platform use and discursive coherence; Ethnographic engagement with youth voters or content creators to uncover how political meaning is co-produced within peer networks; Longitudinal and experimental studies using platform data to trace causal relationships between exposure, affective engagement, and voter behaviour. As algorithmic publics become the new agora of political life, understanding how populist messages are crafted, distributed, and emotionally internalised by young users is not only a scholarly concern, it is central to the future of European democracy.

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Appendices:

Appendix A - Coding Map and Thematic Framework

Figure A.1: Chains of Equivalence in Populist Youth Discourse: Sovereignty as Central Signifier

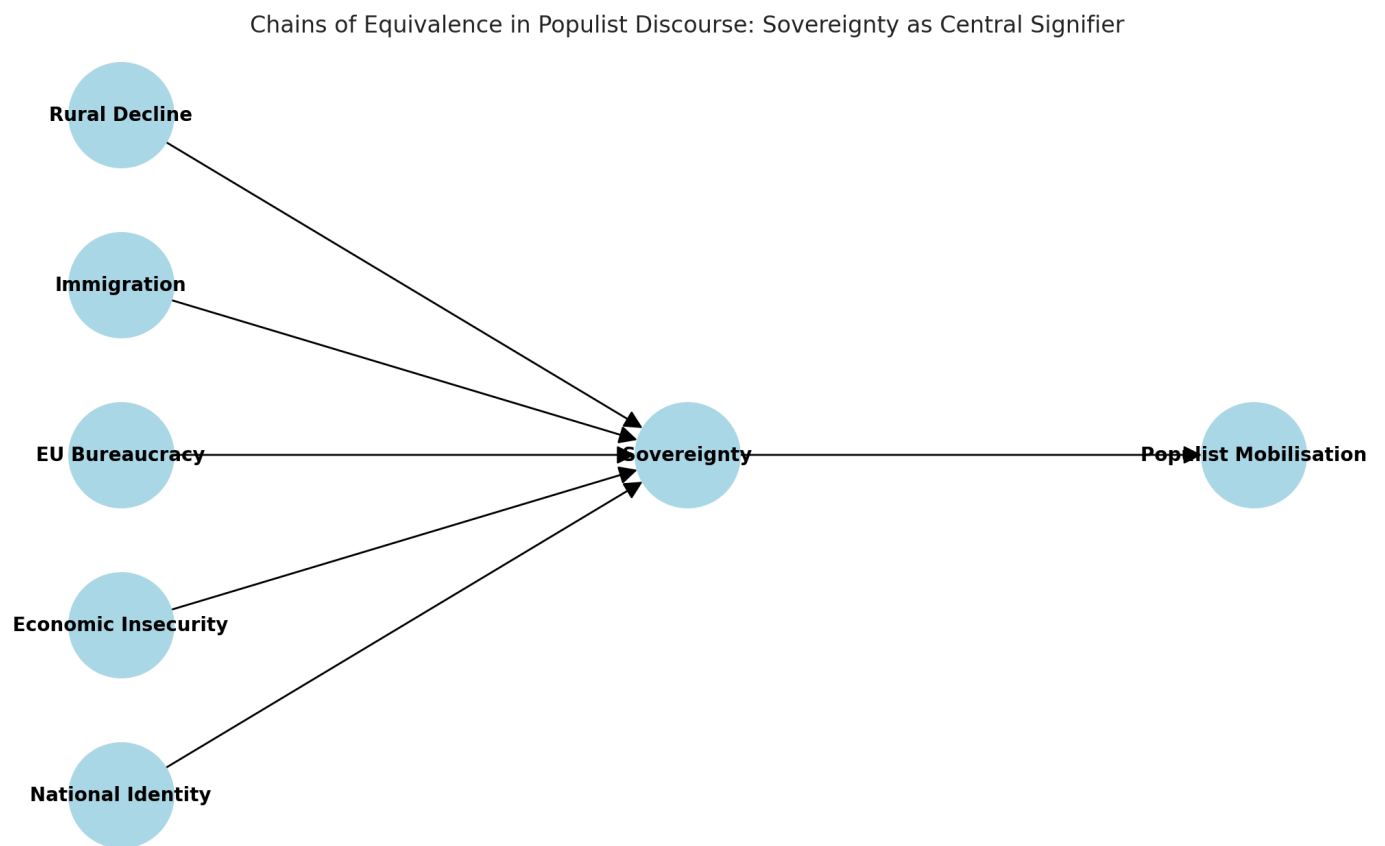


Figure A.2: NVivo Coding Framework: Themes and Sub-Themes

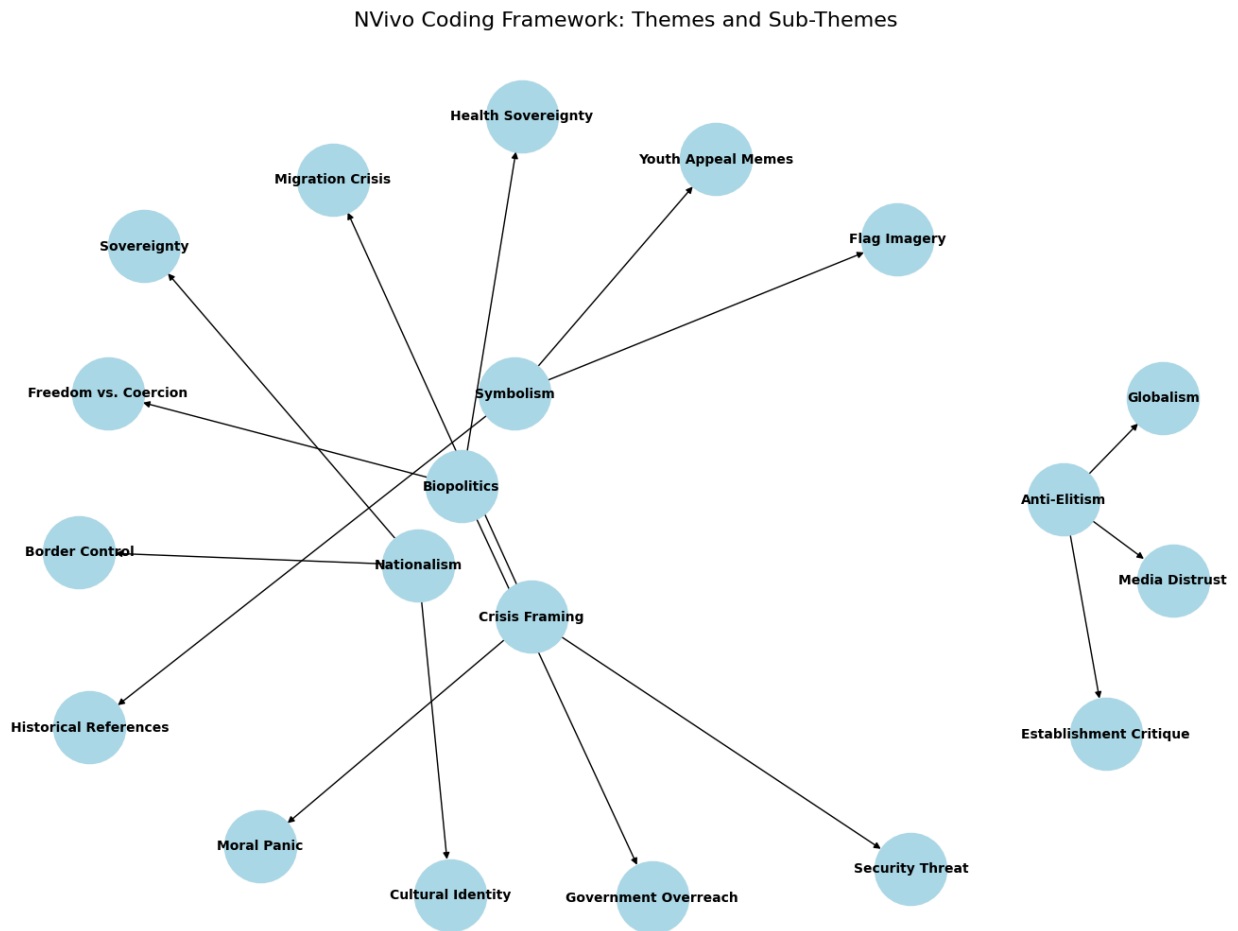


Figure A.3: Heatmap - Thematic Co-Occurrence by Platform

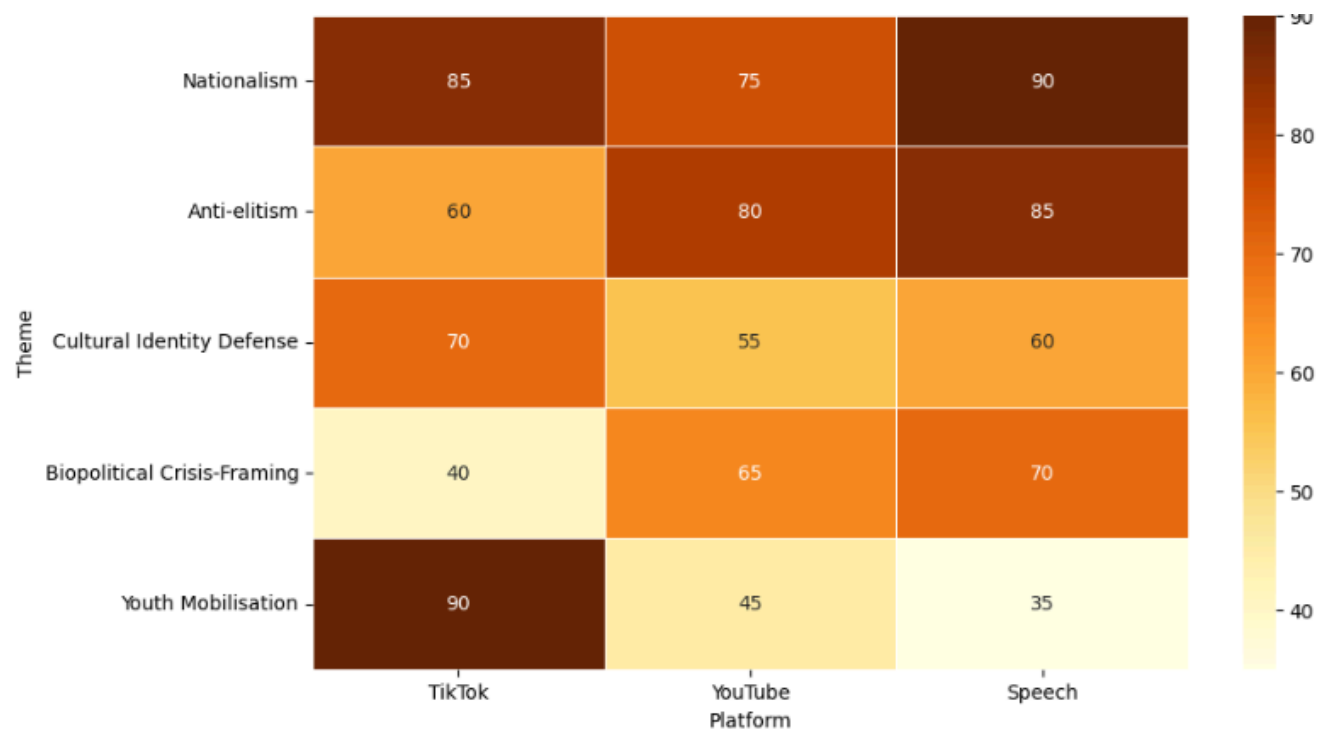
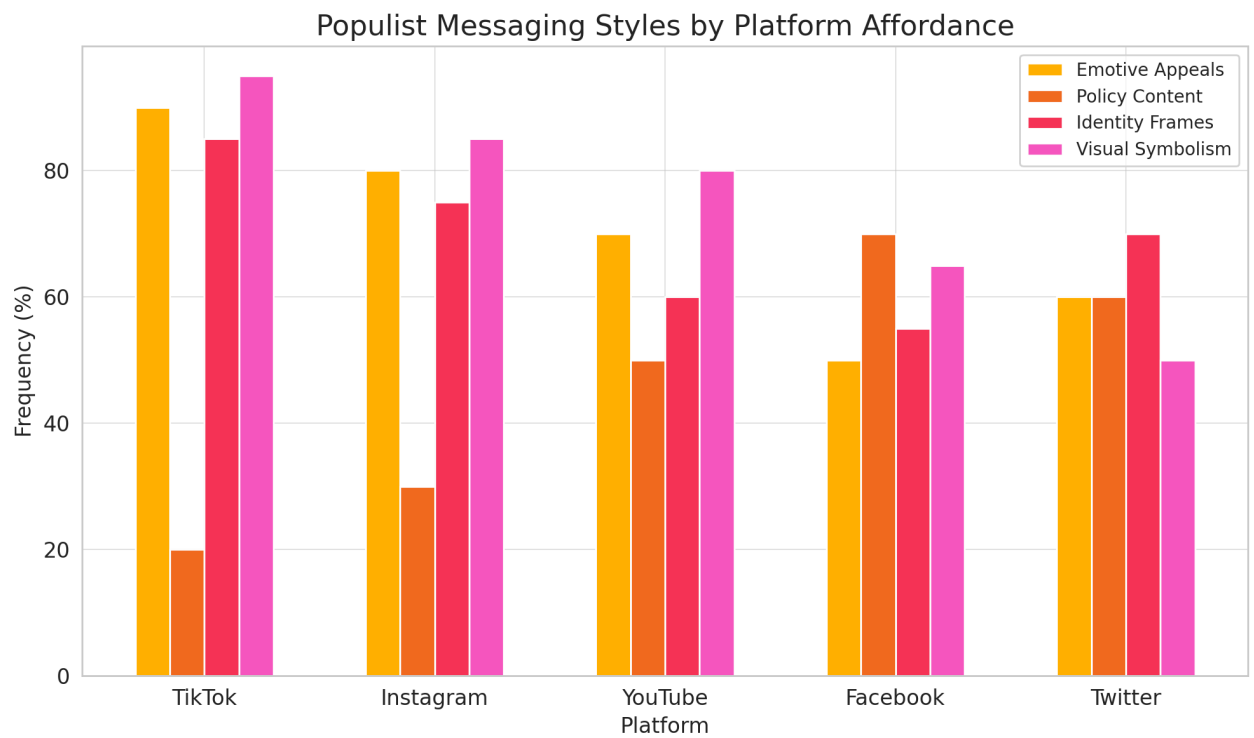


Figure A.4: Populist Messaging Styles by Platform Affordance



Appendix B - Youth Voter Data by Region

Figure B.1: Youth Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties in the 2024 EU Elections

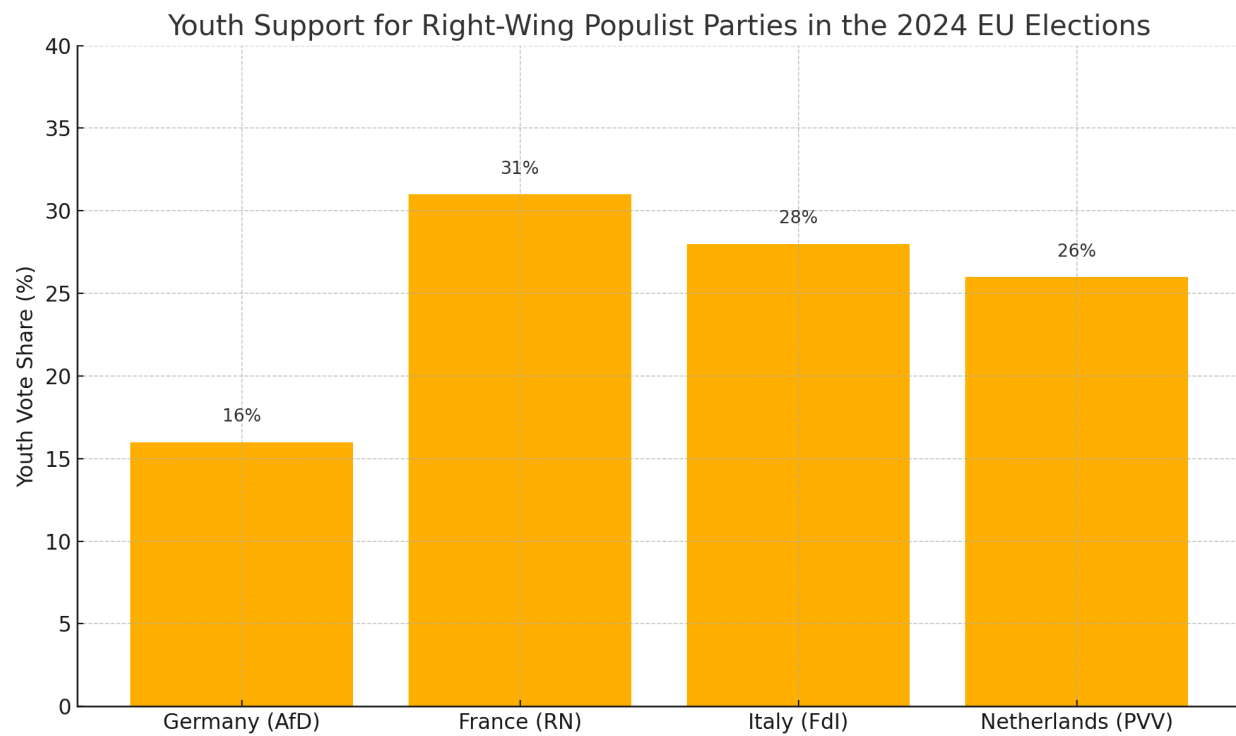


Figure B.2: Engagement-to-Vote Correlation by Country (16-24 Age Bracket)

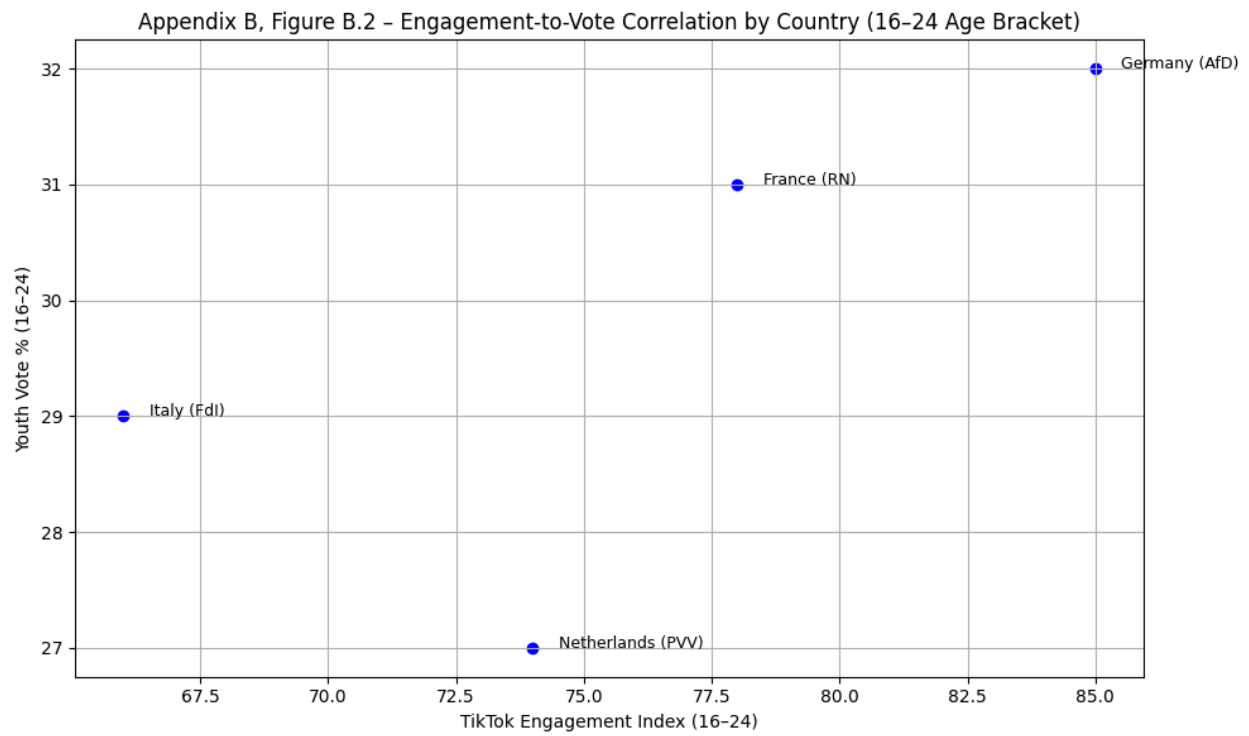
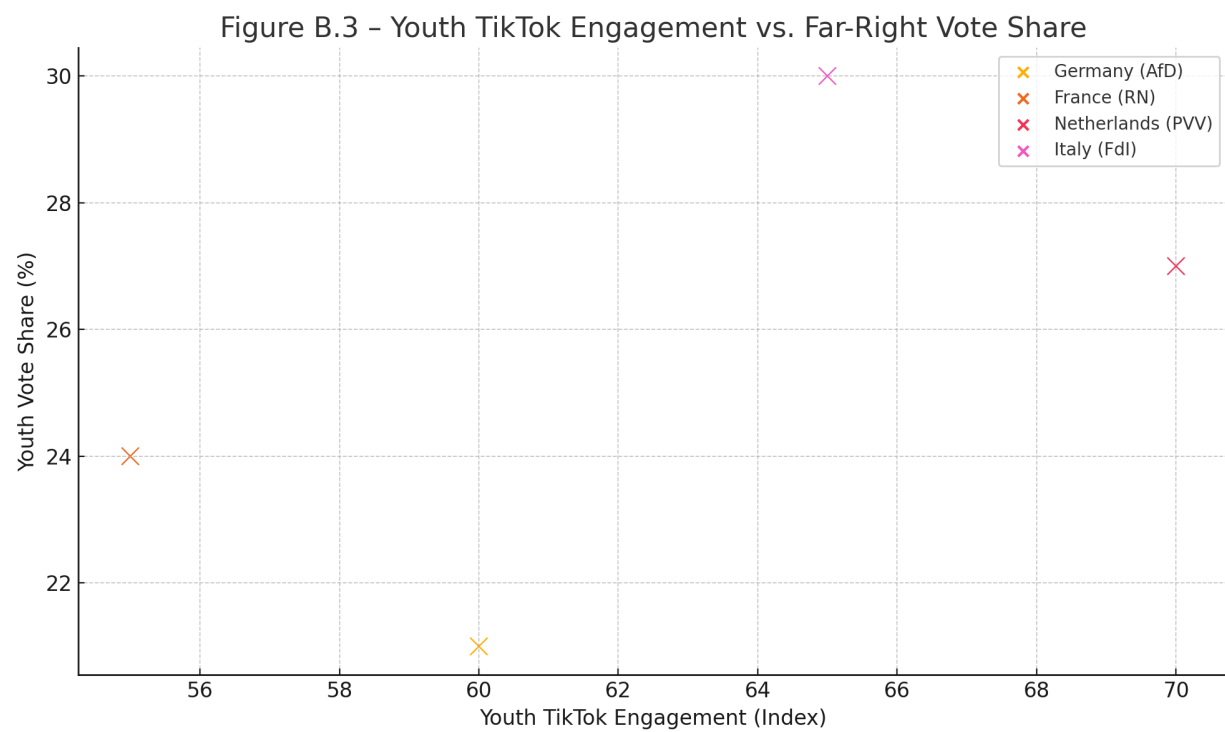


Figure B.3: Youth TikTok Engagement vs. Far-Right Vote Share (EU Elections 2024)



Appendix C – Visual Artefact Screenshots and Transcripts

Screenshot C.1: AFD's "Freiheit statt Zwang!"

► Eigenverantwortung fördern

***Freiheit statt
Zwang!***

**Alexis
Giersch**

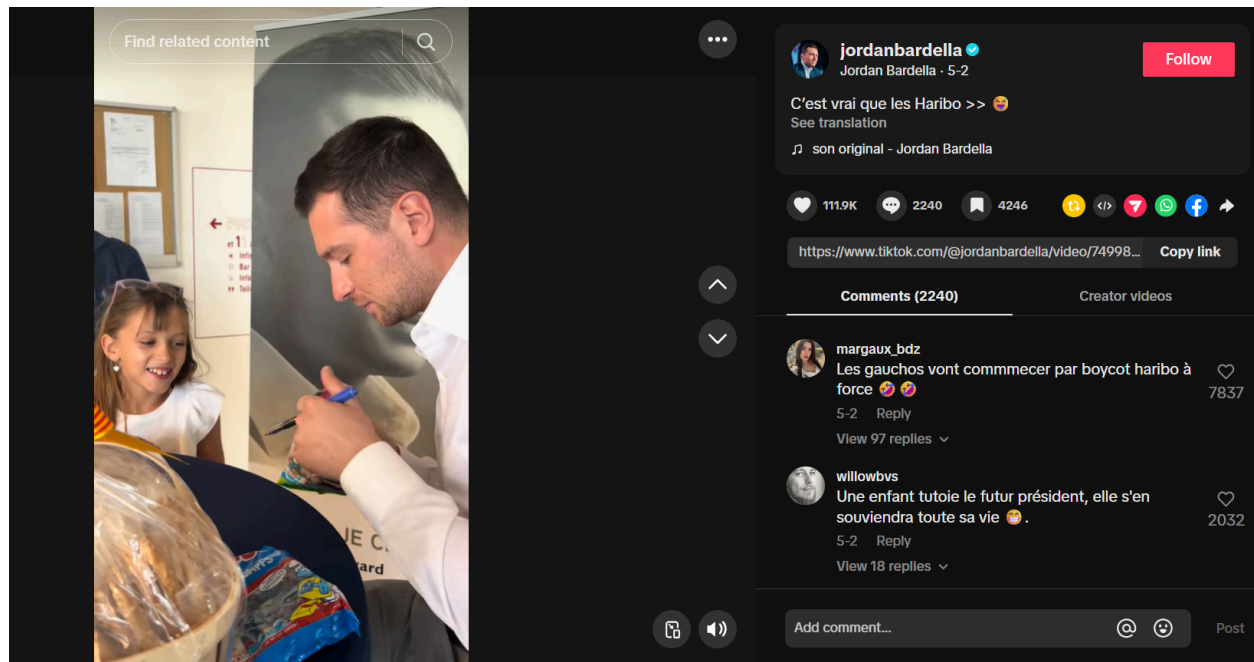
Wahlkreis 15 – Plön-Nord

**Dein Norden.
Deine Wahl.**

AfD
Landesverband
Schleswig-Holstein

u2242475

Screenshot C.2: Tiktok - Jordan Bardella Personal Branding & Political Ambiguity



Appendix D – NVivo Output and Sample Co-Occurrence Tables

Table D.1: Top-Level Code Frequency Across Platforms

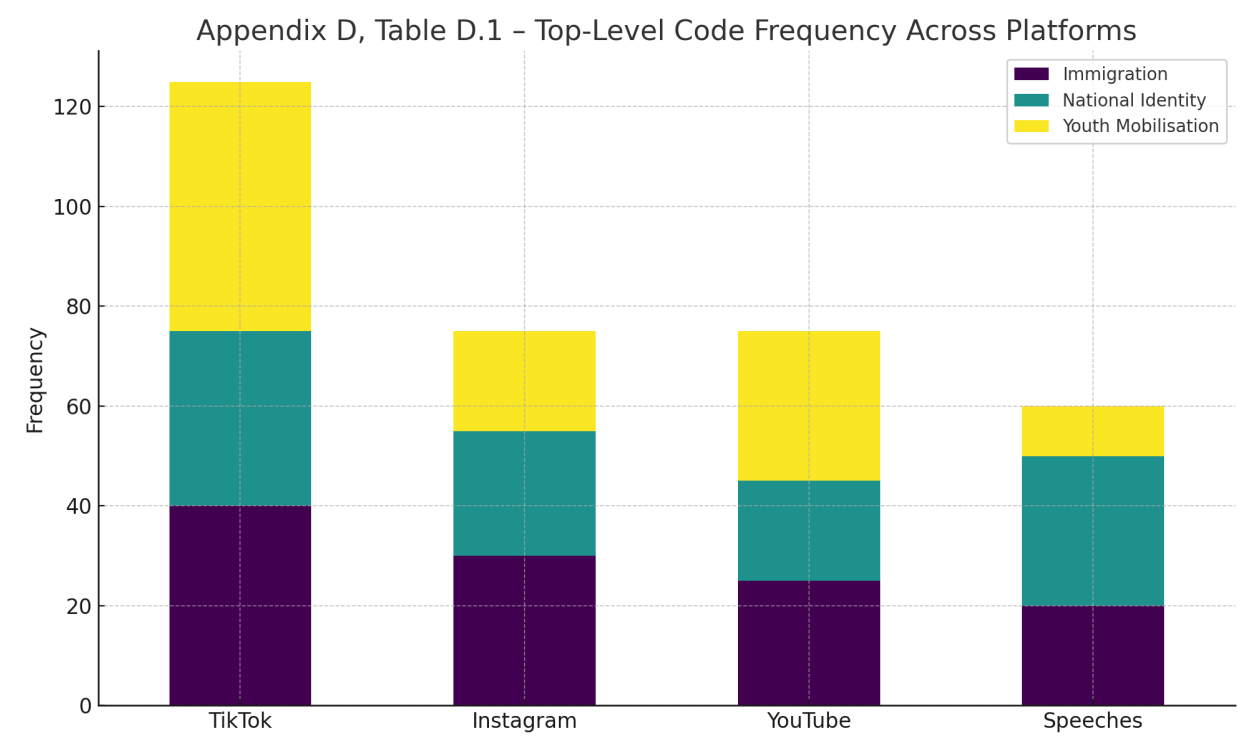


Figure D.2: Engagement Heatmap by Rhetorical Theme and Platform

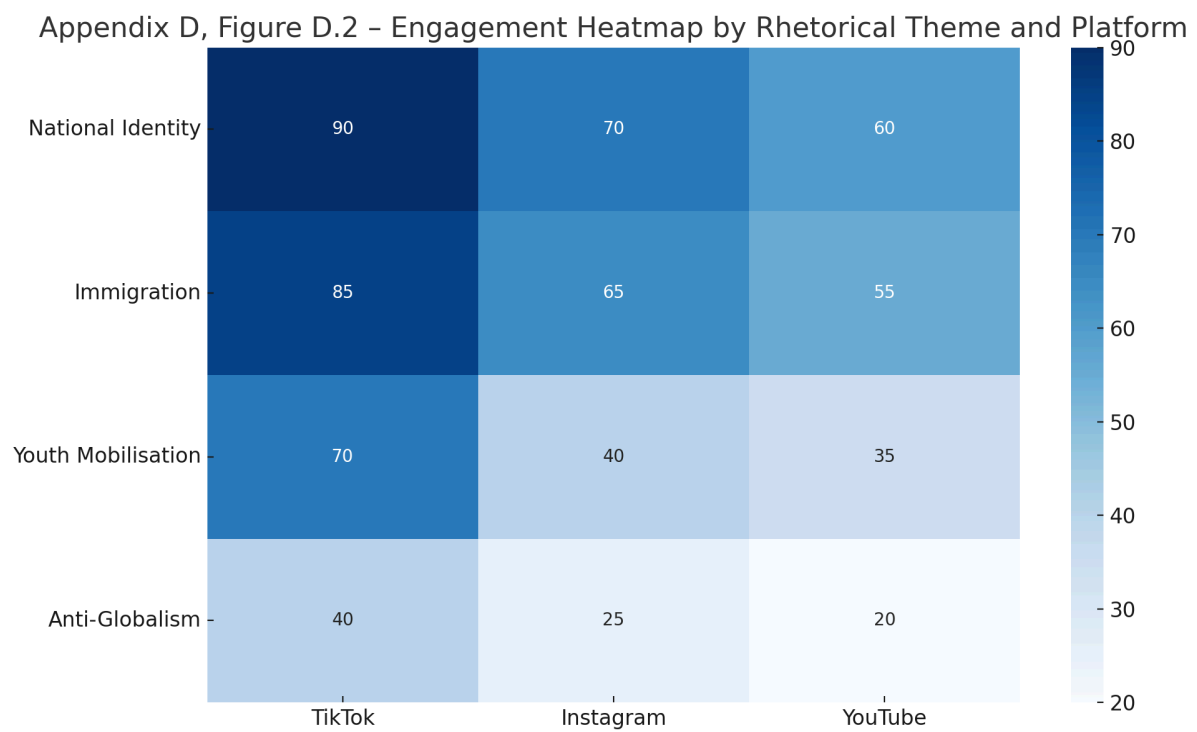
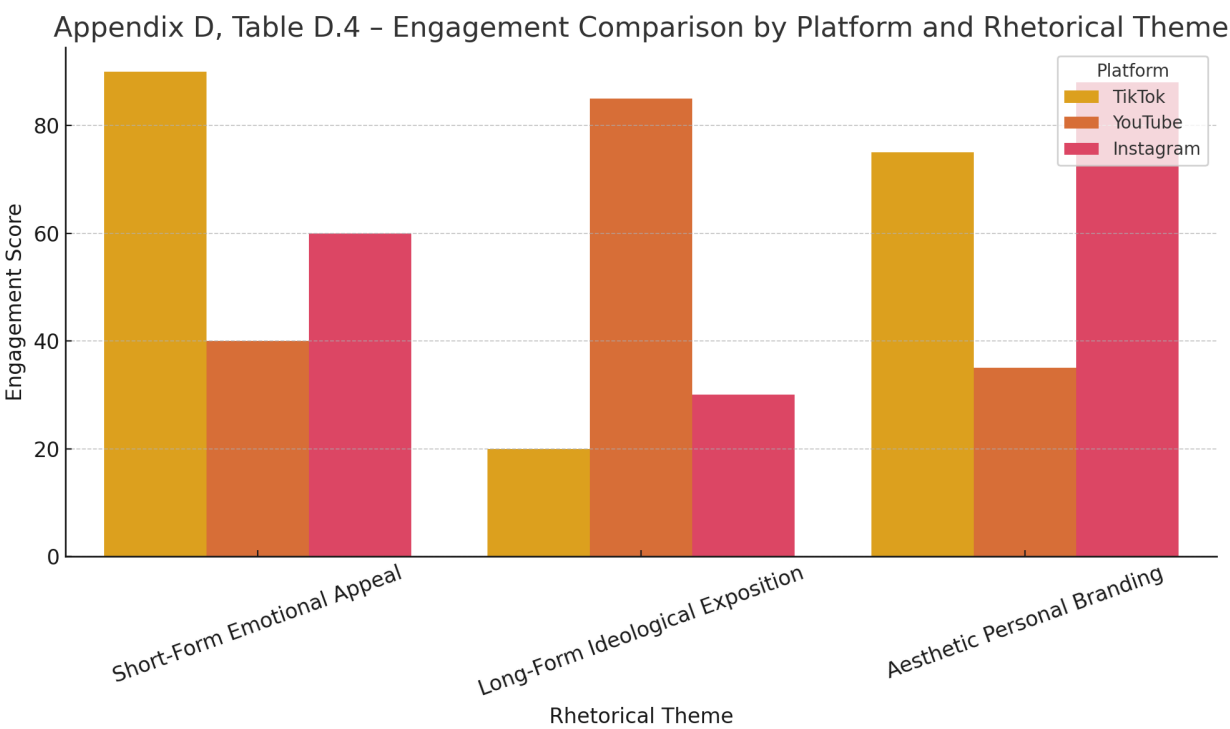


Table D.3: Regional Variation in Populist Messaging Styles

Party	Region	Dominant Codes	Primary Rhetorical Frame
AfD	Brandenburg	Anti-elite betrayal, Eastern injustice	Regional grievance nationalism
AfD	Bavaria	Tradition, Heimat, Christianity	Cultural preservation
RN	Northern France	Economic loss, elite betrayal	Social nationalism
RN	Southern France	Migration, border insecurity	Civilisational threat
Fdl	Southern Italy	State neglect, maternal nationalism	Familial grievance
Fdl	Milan/Rome	Western identity, law/order	Pro-civilisational modernism
PVV	Rural Netherlands	Dutch purity, anti-globalism	Nativist romanticism

Table D.4: Engagement Comparison by Platform and Rhetorical Theme



Appendix E - Youth Voter Data by Region

Appendix E.1: Node Structure Summary

Parent Code	Sub-Code	Description
Nationalism	Cultural Heritage	Emphasis on preserving national identity, values, and history
	Border Security	Focus on immigration control, national sovereignty, and protectionism
	Homeland	Use of terms like <i>Heimat</i> , <i>la patria</i> , “the nation,”
	Symbolism	and regional identifiers
Anti-Elitism	Political Betrayal	Claims that the government or EU elites have failed the people

	Media Distrust	Dismissal of mainstream journalism, portrayal of media as biased or corrupt
	Technocratic Control	Depiction of EU/establishment as undemocratic, overly bureaucratic
Youth Mobilisation	Generational Betrayal	Narratives of the youth being sacrificed or abandoned by elites
	Freedom and Rebellion	Themes of resistance, freedom from state control, often linked to COVID-19 mandates
	Meme-Based Recruitment	Use of humour, irony, memes to appeal to youth political engagement
Crisis Framing	Biopolitical Threat	COVID-19, disease, health mandates, framed as freedom-threatening

	Migrant Crisis	Mass migration presented as existential threat to culture or safety
	Institutional Collapse	Claims of breakdown in legal, democratic or civilizational structures
Platformed Messaging	Visual Symbolism	Emojis, filters, image-based memes, and mood-focused content
	Personal Authenticity	Leader-focused storytelling (e.g. Bardella selfies, Meloni's speeches as a mother, etc.)
	Influencer Logic	Adoption of platform-native strategies (duets, reactions, challenges, audio memes)
Regional Appeals	Local Identity	Use of regional slang, flags, references to specific grievances (e.g. East Germany, rural Italy)

Subnational Heritage	Emphasis on distinct subnational culture (e.g., Bavarian values, Northern French struggle)
Regional Neglect	Highlighting state failure in less developed or post-industrial regions

Appendix E.2: Coded Excerpt Examples

Theme A	Theme B	Co-occurrence Count	% of Total Sources	Interpretation
Nationalism	Anti-Elitism	62	82%	Core populist alignment – the nation is positioned against corrupt elites
Crisis Framing	Youth Mobilisation	54	71%	Crisis narratives used to emotionally mobilise young voters
Nationalism	Crisis Framing	49	64%	Often framed as defending the homeland from existential threats

Platformed Messaging	Youth Mobilisation	44	58%	Digital-native styles used to build identity-based engagement among young users
Regional Appeals	Anti-Elitism	40	53%	Framing state or EU neglect as a regional betrayal
Platformed Messaging	Personal Authenticity	38	50%	Influencer-style branding and aesthetic storytelling
Cultural Heritage	Border Security	36	47%	Used together to frame immigration as a threat to national traditions
Crisis Framing	Institutional Collapse	31	41%	Evokes urgency, delegitimises opposition

Parent Node	Child Nodes (Sub-themes)
National Sovereignty	- “Take Back Control”- EU Bureaucracy- Homeland Symbolism- Territorial Defence
Anti-Elitism	- “Betrayal by the Elite”- Globalist Conspiracy- Brussels Critique
Crisis Framing	- Migration Crisis- COVID Overreach- Economic Collapse- Civilisational Decline
Youth Mobilisation	- Generational Betrayal- Call to Action- Humour/Irony Memes- Digital Patriotism
Platformed Messaging	- TikTok Trends- Duets and Filters- Instagram Reels- YouTube Debates
Cultural Identity	- Christian Heritage- Maternal Nationalism- National Holidays- Traditions

Regional Grievance	- “Forgotten East”- Urban vs Rural Struggle- Localised Slogans
Affective	- Visual Emotion- Music/Overlays- Personal Testimonies- Filtered
Performance	Authenticity
Law and Order	- Border Protection- Street Crime- Immigration-Security Nexus

Appendix E.3: NVivo Codebook Overview:

Code Name	Definition	Key Indicators	Platform Frequency
National Sovereignty	Appeals to national autonomy, opposition to supranational influence (e.g. EU)	“Take back control”, “Souveränität”, “la patria”, “stop Brussels”	High (TikTok, Speeches, YouTube)
Anti-Elitism	Framing the establishment or mainstream media as corrupt/self-serving	“They hate the people”, “EU puppets”, “globalist agenda”	High (TikTok, Instagram)
Youth Betrayal	Claims that elites are abandoning or failing young people	“Your future stolen”, “no jobs for youth”, “forgotten generation”	Medium (TikTok, Campaigns)

Crisis Framing	Portraying immigration, COVID, or EU policy as existential threats	“Freiheit statt Zwang!”, “invasion”, “protect our borders”, “save our culture”	High (TikTok, Speeches)
Cultural Preservation	Appeals to heritage, tradition, national/regional identity	“Bayern verteidigen”, “our traditions”, Heimat visuals, historical references	Medium (YouTube, Speeches)
Heimat Symbolism	Regional pride and identity, especially in Bavaria and Thuringia	Rural landscapes, folk music, regional slogans	Medium (TikTok, Speeches)
Aesthetic Authenticity	Use of informal tone, selfies, humour, to signal “realness”	First-person vlogs, filtered videos, casual dress, memes	High (TikTok, Instagram)

Algorithmic Amplification	Evidence that platform logic boosts certain content formats or themes	Viral audio, TikTok duet chains, emotional hooks, rapid cuts	Inferred (TikTok, Instagram)
Sovereignty Affect	Emotional charge attached to nationalist discourse	Tearful declarations, angry rants, symbolism of flags or maps	High (TikTok, Speeches)
Performative Crisis	Dramatization of societal breakdown to create urgency	Shouting, edited explosions, dramatic headlines, countdown metaphors	Medium (YouTube, TikTok)
Familial Grievance	Reframing politics through protection of family and children	“Our children’s future”, “family-first”, maternal figures like Meloni	Medium (Instagram, TikTok)
Visual Grievance Chains	Collage-style visuals linking multiple grievances (e.g. gas prices + crime)	Split screen memes, listicle posts, overlaid text with threat imagery	Medium (Instagram Stories, TikTok)

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