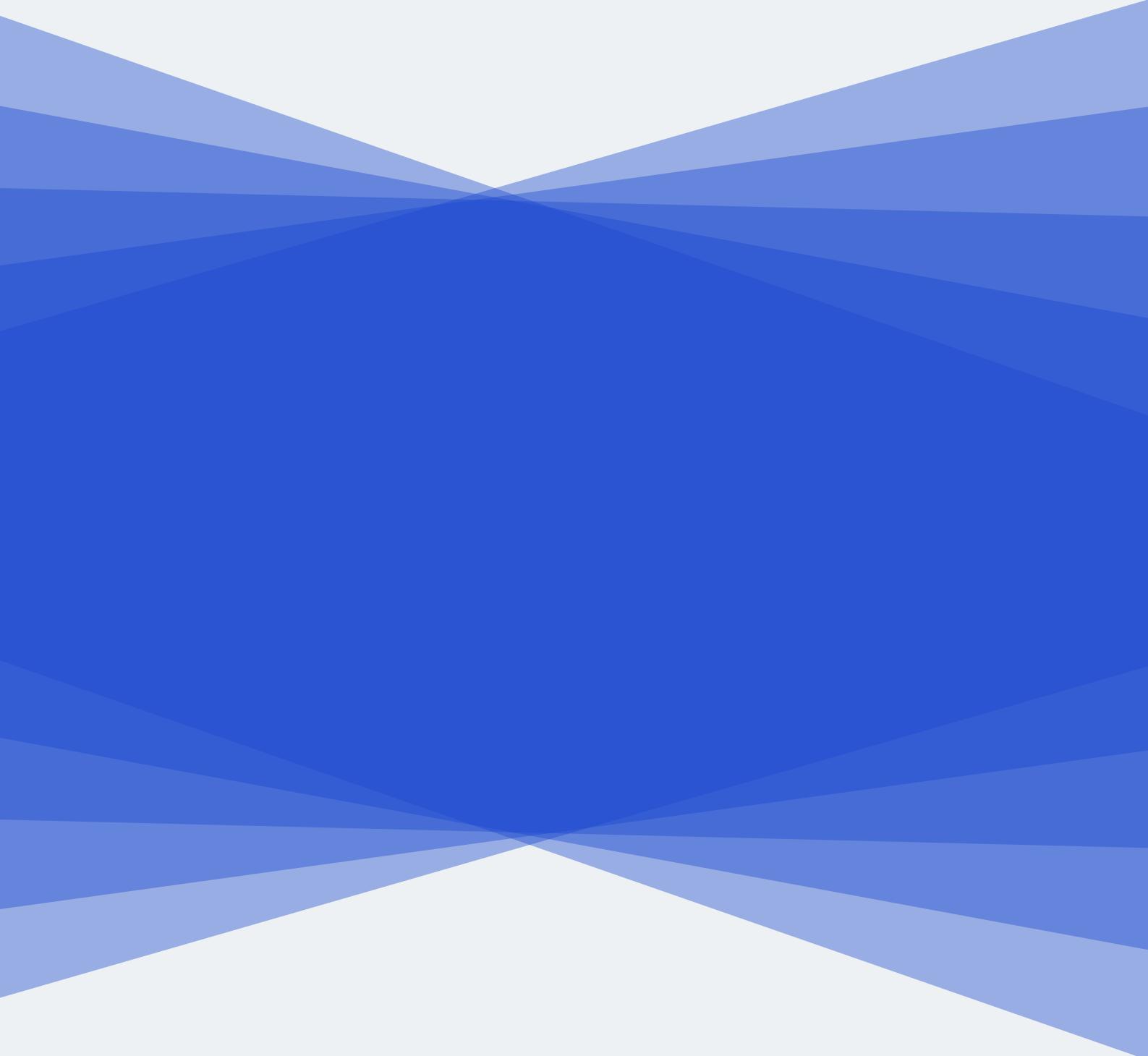


# peripherals





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# Harris vs. Trump: A cross-platform analysis on the 2024 US presidential election through the lens of affordance and self-presentation theory

Anil Atay<sup>1</sup>, Chloé Heyart, Jinzhuo Li, Xi Zeng (Momo), Xiao Han

## Abstract

This paper presents a cross-platform analysis of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, investigating how the platform affordances of Twitter/X and TikTok influence the self-presentation strategies of candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Guided by affordance theory, self-presentation theory, and a critical analytics framework, the study comparatively examines the candidates' communication and branding. Using a combination of manual and automated content analysis of official account data collected after the September 10, 2024 debate, the research identifies platform-specific patterns in content, tone, and visual strategy. The findings indicate that candidates adapt their self-presentation to each platform's affordances. On the text-centric Twitter/X, both candidates employ a more formal, professional, and policy-driven approach, using features like threads and retweets to build narratives and critique opponents. Conversely, on the video-based, memetic TikTok, they adopt informal, personality-driven personas, leveraging trends, humor, and influencer collaborations to engage younger audiences. Despite these platform-specific adaptations, the candidates maintain consistent core brands: Trump as a combative, dominant leader and Harris as a collaborative, solution-oriented changemaker. The study concludes that while platform affordances shape the form and style of political communication, a candidate's fundamental self-branding remains consistent, confirming and extending existing theories on digital political strategy.

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# 1 Introduction

On June 27, the long-awaited debate between Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and Republican candidate Donald Trump took place at CNN studios and brought millions of viewers in front of their screens, causing a tidal wave of reactions across social media. Many Biden supporters expressed disappointment with his performance and pointed out his incoherent speech and weak rebuttals. Associated Press (AP), one of the leading news agencies, and CNN described the debate as “Biden’s disastrous debate”, with POLITICO calling it a “*shipwreck and carnage*” (Long, Miller, and Superville 2024; Collinson 2024; Starcevic 2024).

It came as no surprise that the Democratic party swiftly forced Biden’s withdrawal from candidacy and announced current Vice President Kamala Harris as their new presidential candidate. If she were to be elected, Harris would be the first Black, South Asian and female president of the United States which stands in stark contrast with former president Trump who split the country in two with his polarizing discourse. Both the way candidates promote themselves and the way they tie in their public image with the issues they associate themselves with are important for gaining electoral power. As Iyengar (2022) notes, it is possible to anticipate the greater use of direct politician-to-voter communication through social media, as it expands its reach on a global scale.

The development of vast social online networks has made it possible to reach the public without encountering gatekeepers and intermediaries such as journalists - in other words, politicians have full control of their self-presentation on these platforms (Iyengar 2022). Given this, we are conducting a comparative cross-platform analysis to uncover what this self-presentation looks like and how different platform affordances influence the way it takes shape and form. The two chosen platforms to conduct this analysis are Twitter/X and TikTok. As a highly politicized platform, Twitter/X is a very relevant choice to study this (Iyengar 2022). Moreover, TikTok has a global impact in the shaping of public discourse and news delivery to global audience, particularly when it comes to Gen Z, making TikTok an interesting platform to study this topic.

This leads us to the following research question: *How do the platform affordances of TikTok and Twitter/X influence the self-presentation of the 2024 US Elections candidates, and how does this self-presentation compare on both platforms?* To answer this, the candidates’ self-presentation practices will be analyzed comparatively. Our theoretical framework is grounded in affordance theory, self-presentation theory and vanity metrics with an extension of critical analytics. We will first elaborate on our methodology and operationalization as well as subsequent findings, followed by a discussion that will comprehensively scrutinize the implications of our findings. Conducting this research is socially relevant because global social media stands at the center of the presidential elections and dominates platform discourse all over the globe. Given that we are using digital research tools and existing literature in this research, it is also academically relevant by contributing to the field of media studies.

# 2 Theoretical framework

## 2.1 Affordance theory

One of the key concepts that guide our analysis is affordances. Affordance theory is rooted in the relational study between people and environments, and was first conceptualized in the 1960s and 1970s (Davis 2020). Today, affordances are often theorized in the context of studying the relationship between people and technological change as they play a key role in critical social media studies (Davis 2020; Friz and Gehl 2016).

Affordances are traditionally understood as “the multifaceted relational structure between

an object/technology and the use that enables or constraints potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context” (Davis 2020, 4–5). In other words, affordances are built-in suggestions of how an object is to be used that allow for as well as limit user behavior. How these behaviors and usages play out is “relational and conditional” (7), given that objects are “de-inscribed” (Friz and Gehl 2016, 688) differently depending on people and context.

Although they tend to be built into objects with an ideal user and usage in mind (Friz and Gehl 2016), they merely “mediate between a technology’s features and its outcomes” (Davis 2020, 5) rather than making people deterministically act a certain way. It is thus worth noting that “materiality and human agency always operate together” (5). Affordances play a key role in how individuals present themselves online, which ties in with our second key concept.

## 2.2 Self-presentation vs. self-branding

While self-presentation in daily life is an ongoing performance, on social media it manifests more so as a premeditated display of oneself (Whitmer 2019). A separate branch of self-presentation is the concept of self-branding, which is about promoting and marketing oneself as a product to gain a competitive advantage (Whitmer 2019). The consensus is that “self-branding is accomplished through careful audience management, the selective disclosure of personal information” (3). This is particularly helpful when studying something such as the competitive US elections.

Moreover, research on the concept of self-branding has revealed that those who engage in it adjust and adapt their practices to the particular platforms they use by “putting forth different information” (5) on different platforms. On TikTok in particular, self-presentation has been argued to be tied more to virality than to persona and driven by audio memes (Abidin 2020). These are interesting points to analyze with our case study.

## 2.3 From vanity metrics to a critical analysis

Vanity metrics also play an essential role in our analysis. Although they have been critiqued for being limited, we are using them to help organize our data and guide our methodology before eventually moving on to critical analytics as proposed by Rogers (2018). In short, vanity metrics refer to likes, comments, retweets and so on that “indicated how well one is doing online” (450). However, when analyzing socio-political issues they tend to be limited, which is why the literature suggests alternative metrics seeing that social media are more than just sites to present oneself (450). In particular, Rogers (2018) proposes issue networks as an alternative to traditional vanity metrics with emphasis on the following key factors: dominant voice, concern, commitment, positioning and alignment. In our case, we will focus our discussion on the dominant voice.

# 3 Methodological approach

To answer the research question, we conducted a cross-platform analysis. This type of analysis provides researchers with a comparative perspective on a societal issue, trends or phenomena (Rogers 2023). As Rogers (2024) highlights, cross-platform comparison as a medium-specific approach requires sensitivity to specific platform metrics, vernaculars of use and user subcultures. Digital objects such as hashtags, likes, posts, videos, and images should therefore not be treated equivalently across platforms.

### 3.1 Research design

We chose Twitter/X and TikTok as the platforms for analysis because, while both platforms can be studied as “event-following machines”, they represent two different digital spaces for political communication (Sánchez-Querubín et al. 2023). Twitter/X has been traditionally used as a public arena for political news, discourse and debates, where news organizations, politicians and ordinary users express their opinions and learn what is happening during and after events (Rogers 2024). In contrast, TikTok has emerged as a novel and default platform for millions of young users worldwide who want to learn about issues, express their political ideologies and organize to take action (Lorenz 2020).

Given the difference in user culture and demographics, the 2024 US presidential candidates have maintained their routine communication practices on Twitter/X such as policy messaging, campaign rallies speeches, and ‘attacking’ their opponents, which are traditional political communication strategies. However, on TikTok the candidates have adopted a different approach, leveraging its creative tools such as trending sounds, memes, influencer endorsements, and pop culture references to connect with Gen Z audiences and potential first-time voters who are harder to engage with via the means of traditional media channels (Grantham 2024). Our analysis focuses on two key aspects: the type of platform-specific content and the tone of the platform-specific content. By doing so, we aim to comparatively explore the way affordances and self-presentation tie in with each other.

### 3.2 Operationalization

#### 3.2.1 Step 1. Query design

We identified the candidates’ accounts by searching their names on both platforms. Harris has two accounts on Twitter/X with one being a campaign account, and another one associated with her role as the current Vice President. After selecting the campaign account to compare to Trump’s, we conducted a preliminary close reading to help inform our approach. We started by examining the candidates’ respective TikTok profiles and Twitter/X handles, focusing on key vanity metrics, such as followers, likes, reposts and total number of videos (Rogers 2024). These metrics allowed us to form an initial evaluation of how the candidates’ content is performing in terms of reach and visibility.

#### 3.2.2 Step 2. Data Collection

Our data collection combined a manual content analysis with the use of automated tools. We used ‘Zeeschuimer’ to record the posts’ metadata and imported this into 4CAT for analysis (Peeters 2024). On TikTok, the data sample was smaller because both candidates only created their accounts in June and July 2024. As of October 17, 2024, we collected 36 videos from Trump’s account, and 100 videos from Harris. To ensure comparability between TikTok and Twitter/X datasets, we “demarcated our dataset more specifically” (Peeters 2024) by using a defined timeframe for sampling. We identified September 10 of this year, which is the date of the first televised presidential debate between Harris and Trump, as a key turning point because the event influenced both candidates’ campaign communication and social media strategies. Given this, our Twitter/X dataset includes Harris’ 457 tweets and Trump’s 159 tweets, collected by Zeeschuimer from this moment onward.

#### 3.2.3 Step 3. Data Analysis

First, we analyzed and categorized the content on both platforms based on themes (content focus) and tone. This categorization allowed us to explore how each candidate adapted their

self-presentation based on the platform. We classified the content as follows:

- Policy-driven: focused on political issues, such as policies, governance and solutions
- Personality-driven: informal content that shows the candidate engage in a more personal and approachable way, such as interacting with supporters and famous endorsers
- “Playful performances” (Sánchez-Querubín et al. [2023]): videos that integrate with humor, satire, trending audios and elements of internet celebrity

We then compiled an image wall with TikTok thumbnails as well as Twitter/X images using 4CAT. TikTok video thumbnails represent not only the first frame of the video but also a preview of the content, which gives insights into visual patterns, such as memetic practices (Bainotti et al. [2022]). However, we recognize the limitation of the image wall analysis for TikTok, as it is unable to capture TikTok’s inherently interactive and dynamic features.

In addition, we zoomed in on the most watched TikTok videos of both candidates identified by view count. The videos offer insights into the content that resonates most with the platform’s audience and give us an idea of the platform’s culture. Similarly, on Twitter/X, we selected the most retweeted posts of the candidates, because the retweet function, which allows users to simply repost tweets without commentary, is a unique platform affordance that plays a crucial role in shaping discourse. During the 2020 US presidential election period, Twitter/X temporarily suspended the retweet function, encouraging users to use the quote tweet to reduce irrational communication, further demonstrating the power of retweets in political events (Zhang et al. [2024]).

To better illustrate our findings, we created a comparative overview table that provides both vertical and horizontal comparisons between the two platforms. Furthermore, vanity metrics are our main proxy for understanding the performative aspects of both Trump’s and Harris’ online self-presentation, but we also acknowledge that social media platforms should not only be seen as “a productive social networking site for self-presentation only”, as it is argued that they are also spaces for studying “social issue networking” (Rogers [2018]).

## 4 Findings and preliminary analysis

Figure 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the presidential candidates’ self-presentation on both platforms. We took vanity metrics alongside content focus, content tone and the overall themes that shape their self-presentation and self-branding into account. This overview provides a starting point to break our cross-platform analysis down into multiple key findings.

### 4.1 Key finding 1

On Twitter/X, both candidates’ self-presentation is formal, professional, and focused on their identity as a political candidate (Figure 2). Although the candidates’ tone of voice differs, both take on a more or less professional and informative tone. Their Twitter/X content focuses on the candidates’ political stance and their policy-making procedures and decision-making. This ties in with the platform’s affordances: Twitter/X is text-based which allows the candidates to develop and share a comprehensive narrative facilitated through threads by sharing a series of related tweets one after another for continuity and consistency. Contrastingly, TikTok affords a more segmented content approach.

## Comparative overview of candidates' self-presentation

	Donald Trump		Kamala Harris	
Platform	Twitter/X 	TikTok 	Twitter/X 	TikTok 
Vanity Metrics	Drives engagement through viral hashtags, threads, and strong emotional hooks.	Emphasizes his "strength/power" his political achievements and hero persona in emotive clips	Professional expertise and rational leader, focus on social awareness and community-driven engagement	Approachable, relatable and focusing on positivity, inclusivity, and solidarity
Content Focus /Theme	Rallies speeches, attacks on Harris, economic policies with misinformation!	Playful political performance engaging with trends and using emotional hooks	Factual, statistic-driven, highlighting policy solutions, focusing on changes, progress, moments, everyday activities, humorous consensus-building	More personal stories, and using casual videos to enhance her engaging persona
Tone	Formal & combative Text-heavy	Joking & Theatrical	Formal & assertive concise	Collaborative & authentic
Self-Representation	<u>"Make America Great Again(MAGA 2024)" advocate</u>	<u>Outsider politician Generous entrepreneur</u>	<u>Harris-Walz Agenda, solution-oriented change-maker</u>	<u>Approachable and empathetic female leader</u>

Figure 1: Comparative overview of the candidates' self-presentation

### 4.2 Key finding 2

Another key observation is that on Twitter/X, the candidates criticize their opponents and strengthen their own image via the means of the retweet and quote functions. Trump reshares content from his supporters and his endorsement by Elon Musk, while Harris reshares posts from her Vice-President account to leverage her existing leadership role. As Figure 3 shows, Harris' Twitter images are number and text-oriented which provides more detailed insights into her policies. There is also a professional and consistent visual style involved in the design of the images. Trump's images are dramatized and extravagant, and boast short slogans to stir up strong emotional responses. This type of self-presentation may resonate more with layman audiences.

### 4.3 Key finding 3

The most retweeted posts on Twitter/X since the debate give us insights into how the candidates' self-presentation compares and competes with each other. Harris's most retweeted post was an accusation against Trump posted on 9/11, an important day in the US. Trump's most retweeted post is a religious image, which differs from his usual content where he somewhat aggressively positions and presents himself as the hero and savior of the American people. Instead, this tweet was a more subtle attack on the "evil" side that opposes him as the "good" side. Both candidates actively use Twitter's retweet feature, but Trump uses it more than Harris. The constant retweeting of posts that support these candidates creates an echo chamber that reinforces their community.

### 4.4 Key finding 4

On TikTok, the candidates' self-presentation is focused on showcasing their individual charisma and aligning with the platform's informal culture. The most-watched TikTok videos from the candidates are vivid illustrations of how their social media teams strategically integrate political messages into short videos by leveraging the platform's culture and creative affordances and leaning into the element of internet celebrity (Abidin 2020). Harris' TikTok content contains celebrity endorsement and popular music templates with intentionally selected lyrics such as

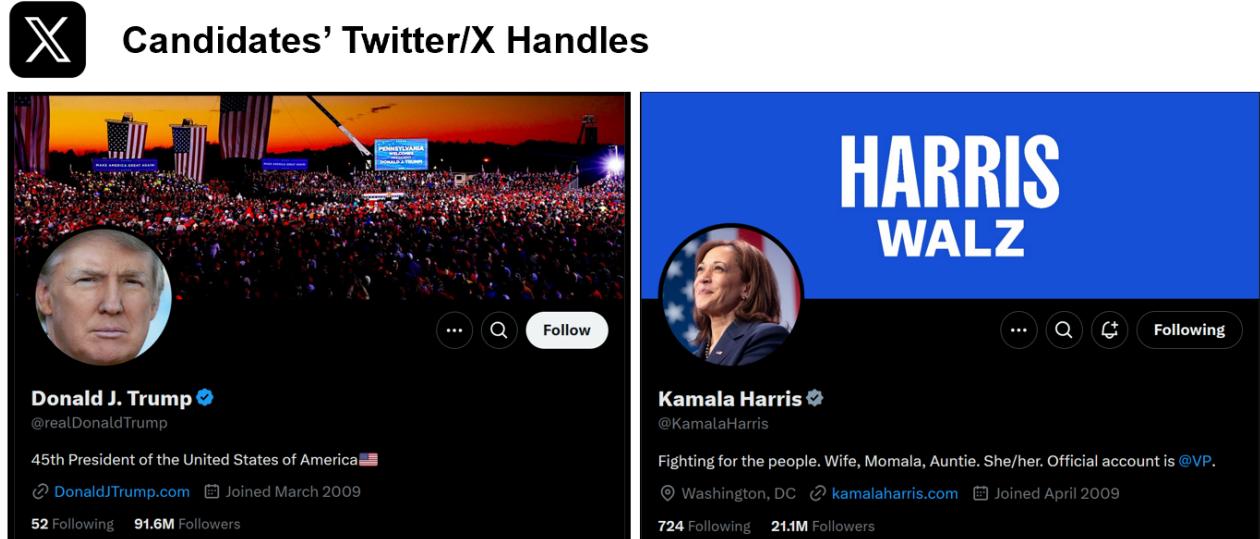


Figure 2: X profiles of the presidential candidates (as of 17/10/24)



Figure 3: Twitter image wall

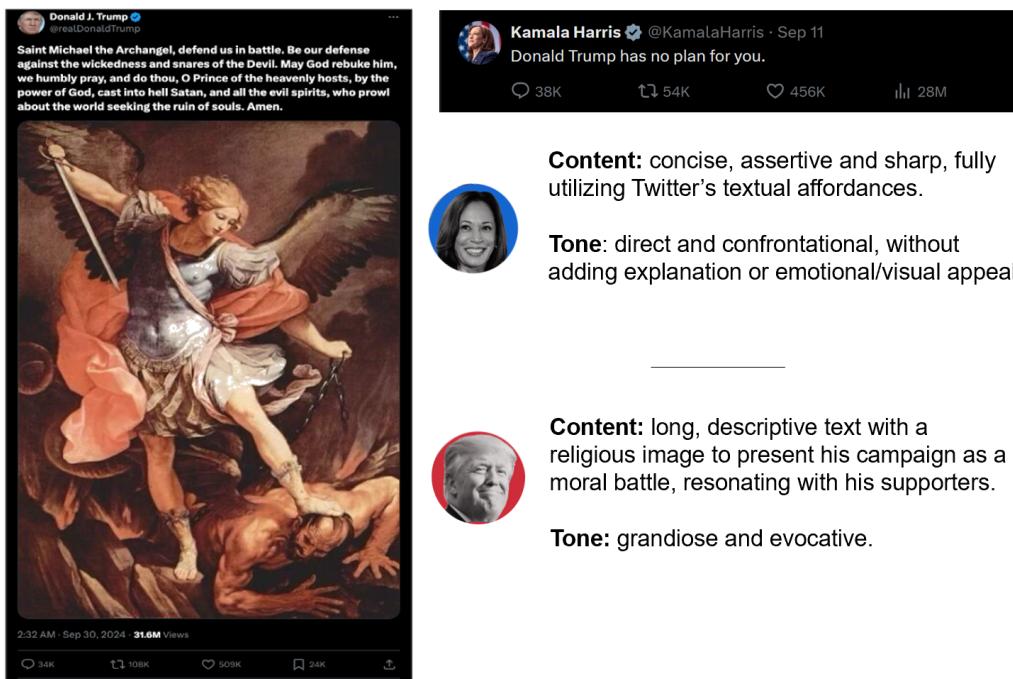


Figure 4: Most-retweeted X posts of both candidates (data collected on 17/10/24)

“bye bye bye” to criticize her opponent, which not only garners significant attention and views from a younger public due to the humoristic element but also remains memorable. Meanwhile, Trump also leverages the platform’s memetic structure, such as showcasing his signature dance moves together with a popular gaming influencer and staging a theatrical confrontation with influencer Logan Paul in a boxing stance to project his power.

#### 4.5 Key finding 5

Although the affordances differ per platform, the two candidates remain consistent with their image strategy on both platforms. Trump emphasizes his past accomplishments as president and leader of the people, while Harris emphasizes unity alongside her social identity to resonate with the public. While platform-specific affordances nudge the candidates’ self-presentation in certain directions, they still have very different personas and approaches to the way they brand themselves as political candidates. This entails that beyond platform-specific commonalities and deviations, there are also candidate-specific ones.

For instance, Trump’s tone is more combative as he presents himself as the people’s hero who is here to make the nation great again. Trump’s tonality is grandeur-esque and full of polarizing promises where he is the top-down leader. Trump’s TikTok videos focus on individual engagements where he speaks directly to his audience. His tone is authoritative and straightforward, often accompanied by short slogans which create a strong emotional hook. Harris’ self-presentation and candidate branding is that of a solution-oriented change-maker who is making efforts to solve national problems through collaboration. She focuses on people-centric policy-making informed by community engagement and exemplified by her frequent use of “we should.”

The TikTok image wall reveals distinct visual patterns and messaging strategies between Harris and Trump. Harris is frequently shown in group settings with members of her community, implying a focus on group participation and presenting her as a cooperative team player and active listener. By sharing personal stories about her family, she presents an approachable and relatable image, rather than an untouchable politician, which resonates with younger audiences.

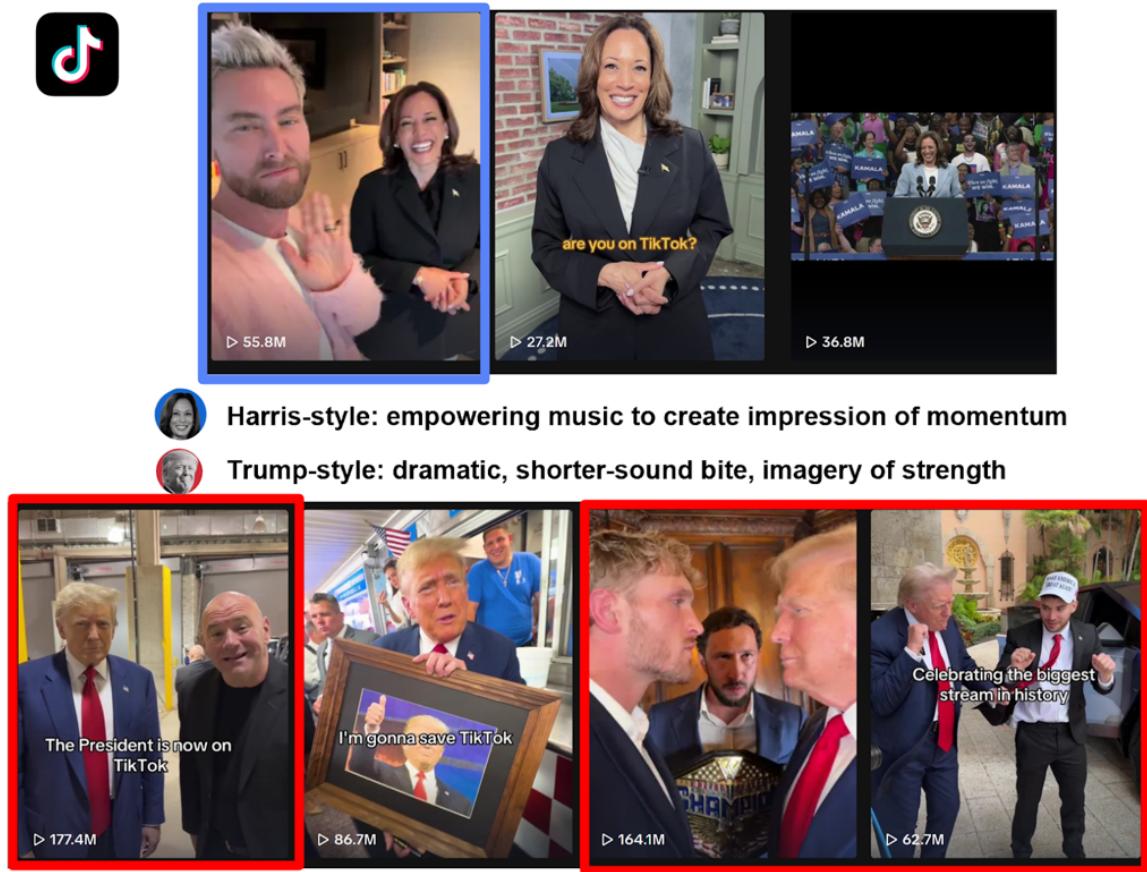


Figure 5: Most-watched TikTok videos of both candidates (data collected on 17/10/24)

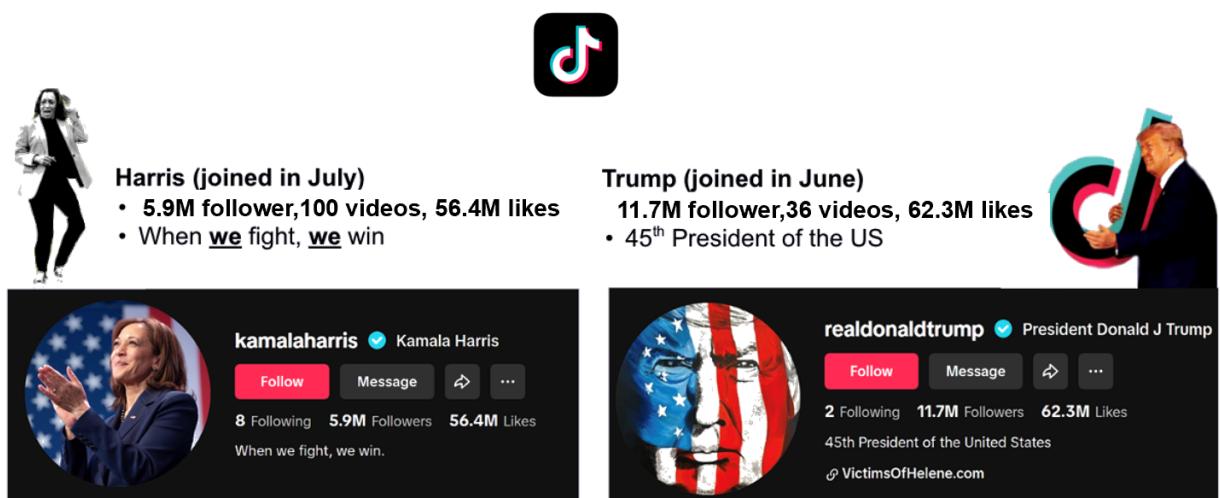


Figure 6: TikTok profiles of the presidential candidates

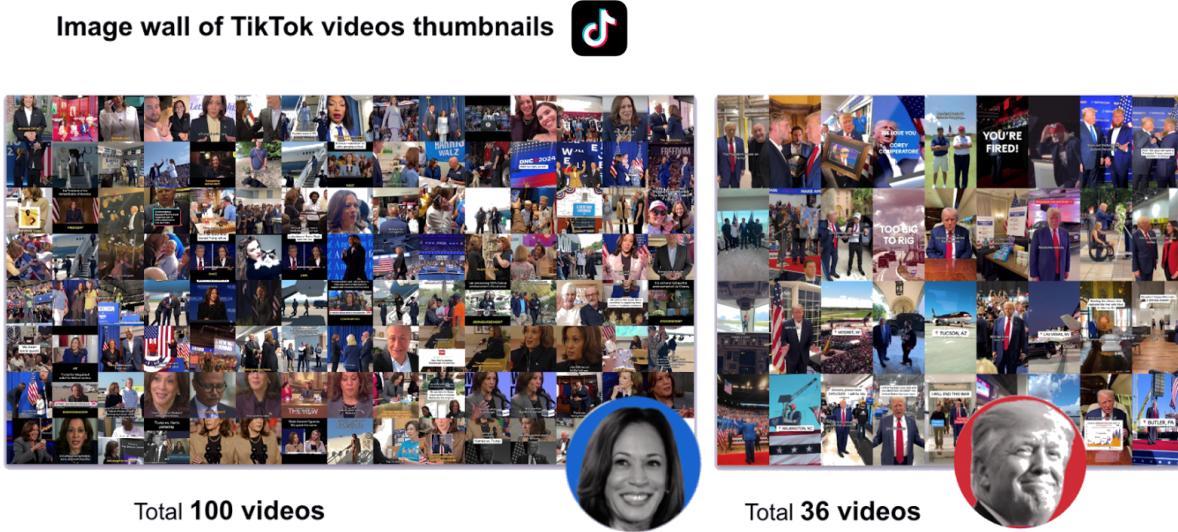


Figure 7: TikTok image wall (data collected on 17/10/24)

Her supportive and encouraging tone promotes a positive and inclusive environment.

## 5 Critical discussion

The key findings derived from our analysis leave room for a critical discussion on the implications of this research, as well as on how it fits into the larger academic conversation around affordance-based self-presentation on social media.

First and foremost, the nature of fame and virality has shifted on TikTok where it tends to be based on the performance of users' individual posts (Abidin 2020). Trump and Harris have both taken advantage of this post-based virality and TikTok's memetic nature to push their self-presentation as political candidates. The use of audio templates is a key "organizing principle" (80) on the platform, which both candidates have leaned into. Trump and Harris "actively seek out, learn, participate in, and engage in these what is 'going viral'" to maximize their visibility (79). On the other hand, Twitter/X's already heavily politicized environment is being leveraged by both candidates in a different way than on TikTok. Key affordances such as retweets and threads inform the candidates' strategy on the platform, which is more formal and professional compared to the informal and memetic strategy both employ on TikTok. This ties in with what we mentioned in our literature review, namely that individuals who engage in self-branding adjust their practices depending on the platform (Whitmer 2019).

Although part of our findings were organized based on vanity metrics, there is room to expand beyond that and look at different modes of measurement. It is clear that in the case of both candidates, they present as dominant voices (Rogers 2018) - although to varying degrees. As we have illustrated, Trump presents himself as the hero, the leader and the savior who has all the answers and solutions. His communication style makes his polarizing voice an undeniably dominant one in US politics. While Harris' voice also comes with authority, it operates differently. Rather than dominating and taking over the national discourse, her voice resonates more in certain circles rather than on a large scale. This is reflected for instance by the fact that, although she has much more content available on TikTok than Trump, she gathers less engagement (see Figure 6 and Figure 7).

Since we focused on the candidates' self-presentation rather than on user engagement and the community that both candidates have online, it poses rather difficult to analyze an issue

network as proposed by Rogers (2018). Therefore, analyzing factors beyond just the dominant voice, such as concern, commitment, positioning or alignment, is not entirely applicable to our case. However, this research could be extended further by analyzing the way users engage with the candidates' self-presentation. Expanding in this direction would create an opportunity to look into these other metrics.

## 6 Conclusion

In this study, we conducted a cross-platform social media analysis of the US presidential elections through the lens of self-presentation and affordance theory, guided by the following research question: *How do the platform affordances of TikTok and Twitter/X influence the self-presentation of the 2024 US election candidates, and how does this self-presentation compare on both platforms?* Our research combined manual and automated data collection to comparatively analyze the findings of the two candidates' self-presentation practices on the two social media platforms.

Our findings revealed that the text-based affordances of Twitter/X lead the candidates to lean into formal self-presentation practices, whereas TikTok's memetic nature and audio template affordances allow for more informal and playful self-presentation practices. The research results also showed that, although platform-specific affordances inform how the candidates self-present, they still brand themselves in very different ways. Despite Harris' leading in the polls, Trump rules the national discourse with a dominant voice. Altogether, our results build on and confirm existing affordance-based self-presentation theory.

While our research is both socially and academically relevant, we also encountered limitations. First, we recognize that compiling an image wall of TikTok thumbnails does not account for the dynamic entirety of a TikTok video. Second, we had to limit our dataset to a specific timeframe due to the scope and context of this research. Third, we understand that, although we've explored Rogers' dominant voice metric (Rogers 2018), there is room to expand this study further and explore the entirety of the issue network around the US presidential election.

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## Debate videos, polarizing content and warlike metaphors in conflictual online discourses

Marios Moros<sup>1</sup>**Abstract**

Debate videos have been taking social media platforms by storm in recent years, with the YouTube channel “Jubilee” as one of the most prominent audiovisual avenues for conflictual content. This study investigates what combative, warlike metaphors are at play in Jubilee’s YouTube channel, metaphors that might be more polarizing than unifying. Through analysis of video titles, thumbnails, content categorization, and debate prompts, this paper examines how war metaphors are present throughout Jubilee’s online presence and their role in debate content. The findings reveal that metaphors of war and combat commonly add polarizing elements to the rhetoric that may change the affective perception users have of debate content, transforming the platform into a participatory battlefield where everyone is invited to debate or fight.

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## 1 Introduction

Debate videos have been taking social media platforms by storm in recent years, with the YouTube channel “Jubilee” as one of the most prominent audiovisual avenues for conflictual content. Owned by the US-based company Jubilee Media, the YouTube channel has amassed more than 9.5 million subscribers as of January 2024, and organizes, among other things, sociopolitical discussions. It often invites ideological entrepreneurs like Ben Shapiro and even hosts *gamified* debates which have been defined by Vox as “Battle Royale-like” (Cunningham [2024-10-10, 2024]). According to the media company’s founder, this discursive shift took place in 2016, in the aftermath of the U.S. presidential race and its consequential polarization (Shanfeld [2024-11-04, 2024]). The purpose of its debate content is to bridge this widened gap surrounding contemporary sociopolitical issues. Evidently, the media company’s tagline is as follows: “We believe discomfort and *conflict* [emphasis added] are pivotal forces in creating human connection” (Jubilee Media, [n.d.]).

Skimming through the content catalogue of Jubilee’s YouTube channel, it becomes evident that its political debates commonly take place between the privileged and the underprivileged, the majority and the minority, the oppressor and the oppressed. The topics of such conflictual discourses can range from individual rights to war-related matters, as observed in video discussions between Palestinians and Israelis. The combative nature of Jubilee is not only encountered in the war-related debates it hosts, but also in the ways that such content is produced, categorized and communicated by the YouTube channel.

In an online space that is meant to bring polarized audiences together, what are the factors that may be operating against that? At a time where allegorical terms like “culture war”, “TikTok War” (Chayka [2022-03-03, 2022]) and “information warfare” are often deployed and weaponized in relation to online debates, it is critical to investigate what combative, warlike metaphors are at play in Jubilee’s YouTube channel, metaphors that might be more polarizing than unifying. As the YouTube account in question is one of the most prominent of its kind, whose content spills into multiple social media platforms, understanding how combative metaphors may add an extra layer of conflict to massively watched debate videos is of academic importance as well as societal.

As such, the research question of this paper is as follows: “*What war metaphors are present in Jubilee’s YouTube content and what is their role in debate content?*”

With this research question as a guiding light, the below-presented analysis begins with a literature review of relevant texts about war and metaphors. These texts serve as the theoretical and conceptual prism through which the content of Jubilee is to be analyzed, as discussed later in the Methodological approach.

## 2 Theoretical framework: a study of metaphors

The theoretical starting point of this study is that metaphors can assume the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lakoff and Johnson [1980]), especially when such metaphors are of a warlike nature and deployed in a discursive context. In today’s polarizing political climate, they can become “weapons in the hands of everyone around them, annexing their targets into a war zone where anything is permissible” (Hermann [2017-03-14, 2017]).

What is, then, the self-actualizing prophecy that is of concern with war metaphors? Steuter and Wills ([2008]) claim that war metaphors—to be at war with something, for instance—create a dichotomy of rightful and wrong sides, actions and actants. By default, war metaphors can have conflictual properties, depending on the context to which they are applied (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau [2018]).

For example, the metaphorical rhetoric of warfare and militarization has been historically employed in different kinds of settings, even in the world of medicine and public health education (Sontag 2013). In such medical settings, war metaphors are not simply a rhetorical device with a view to communicating the urgency of a health issue more efficiently, but can also produce stigmatizing, polarizing, demonizing and guilt-inducing allegories that seep through the public consciousness. The disease is painted as a public enemy, while those afflicted by it are in one way or another *othered*. A *medical battlefield* emerges with a crystal-clear enemy/threat.

The consequences of war metaphors, generally, can be of an *affective* nature that may mobilize their intended audiences by evoking specific emotions. Shapovalova (2024, 108) underlines that to be at war with something, as Alex Jones has often claimed to be through his far-right rhetoric, “only adds urgency... seemingly channeling the built-up frustrations of his viewers”. In a sense, emotionally impactful metaphors are excellent tools of warfare, since the latter often triggers and then weaponizes the emotions of others to achieve specific goals (Davies 2019).

In the world of online debates and discourses, multiple warlike terms and metaphors have been put to use to describe cases of civilians/users creating their own war narratives to challenge the status quo (Shapovalova 2024) and state-actors responding to them or reappropriating them for their own goals (Oates 2016). This pattern has been termed as *discursive battlefield* by Filimonov and Carpentier (2021). Other war-related terms have been used to describe discursive phenomena pertaining to matters of social issues and individual rights. The focus of this study, however, is not what kind of war metaphors are put to use to describe or conceptualize online debates and conflicts. Instead, its main focus is to better understand what kind of war metaphors debate content uses that might make it more conflictual.

Such combative terms can appear in various forms and formats. Cappelle (2023, 13) notes that in the conservative online ecosystem, titles and content thumbnails often include terms like “destroyed” in capital letters, usually in relation to debates about sociopolitical issues, something that “dramatises the issue at stake”. Real-life argumentative language has been closely tied to war terminology (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and so it should not come as a surprise that online content is utilizing similar tactics. These choices create a moral and ideological dichotomy—to circle back to Steuter and Wills (2008)—through which online users are introduced to the content.

Sensationalist tactics tend to capitalize on outrage and result in increased clicks and views, and metaphorical language is a convenient tool to achieve that. While there is a literature gap in how online debate content deploys war metaphors to create more conflict and, possibly, increase its virality, Cunningham (2024-10-10, 2024) does mention that Jubilee creates specific content series and debate prompts that “feel primed to become ‘rage bait’ clips meant to get viewers excited or angry, to the tune of millions of clicks.”

### 3 Methodological approach

With the above-discussed theoretical intersections of warfare and metaphorical language in mind, a more critical look at the content of Jubilee is necessitated. While its debate content is shared by official accounts on different platforms, the focus of this study remains on YouTube, where Jubilee’s long-form videos are posted in their entirety. Elements that are to be analyzed for potential use of warlike or combative language are video titles, thumbnails, content categorization (Jubilee has different types of debate series that follow different discursive conventions) and debate prompts. These elements allow one to investigate how Jubilee presents and communicates its debate content to online audiences and whether it “breaks” its neutrality by including more conflictual and warlike elements.

While Jubilee has posted more than 1.2k videos on its YouTube channel, the purpose of this paper is not to make a quantitative analysis of the number of war metaphors that appear across

its content actions. Instead, specific pieces of content—from videos to community posts—are singled out and analyzed, whose headlines, visuals, prompts, debate structure/rules and general rhetoric may allude to warfare in a non-literal sense. Relevant instances of combative metaphors are thus to be discussed in the following section in relation to the study’s theoretical grounding. To narrow down the content that is deemed relevant for this analysis, the chosen timeframe includes content from 2023 and 2024, so that the potential usage of war metaphors can be of relevancy to the contemporary climate of online discussions.

An additional layer that is included in this study is how Jubilee makes use of different platform affordances to make its content more conflictual. While these choices may not be directly associated with war metaphors, they can help us understand how debate videos encourage users to become part of the conflict or to consume it in more one-sided and biased ways.

Any relevant pieces of content are either referenced and linked to or captured and demonstrated through cropped screenshots.

## 4 Findings

By scrolling through the main page (Home) of Jubilee’s YouTube account, one quickly encounters, among other things, different playlists of debate videos that have been curated by the channel. The playlists that have been chosen to appear on the channel’s main page are not thematic, however. They do not pertain to specific discussion topics but modes of debating.

The main forms of debating that appear here are *Surrounded* and *Middle Ground* (or *Middle Ground Roundtable*). Interestingly, both debate series adopt a loose combative metaphor; in the former, a famous political personality or ideological entrepreneur is literally surrounded by their “opponents” who have to race each other in order to debate the singled-out guest; and in the latter, two different sides come together in a neutral, peaceful territory where they are expected to hear each other out—like two opposing sides in a war coming together in an attempt to negotiate. The *Middle Ground* series, based on its playlist description, “explores whether two different groups of people, opposed in their beliefs, can come together empathetically and find middle ground.”

The metaphors are present in the headline of every debate video found in the respective playlists, regardless of the discussion topic in question. In the case of *Middle Ground*, however, the metaphor becomes more conflictual with debate topics that are actually war-related. In the case of debate content between Pro-Israel and Pro-Palestine supporters (Jubilee [2023-12-10, 2023]), Jubilee attempts to make a discursive intervention, as though the two opposing sides can “empathetically” find a middle ground not in the real-life genocide that is being committed in Gaza, but through the spectacularized content of YouTube. The challenge of finding a middle ground, in this case, does not make the discussion any less combative, as each side still has to *fight* to communicate its points. More pressure is thus applied to both sides to achieve peace, a process that is not devoid of conflict—especially when an asymmetry of power is at play.

Potentially combative metaphors are then present in video headlines, playlist titles and descriptions, but also in the entirety of these debate series. Specifically, the *Surrounded* series is an exemplar of dramatized content that plays out as a *gamified conflict*. From beginning to end, participants race each other to secure a spot against the debate guest, be the one to “defeat” them and take the glory for it. These metaphors are, then, not just present in how debate videos are titled, described, categorized and communicated through content features and platform affordances; they are also deeply ingrained into the structure and rules of these filmed discussions.

However, these conflictual metaphors do not create an evident dichotomy of what is right and what is wrong (Steuter and Wills [2008]). Nevertheless, they do create a dichotomy of two opposing views that the audience has to choose between (or even debate for, as discussed later).

Moving on to the more visual aspects of these debate series, it is critical to observe some of their chosen thumbnails. Their typical formula consists of the debate topic, a background photo of all the participants, and usually close-up shots of two participants, one from each side. Interestingly enough, these cherry-picked participants are not always portrayed neutrally. In the thumbnail presented below, the minimum wage worker appears to be “dramatically” defending their side of the debate, while the teen millionaire assumes a judgmental/condescending stance. Here, we do observe a less subtle dichotomy (Steuter and Wills [2008]) that implies who to take seriously in the debate.



Figure 1: Thumbnail of a *Middle Ground* video that depicts participants from both sides of the debate.

Another example is the following thumbnail, where the left participant (supporting the feminist point of view) is shown to have a dismissive body language towards the Men’s Rights activist. It is also important to note here that even though men’s rights activists are mentioned first in the title, their view is actually represented by the female participant on the right, creating a false expectation of who is dismissive towards whom. Which side is which becomes blurry, as it often happens in war.



Figure 2: A Jubilee thumbnail of a debate video that includes men's rights activists and feminists.

These video thumbnails do not directly invoke war metaphors. However, they attempt to represent each side of the debate through participants that assume offensive and defensive stances, encouraging the audience to make a (biased) choice in a given conflict. Even in *Surrounded* videos, thumbnails tend to include both the surrounded guest and one of their “enemies” to better visualize the conflict that is taking place.



Figure 3: Video thumbnail portraying Ben Shapiro and one of the 25 Kamala Voters debating.

Another section of Jubilee’s channel that deserves attention is its community posts. They mainly consist of memes, image-based and/or textual content, surveys and debate invitations.

A 2024 meme, for instance, includes a collage of 4 people that have participated in Jubilee’s *Surrounded* series. Captioned as “Choose your fighter”—commonly present in fighting video games and online meme formats—this post metaphorically refers to debate participants/guests as fighters and, by extent, to debating as fighting. It also invites users to choose one of the participants as though to represent them in the battlefield.

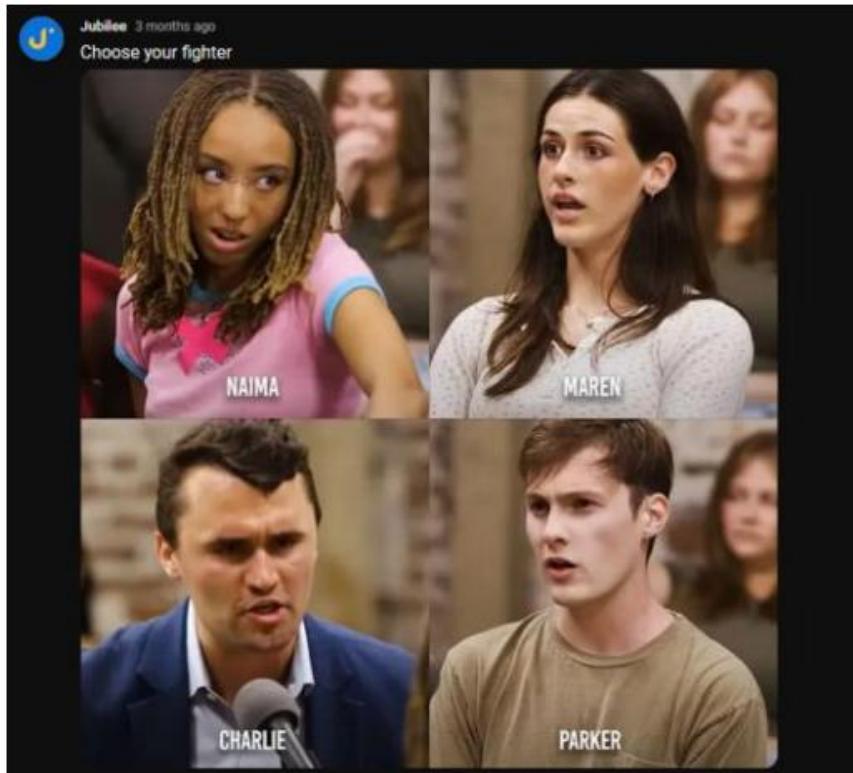


Figure 4: Community post shared by Jubilee that shows 4 debate participants.

Other community posts, as mentioned above, invite users to participate in upcoming debate videos, thus becoming part of Jubilee’s discursive content. In a sense, its debate content is not just filmed material that the audience passively watches and reacts to but becomes an arena where everyone can participate—a conflict that becomes democratic (Davies 2019). Such invitations resemble a *drafting* process, a term which is not only used in real-life military situations but even in online discourses and matters of memetic warfare (Peacock 2022). Here, it must be noted that these invitations are not only shared through community posts, but also through in-video material. Users are encouraged to apply right in the middle of the “conflict”.

Apart from these warlike invitations, it is important to consider the affordances of YouTube and how they may play a role in fostering online conflict. All debate videos of Jubilee, even those pertaining to sensitive and war-related topics, have an enabled comment section, inviting users to join. This is also true of community posts, where users can similarly become part of online discussions. In more recent videos, Jubilee has also been making use of the platform’s timestamps (Video Chapters) to help the users navigate the different thematic segments of a given debate video more easily. These timestamps are present in the descriptions as well. The title of each such segment is usually derived from a debate prompt, as seen in the image below (Jubilee 2024-10-24, 2024).

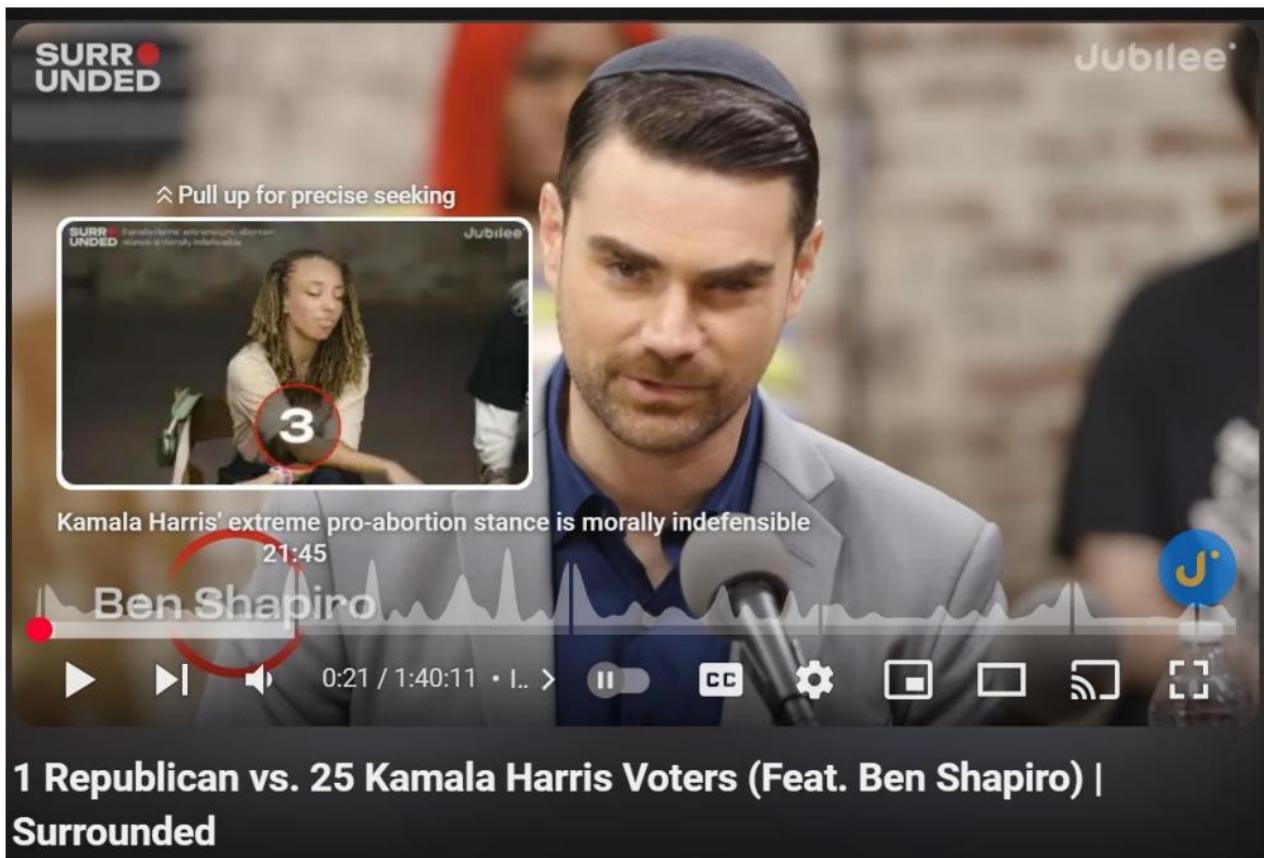


Figure 5: Timestamps on a Jubilee video that also showcase which segments are watched the most.

Such timestamps encourage users to (re)watch specific segments of the debate while ignoring others. Typically formulated in the language of rage-bait (the words “extreme” and “morally indefensible” are by no means neutral), they may encourage users to make their own debates in the comment section. Debates are not consumed, echoed and engaged with in their entirety but in a monolithic manner.

## 5 Conclusion

Metaphors of war and combat are present throughout Jubilee’s online presence. With combative memes and debate series that simulate attempts of conflict and peace, the YouTube channel of Jubilee commonly adds polarizing elements to its rhetoric that may change the affective perception that users have of its debate content. Instead of treating each and every discussion as a democratic debate—which is the channel’s self-proclaimed goal—Jubilee spectacularizes the structure of its debates, presents them in a more gamified and warlike manner, and curates an online image that not only encourages users to treat it as a battlefield for different opinions but even participate in it.

Despite their undeniable presence, such combative metaphors are much less obvious than in the case of Cappelle’s (2023) analysis of conversative discussion videos, and they do not necessarily push users to root for a specific side over the other (with certain thumbnails being a core exception). More broadly, however, they do push users to become a part of the conflict, one way or another. War metaphors are an integral part of Jubilee’s content, as it is impossible to consume *Surrounded* and *Middle Ground* videos without an allegorical war perspective; it is through this conflictual angle that such debate series are conceptualized, produced and shared

with online audiences. And when a conflict is present, viewers are often prompted to root for one side or the other.

In the rest of Jubilee's YouTube presence, elements like memes and humorous video thumbnails add a lighter tone to the channel's content while simultaneously invoking combative metaphors. It is this intersection of humor and conflict that characterizes the entirety of Jubilee and transforms it into a *participatory battlefield*, where everyone is invited to debate (or fight). This is further heightened by YouTube's platform affordances which create an ecosystem for discussions, conflictual and biased though they may be.

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## Peripherals

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# Good morning Vietnam! Memetic Formulas, Vernaculars, and a Cross-Platform Analysis of TikTok and Douyin

Zeyu Yang

## Abstract

This research treats Douyin and TikTok as distinct platforms and conducts a cross-platform analysis between them. It found that the same event, #GoodMorningVietnam, could be portrayed and interpreted differently across platforms. To analyze content creation techniques, the research repurposed “video collages” in 4CAT to identify visual formulas. It discovered that users on both platforms employ the same visual formulas within #GoodMorningVietnam. However, one Douyin template remixes new elements into these visual formulas, transforming the original meaning of the meme. Guided by the “situation and suspense” theory, the research analyzed how meaning changes through repetition-with-variation. Beyond content, the research also examined the comment sections. Using matrix plots to identify textual formulas, it found that while the content and visual formulas are similar, the textual formulas differ, evoking distinct types of affective resonance across platforms. The research hypothesizes that these differences are tied to platform-specific vernaculars. The comments on the remixed Douyin template illustrate how textual formulas simultaneously create affective dissonance and affective affirmation, revealing the complexity of affective responses to memes. Finally, the research identified special affordances and vernaculars unique to Douyin. First, Douyin offers an exclusive emoji system, which may evoke expressions and resonances distinct from TikTok. Second, Douyin allows users to upload pictures and GIFs in the comment sections, offering greater ‘space’ for users affectively reverberate with posts compared to TikTok. Lastly, the content and comments on Douyin reflect a unique vernacular where Douyin users spontaneously promote nationalism and patriotism through video memes, manifesting the concept of ‘playful patriotism.’

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# 1 Introduction

TikTok introduces new features and possibilities for users to engage with the platform, while also offering unique opportunities for scholars to study its distinctive affordances and vernaculars. Specifically, TikTok and attention economy (Abidin [2021], Klug et al. [2021]), TikTok users as “imitation publics” (Zulli and Zulli [2022]), and TikTok and affective affirmation (Geboers and Pilipets [2024]). Digital methods mainly provide two paths for scholars to study TikTok. One is to do a cross-platform analysis between TikTok and other social media platform to see the different affordances and vernaculars. Another is to seek how the specific features of TikTok can be repurposed for societal and cultural research (Rogers [2024]). This research aim to extend these ideas through doing a cross-platform analysis between TikTok and Douyin.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Secondary orality and memetic formulas

“Electronic technology has brought us into the age of “secondary orality”” (Ong, 1982). Secondary orality in digital media is intrinsically tied to the evanescence and ephemerality of digital technology. Venturini ([2022]), through his research on online conspiracy cultures, argues that online vernacular cultures exemplify secondary orality, as conspiracists must craft content that is both repeatable and memorable to face the fleeting nature and attention economy of social media. Ong (1982, p. 133) also highlights that secondary orality is deeply connected to the use of formulas, defined as “more or less exactly repeated set phrases or set expressions” (Ong, 1982, p. 26). Expanding on this idea, Hagen and Venturini ([2023]) explore the repetition-with-variation of internet memes—what they term “memecry”—through an investigation of memetic formulas. To analyze predominant textual formulas on 4chan/pol/, they developed a protocol to capture the textual patterns over temporal flows. While this protocol effectively identifies textual formulas on a predominantly text-based platform like 4chan, it has limitations. Memetic formulas are not confined to text; they can also be visual or aural (Zulli and Zulli [2022]). Thus, while the protocol is well-suited for studying text-based platforms, it may be inadequate for TikTok, where content is primarily video-based. Consequently, this research also aims to repurpose digital methods to identify visual memetic formulas on TikTok and Douyin and compare them.

### 2.2 Parallel Universe: TikTok and Douyin

TikTok and Douyin are described as “two separate, short video parallel universes” (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng [2021]). Although both platforms are created by ByteDance, they should be regarded as distinct platforms. Specifically, TikTok’s content and user base are international, while Douyin’s content and users are predominantly Chinese (Rogers [2024]). Additionally, Douyin includes a unique feature called the “Positive Energy” section, where users and government accounts promote nationalist and patriotic content (Chen, Valdovinos Kaye, and Zeng [2020, 25]). Given these differences, Rogers ([2024]) underscores the importance of comparative, cross-platform analysis to uncover nuanced distinctions between TikTok and Douyin. His study examines how the same event is portrayed on both platforms, focusing on the presence or absence of content such as #ChinaProtest. However, his analysis overlooks the content creation techniques and the role of comment sections, which could yield deeper insights. To address this gap, this research builds on Rogers’ comparative approach by investigating how the same event is portrayed on both platforms, with a stronger emphasis on the content itself and the dynamics within the comment sections.

## 2.3 Chinese cyber nationalism and playful patriotism

Liu (2012) describes ‘Chinese cyber nationalism’ as a bottom-up, spontaneous nationalist sentiment driven by internet users’ perceptions of external threats to China. Such grassroot phenomenon is different from traditional forms of top-down patriotic propaganda (Guo and Yang 2016). In terms of Douyin, Chen, Valdovinos Kaye, and Zeng (2020, 25) use the term ‘playful patriotism’ to describe how individuals and state use light-hearted and amusing content to prompt nationalism and patriotism instead of taking it seriously, seamlessly integrating these sentiments into the Douyin. Therefore, inspired by previous scholars’ findings on the difference between TikTok and Douyin, this research also tries to follow these ideas and to seek the relevance between the platform vernacular of Douyin and playful patriotism.

## 3 Research Questions

**RQ1:** How is #GoodmorningVietnam portrayed and interpreted on TikTok and Douyin? Are there any differences?

**RQ2:** What unique affordances and vernaculars are presented in #GoodmorningVietnam on Douyin compared to TikTok?

## 4 Methodology

The data collection begins by querying #goodmorningvietnam on both TikTok and Douyin. To ensure unbiased query results, new accounts are created specifically for this research on each platform. Using Zeeschuimer (Peeters 2021), the top 200 posts from each platform are scraped to form the primary dataset. From this dataset, the two most highly engaged posts on each platform—based on metrics such as likes, views, and comments—are purposefully selected as case studies for detailed comparison and analysis.

### 4.1 Visual formula: Video collages

To address the research questions, this study adopts digital methods to analyze the data (Rogers 2024), focusing on both the visual formulas of the posts and the textual formulas of the comments on TikTok and Douyin. Specifically, it examines how the “repetition-with-variation” of these visual and textual elements contributes to the portrayal and narrative of the hashtag #Goodmorningvietnam on each platform. As noted, Hagen and Venturini’s protocol is only designed to analyze textual formulas. To identify visual formulas, this research repurposes the “video collages” feature of 4CAT (Peeters and Hagen 2022). Rather than relying on frame-by-frame video montage for multimodal analysis (Manovich 2009; Geboers and Pilipets 2024), video collages allow researchers to detect recurring patterns across videos (Peeters and Hagen 2022). This feature aligns with the research goal of identifying visual formulas. Additionally, video collages can still extract video frames to form an image wall which enable both “close-looking” and “cross-reading” of content. It resonates with the concept of “metapictures” (Rogers 2021; Geboers and Pilipets 2024), allowing researchers to analyze visual patterns comprehensively. By applying this method, the study systematically investigates the repetition-with-variation in posts, identifies visual formulas, and compares findings across platforms.

### 4.2 Textual formula: Matrix plot

To identify and compare the textual formulas in the comment sections of TikTok and Douyin posts using the hashtag #goodmorningvietnam, this research adapts Geboers and Pilipets

(2024)'s method of identifying word pairs and creating matrix plots. While Geobers and Pilliet applied matrix plots to compare textual formulas across different templates and soundscapes, this study uses them to examine and contrast the textual formulas of the same hashtag across platform. For TikTok, the top 200 comments for each post are exported and analyzed using Rieder (2015)'s TextAnalysis tool to identify bigrams and their frequencies, with the top six bigrams selected to generate a matrix plot. For Douyin, where Zeeschuimer cannot scrape comments, the research employs the Chinese data scraping tool Bazhuayu to collect comment data. Since TextAnalysis tools do not support Chinese, the study adapts the "Tokenise" feature in 4CAT combined with Jieba, a Chinese tokenizer, to generate top six bigrams and their frequencies. Challenges unique to Douyin also include the need for manual rematching of mismatched word pairs and manually converting exclusive emojis used by Douyin users for inclusion in the matrix plot. By addressing these complexities, the research systematically compares the textual formulas of comments on both platforms, using matrix plots to reveal patterns and differences.

### 4.3 Limitations

While TikTok and Douyin are predominantly aural platforms, this method still relies on the traditional use of hashtags to structure the comparison, rather than mapping the soundscapes. Also, This research method was unable to uncover the temporal traceability of memecry. While the study of secondary orality in internet memes is closely tied to the temporal aspects of communication (Venturini 2022, 74), this study focuses primarily on spatiality. Specifically, the method lacks a temporal flow or RankFlow to track how memetic formulas circulate and evolve over time, instead focusing on how these formulas are applied and remixed across platforms. Furthermore, despite employing various approaches to handle Chinese text, the results suggest that bigram analysis is not well-suited to the Chinese language system. More advanced and accurate Chinese language analysis models are needed to apply in the future. Lastly, due to Douyin's unique affordances, which allow users to upload pictures and GIFs in the comment section, current data scraping tools struggled to extract this content. As a result, only a limited selection of images could be manually analyzed, making it difficult to fully display metapictures or conduct a systematic visual analysis.

## 5 Finding and Discussion

### 5.1 Memetic formulas across platform

Instead of identifying "word pairs" as textual formulas (Geboers and Pilipets 2024), this research aims to identify "clip pairs" as visual formulas in TikTok and Douyin videos. Using video collages, it visually demonstrates how users construct their content in #GoodmorningVietnam on both platforms. Different colors are used to frame and categorize the similar and differing elements in the video collages, aiding in the identification of visual formulas. The findings reveal that both templates on TikTok use the same approach: combining a *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) movie clip with Vietnam War footage to construct narratives in 2022. The movie clip originates from the 1987 American comedy film of the same name (Levinson 1987), featuring a scene in which a broadcaster loudly shouts "Good Morning, Vietnam" in a mocking tone (Figure 1). On Douyin, Template 1 follows a similar method to construct its content in 2022. However, Template 2, created in 2024, employs a more complex approach. Specifically, it first appropriates a Vietnamese patriotism challenge clip from TikTok, then incorporates the movie clip with Vietnam War footage, and finally integrates Sino-Vietnamese War footage to complete the narrative. The Sino-Vietnamese War, a conflict between China and Vietnam following World

War II, ended with a Chinese victory (Figure 2). Through video collages, it becomes evident that users across both platforms utilize the combination of the movie clip and Vietnam War footage as a foundational template. Such “clip pair” emerges as a visual formula for #Good-morningVietnam. Furthermore, this visual formula is reused and remixed in Douyin’s Template 2 in 2024. By utilizing such visual formula and remixing it with new elements, it transforms the meaning of the original meme, illustrating the concept of “repetition-with-variation” of memecry.

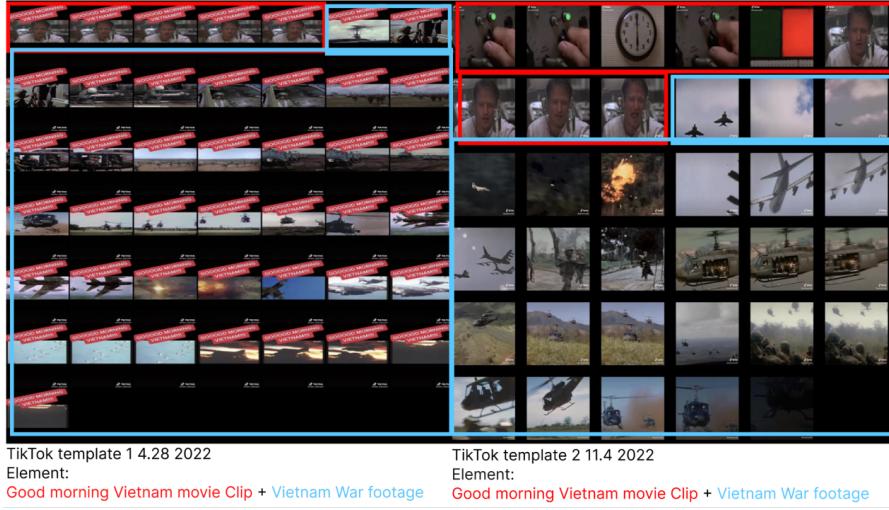


Figure 1: TikTok Video Collages with brief description

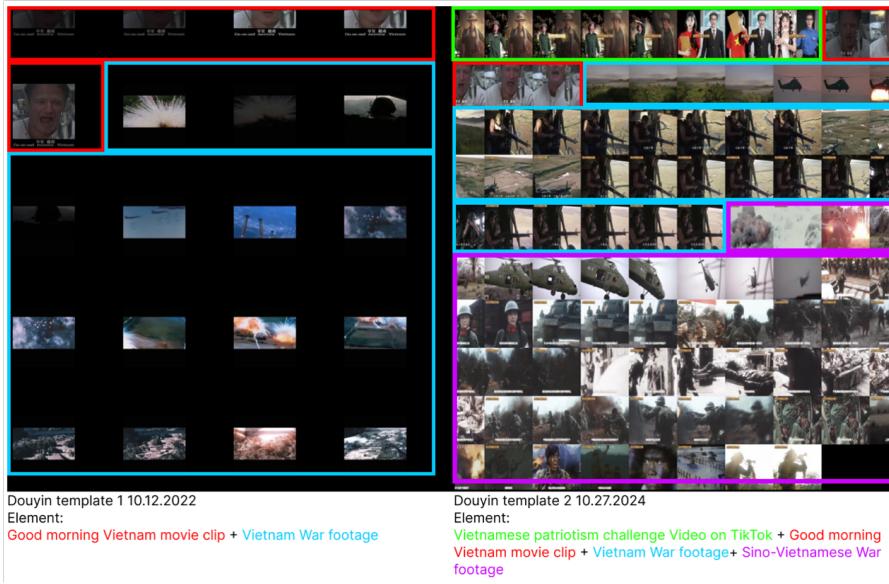


Figure 2: Douyin Video Collages with brief description

In terms of how the meaning is constructed in different ways, it can use “situation and suspense” to analyze it (Wang and Suthers 2022, 313). Situation refers to providing a context, while suspense involves the continuation of that context, prompting the question, “What happens next?” For both templates on TikTok and Template 1 on Douyin, the broadcaster’s ironic shout establishes the situation, while the suspense is introduced through the Vietnam War. The combination of such ‘situation and suspense’ ironizes the Vietnam War, aiming to mock either the Vietnamese or the Americans involved in this war. However, in Template 2 on Douyin, the

‘situation’ shifts to portray “fake” Vietnamese patriotism, highlighting the idea that Vietnam continues to suffer from the consequences of the Vietnam War despite their victory over the U.S. The ‘suspense’, in this case, pivots to the Chinese victory in the Sino-Vietnamese War. The meaning of the post transforms to the comparison and tension between “fake” Vietnamese patriotism and “real” Chinese patriotism through changing the ‘situation and suspense’.

Comment sections function as a medium of affective resonance with video posts (Geboers and Pilipets 2024). Building on this idea, this research utilizes a matrix plot to illustrate how comment sections affectively respond to memecry through word pairs and emojis (Figure 3). This approach aligns with the call to “take the comments seriously” (Reagle 2015). The matrix plot reveals that in both TikTok templates, users consistently mock the United States. Emojis such as and are used to symbolize the U.S., while conveys their reactions. Users also employ similar textual formulas, such as “oil freedom” and “freedom and democracy,” to sarcastically critique the U.S. for claiming to fight for freedom while actually pursuing wars for oil. When comparing the two TikTok templates, the affective resonance remains consistent, as both rely on similar textual formulas to satirize the hypocrisy of the U.S.

However, on Douyin, a different type of affective resonance is evoked (Paasonen 2019). For Template 1 on Douyin, while its content and visual formulas are similar to TikTok’s, users tend to mock the suffering of both Vietnam and the United States during the war. For instance, users employ formulas like “immersive experience” to express how watching the video makes them feel as though they are U.S. soldiers killing Vietnamese. Additionally, they use phrases such as “the grass is laughing” to mock the ambushes suffered by U.S. forces in Vietnam. This highlights how, despite similar content and visual formulas, the affective resonance varies across platforms. Future research could explore the reasons behind these differences and their connections to each platform’s unique vernaculars. For the “fake” Vietnamese patriotism template on Douyin, users invoke word pairs like “Xinhua News Agency” (the official outlet that announced China’s victory in the Sino-Vietnamese War) to critique “fake Vietnamese.” These textual formulas serve as an affective dissonance against “fake” Vietnamese patriotism while simultaneously evoking affective affirmation of “real” Chinese nationalism and patriotism.

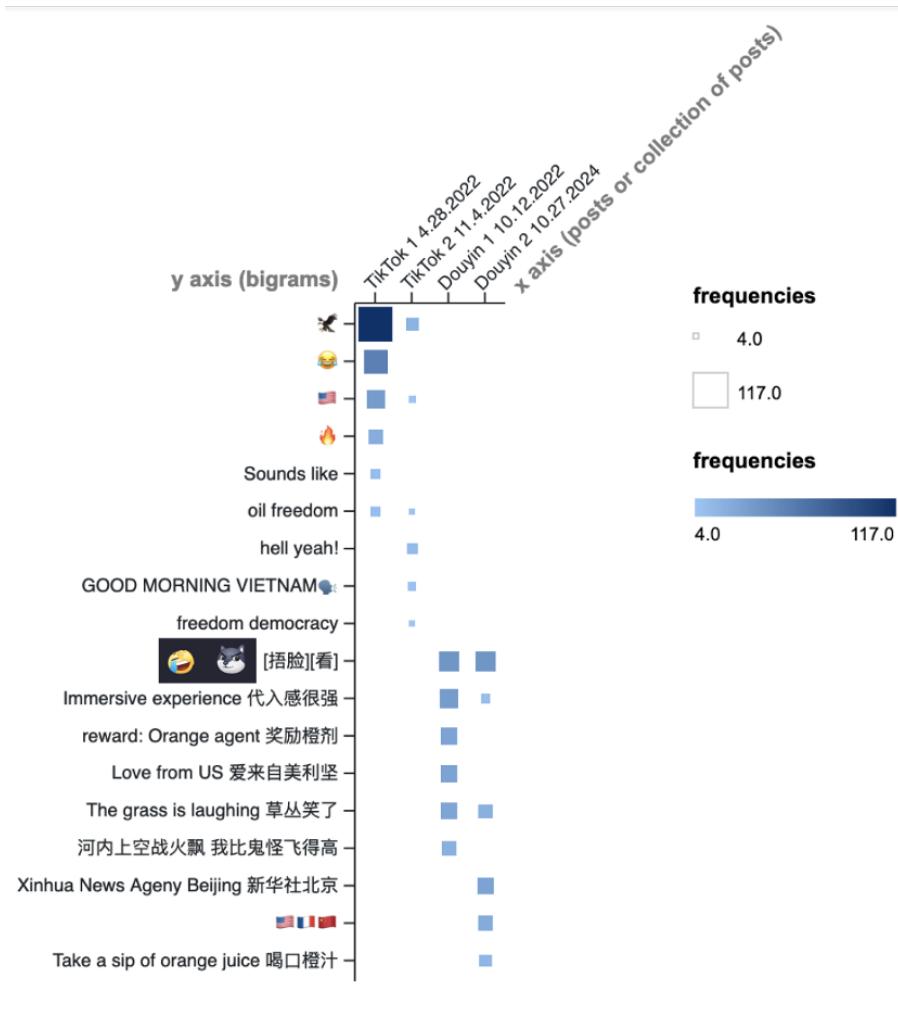


Figure 3: Matrix plot of #GoodmorningVietnam comment section on both TikTok and Douyin (with translation of text and exclusive Emoji on Douyin)

## 5.2 Special affordances and vernaculars on Douyin

During the cross-platform analysis of both content and comments, this research identified unique affordances and vernaculars on Douyin. Firstly, Douyin features an exclusive emoji system that differs from TikTok's, offering users distinct ways of expression. This unique emoji set may elicit different affective responses compared to TikTok. Additionally, Douyin allows users to upload images and GIFs directly in the comment sections (Figure 4). Under such circumstances, Douyin users have greater opportunities to creatively appropriate and assemble multiple forms of memes to engage with and respond to the content. It fosters a phenomenon described as “memes within memes,” where Douyin users combine textual memes with image-based memes to reverb with video memes. Such affordance and practice may function as affective amplifiers, providing more space for users’ affective reverberation compared to TikTok.



Figure 4: Images memes in Douyin comment section

Lastly, this research reveals that Douyin has a strong patriotism and nationalism vernacular compared to TikTok. Within the same event #Goodmorningvietnam, while TikTok users mock the hypocrisy of Americans, Douyin users indiscriminately attack outsiders and mock the suffering of both Vietnam and the United States during the war. Simultaneously, they emphasize China's victory to promote Chinese nationalism and patriotism. Through a cross-platform analysis of #GoodmorningVietnam, this research finds that, even without direct state sponsorship or intervention, light-hearted and amusing short video content promoting Chinese nationalism and patriotism on Douyin has emerged as a bottom-up, grassroots phenomenon. It argues that such playful nationalism and patriotism (Chen, Valdovinos Kaye, and Zeng 2020, 25) has already become an internal part of Douyin's platform vernacular.

## 6 Conclusion

Through a cross-platform analysis of #GoodmorningVietnam on Douyin and TikTok, this research first identified the similarities and differences in textual and visual formulas across posts and comment sections on both platforms. It found that the same event can be portrayed in distinct ways and, more importantly, that similar content can evoke different types of affective resonance across platforms. Subsequently, the research recognized the unique affordances of Douyin and explored how these features provide greater opportunities for users' affective reverberation. Finally, it illustrated how playful patriotism has become an integral part of Douyin's platform vernacular. This research underscores the importance of treating Douyin and TikTok as distinct platforms and the need for further studies on Douyin's unique affordances and vernacular.

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**Peripherals**

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# Is Luigi Mangione a hero?: Analyzing YouTube Video Formats and Audience Comments on Luigi Mangione

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## Abstract

The focus of the research was on YouTube video trends and comments on the issue space of Luigi Mangione. News videos with their purpose of new information dissemination rose during the key dates of the event, while Non-News videos underwent relatively steady trends. Initially, anti-Luigi continents dominated the issue space but over time balanced stances were apparent among uploaded videos that represent the change in public sentiment. Overall comments were dominantly supportive towards Luigi regardless of video formats. There were diverse narratives discussed in the comment section from supporting of healthcare reform to framing of Luigi as an extremist.

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# 1 Introduction

On December 4, 2024, Brian Thompson, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare, was fatally shot by a 26-year-old American man, Luigi Nicolas Mangione. UnitedHealthcare, an American insurance company, has been criticized on a number of occasions for the way it handles claims (Kliff and Abelson 2024). This premeditated assassination was motivated by Mangione's desire to critique the U.S. healthcare system. In the wake of this shocking event, Mangione's actions sparked significant public discourse on social media platforms. Public reaction to the allegations has been polarised, with some expressing sympathy for Mangione and others unequivocally condemning his alleged actions (Chohan 2025). Some individuals began to portray him as a folk hero, reflecting broader societal frustrations with the American insurance industry.

As discussions about Mangione's actions proliferated online, YouTube emerged as a central platform for shaping and negotiating public opinion on the issue. Videos on YouTube addressing the issue appeared across a range of formats, taking the form of TV formats like News or Non-News formats, such as podcasts, interviews, and talk shows. Various video formats, like journalistic objectivity, personal stories, and opinionated commentary, can cut through the issue from different angles. In addition to widening the scope of discussion, this diversity of formats also influenced how audiences engaged with these videos. YouTube comments serve as a participatory space where users engage in dialogue and contribute to community dynamics, reflecting trends in posting behavior and stance-taking over time (Boyd 2014). Audiences post comments such as Mangione's theory of innocence and the flaws in the U.S. healthcare system. These comments often reflect deep ideological divisions regarding whether the audience is on the same stance as the video. Videos sympathetic to Mangione tend to attract comments from supporters, while audiences who take a different stance from the video question its narrative. The stance-taking of videos shifted over time as new information emerged, and audience reactions often mirrored these changes.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine how Luigi Mangione's topic sphere is narrated and framed in the YouTube issue space. We aim to study the issue space by mapping and identifying the various sets of video formats on the controversial topic of the murder case by Luigi Mangione to identify what kinds of actors play significant roles in the discussion. To do this, we first classify YouTube videos into News and Non-News videos and observe their uploading trends. Furthermore, we analyze the stances of both video formats on the Luigi Mangione issue. Moreover, this paper pays attention to the differences in audience reactions across different video forms about the issue in two ways. On the one hand, we inquire whether the comments align with or diverge from the videos' stances. On the other hand, we identify the main narratives/discourses in the comment section regarding the aforementioned issue.

# 2 Initial Data Sets

## 2.1 Luigi Mangione

1. Initial DATASET by Rieder: 3 datasets extracted by Rieder ranked by date, relevance, and view count respectively.
2. Processed Dataset: Dataset ranked by date, and filtered based on comment count, categorized by video formats, with transcripts of selected videos.
3. Comment Stances of 6 videos: top 100 most liked comments from 6 chosen videos, with their general stance ranking, positions, and explanation offered by Prompt Compass.
4. Poster: a visual representation of findings that answer RQ1~RQ3.

### 3 Research Questions

1. What is the posting trend of News and Non-News YouTube videos about Luigi Mangione?
2. How does the stance-taking of these videos change over time?
3. Do comments align with or diverge from the video's stance-taking?
4. What are the main narratives in the comment section?

### 4 Methodology

The research questions are inspired by Rogers's (2018) discussion of the concept of issue space, where he mentions five factors that comprise issue space: concern, dominant voice, commitment, positioning, and alignment. Firstly, concern refers to the most impactful sources within the issue space (Rogers 2018), which can be sorted out by frequency hierarchy (Rogers 2024). In this context, the main focus is the audience's engagement with the issue, so we measure concern in the dataset by filtering videos with the most comment count. Hence, we selected the 300 most commented English videos from 6,363 YouTube videos extracted through the Video List Module on YouTube Data Tools (YTDT) (Rieder 2015) on 6 January 2025. These videos were ranked by date and retrieved by querying the term "Luigi Mangione."

Secondly, as YouTube videos are created in different formats, we manually classified the selected videos into different formats. García-Avilés and de Lara (2018) state that "Online video is characterised by its diversity of formats and also by a growing hybridisation of genres. For this reason, it is difficult to establish a typology that systematises the wide diversity that exists." Indeed some of the YouTube videos we manually inspected, could not be classified on a concrete basis as they were either combinations of transformations of different forms. Therefore, we divided "Luigi Mangione" videos into two audiovisual formats: News (a traditional TV-based News form) and Non-News (all other forms). To analyze YouTube-native content further, we divided the Non-News category into six subtypes based on their content and format: interview, podcast, narrative, commentary, talk show, and comedy. To compare the upload frequency of each video format, we can identify the dominant voice shaping the issue (Rogers 2018) over time. As Rogers (2018) states, commitment analysis examines the persistence of different actors' engagement, exploring whether they address an issue merely to follow trends or out of genuine and consistent concern. We can gain insights into how these formats as actors, demonstrate their concern for the issue by comparing their upload frequency across time. Two line graphs will be presented to address RQ1.

Thirdly, a beeswarm plot visualized the positions and alignment of News and Non-News videos throughout the timeline, aiming to answer RQ2. According to Rogers (2018), positioning is evaluated by using terms to express an actor's concern, which can either push the agenda forward or exclude them from the discussion. Alignment analyzes who uses the same issue language to share similar positions (Rogers 2018). Ziems et al. (2024) introduce stance detection as a task design for the utilization of large language models (LLMs). From their evaluation metric results, it is evident that ChatGPT is reasonably accurate with a score of 76.0% in detecting stances of a given text (Ziems et al. 2024). Accordingly, in our case, we attempt to evaluate each video's stance toward Luigi by using ChatGPT from Prompt Compass (Borra and Plique 2024). First, we used the YTDT Transcript Scraper (Rieder 2015) to extract transcripts from the 300 most-commented videos. We then filtered out videos with empty transcripts, leaving us with 259 valid videos. After, we employed Prompt Compass (Borra and Plique 2024) to analyze and identify the stance expressed in each video. Here is the prompt used to generate videos' stances:

*System prompt: You are an advanced interpreting AI helping researchers study social media data. You know a lot about Luigi Mangione News. You are tasked by the researchers with extracting narratives from the comments of YouTube videos on Luigi Mangione News.*

*Prompt: On a scale from -5 to 5, -5=Anti-Luigi, 0=Neutral, 5=Pro-Luigi, how positive is the whole comment section on the role of Luigi, and briefly explain why*

*Your answer must be lowercase. Provide it in [stance score, narrative stance, “your explanation”] format*

Eventually, we generated a beeswarm plot to illustrate the trends of stance-taking in News and Non-News videos over time, with the size of each dot indicating the comment count, thereby addressing RQ2.

Fourthly, we chose the three most-commented videos with stance scores of -5, 0, and 5 from each of the two video formats, yielding six videos that take extreme stances with the highest levels of commentator engagement. Applying YTDT, we extracted the top 20 comments from each video and filtered 100 comments for each video by like count. We copied comment texts and asked ChatGPT (OpenAI 2023) to generate an overall stance and narratives of 6 comment sections respectively. Here is the prompt used to generate commentators’ stances:

*You are an advanced interpreting AI helping researchers study social media data. You are tasked to analyze the comment section of videos discussing the killing of United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson by Luigi Mangione. Users in the comment section are discussing whether this killing was justified or not. You are tasked by the researchers with extracting narratives from the comments of YouTube videos to better understand whether the users sympathize with Luigi.*

*Prompt: On a scale from -5 to 5, -5=Anti-Luigi, 0=Neutral, 5=Pro-Luigi, how positive is the whole comment section on the role of Luigi, and briefly explain why*

*Your answer must be lowercase. Provide it in [stance score, narrative stance, “your explanation”] format*

We created a matrix plot to visualize the different stances taken by comment sections in News and Non-News videos. It highlights three distinct stances—positive, neutral, and negative—across these two categories of videos. This allows us to compare how each stance is distributed within the comment sections of News-related content versus Non-News content, which answers RQ4.

Finally, we generated word clouds using WordItOut (WordItOut 2025) for each comment section by selecting words with a minimum frequency of 3 and including the top 20 words for each cloud. This approach allowed us to map the main narratives within the comment sections, addressing RQ4.

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 The Posting Trend of Various Video Formats

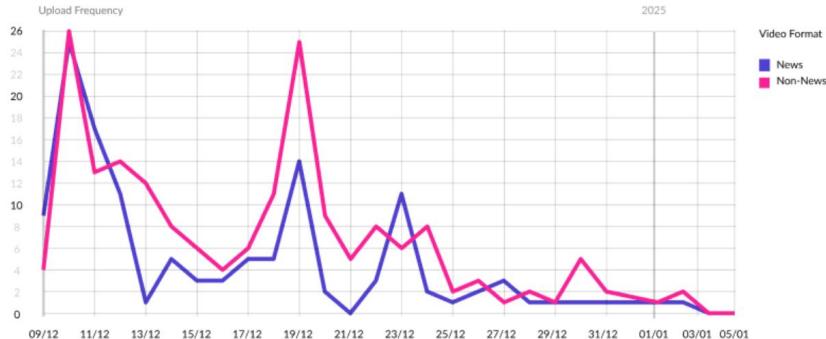


Figure 1

Figure 1: Line graph: The trend of News and Non-News video uploads.

Figure 1 depicts how the number of News videos and Non-News videos about “Luigi Mangione” posted on YouTube changes over time. By distinguishing the upload frequency of each actor, it is possible to detect the presence of a dominant voice in the discussion of the incident and identify where the dominant voice comes from.

Initially, News videos dominated the issue space, and the 3 peaks of News video uploads closely align with the three key dates:

9 December — Luigi got arrested (Sayer 2024)

19 December — Luigi’s first appearance in the court (Katersky, Shapiro, and Nalty 2024)

23 December — Luigi pleaded not guilty (Bernd Debusmann Jr 2024).

News videos dramatically decreased after the 23rd, probably because there was no new progress to be delivered to the masses. It illustrates that the News videos always work for reporting the murder itself, and seldom extend discussions, which shows the characteristics of timeliness and focus of the format.

Non-News videos caught up within three days and remained dominant from 12 to 22 December. Two prominent peaks were observed on 10 December and 19 December, corresponding to critical turning points in the incident that garnered increased public attention. An interesting observation is that the number of Non-News videos shows less fluctuation compared to the News videos. A notable gap is evident on December 19, when these videos jump into the extended discussions that usually revolve around Luigi personally and the health insurance system, probably people praising and supporting Luigi and his appearance through them. Furthermore, it is evident that after December 19, the number of Non-News videos declined gradually, indicating that the Non-News channels paying progressively less attention to this murder as they had to switch their focus to other trendy topics to attract audiences.

Overall, the number of Non-News videos is much greater than News videos, showing that people pay more attention to the extra information that surrounds the issue of murder, instead of the murder itself. However, News videos are more persistent in discourse construction than their counterpart. Non-News videos are mostly created by independent commercial companies or individuals, and there is not as strong a sense of responsibility and motivation to keep track of events. However, the rapid rebound of Non-News videos in the early stage reflects to some extent that the monopoly of News media on information dissemination is nowadays threatened, and more and more actors representing the interests of different groups are involved in the discussion of events.

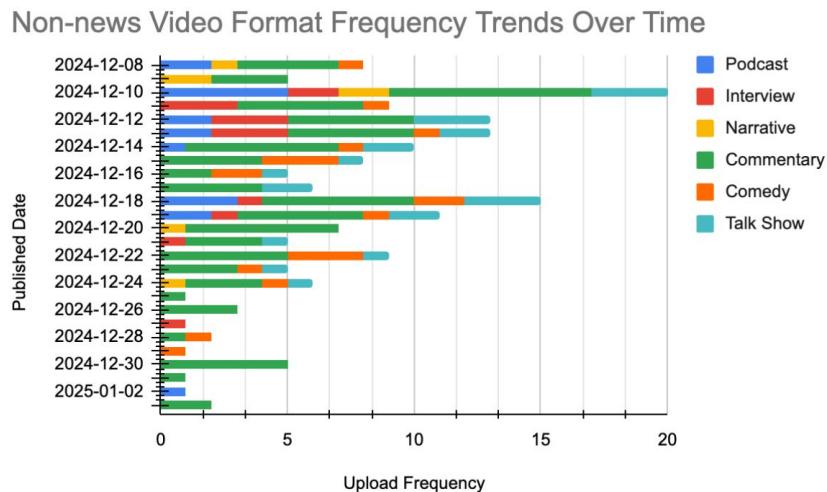


Figure 2: Bar graph: Non-News video format frequency trends over time.

The number of Non-News videos posted peaked on 10 December and has been on a fluctuating downward trend ever since. The number of different types of videos is not even, with Commentary videos always accounting for a large proportion of the total and covering almost the whole period, which can be reckoned as the dominant type of Non-News videos. Interviews, Comedy, Talk Shows, and podcasts, on the other hand, are trending well in the early part of the period, but are unstable from the middle of the period onwards, and are largely absent in the later part of the period. This reflects the fact that Non-News videos pay attention to the event by commenting and discussing it, which is an individual opinion output. On the other hand, the types of videos that require complex post-production and higher production costs are relatively few, reflecting to some extent the limitations of Non-News videos.

## 5.2 The Changes in Stance-taking of Videos Over Time



Figure 3: Beeswarm plot: Stance-taking of News and Non-News videos over time.

The beeswarm chart reveals differences in the distribution of YouTube video content on Luigi. First, it is clear that the number of videos against Luigi significantly exceeds the number of videos in support of Luigi, especially between December 7 and December 23, when anti-Luigi videos appear very densely and occupy the lower half of the chart. After December 23, the distribution of positions became more balanced, with an increasing number of neutral and pro-Luigi videos. Interestingly, News videos are more likely to take an anti-Luigi stance, while Non-News videos show a more evenly distributed range of positions. Despite this, anti-Luigi videos consistently attract more people to participate in the discussion, as shown by the size of the bubbles representing comments, highlighting the ability of this stance to spark significant controversy. Counterintuitively, pro-Luigi videos are not as numerous, which means that YouTube may have deleted reports of related support content, indicating that platform moderation or algorithmic factors may have an impact on this uneven distribution. At the same time, this deletion may distort people's expressed emotions, further amplifying the anti-Luigi narrative.

The clear initial dominance of anti-Luigi videos suggests a wave of concentrated negative sentiment early in the timeline, perhaps due to heightened attention or the emergence of opposing views. The shift to a more balanced stance after December 23 suggests that anti-Luigi content has become saturated or that new alternative views have not yet emerged. The differences between News and Non-News videos further highlight the role of video type in shaping public discourse—Non-News is more likely to drive polarized discussions due to its highly subjective views, while News videos tend to take a more critical stance due to their more neutral views and tendency to narrate facts. In addition, the larger comment bubbles on anti-Luigi videos highlight the stronger public engagement with these narratives, raising questions about the interplay between content visibility and audience engagement. The removal of pro-Luigi videos complicates the narrative, suggesting that potential platform moderation may suppress supportive content, thereby distorting apparent public sentiment. The uneven distribution of stances, especially the dominance of anti-Luigi videos early in the timeline, highlights the influence of visibility, platform moderation, and audience engagement in shaping digital discourse.

### 5.3 The Relationship Between Stances of Video Formats and Comments

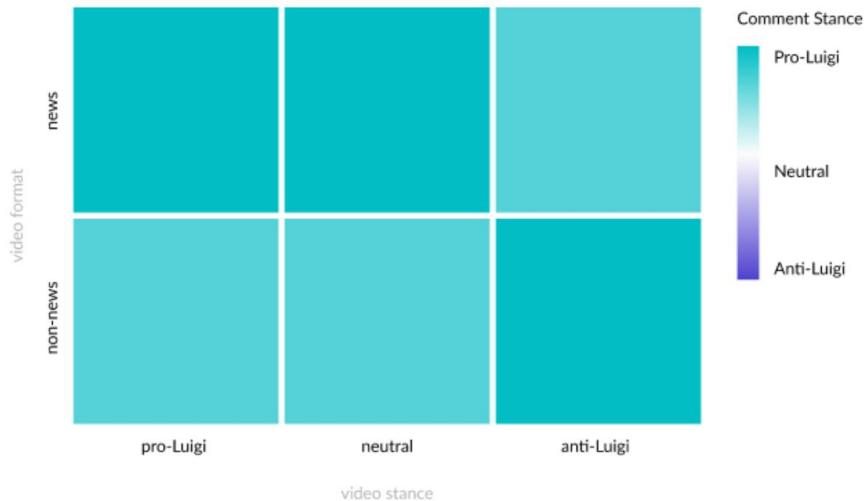


Figure 4: Matrix plot: Stance-taking in comments of News and Non-News videos.

The matrix plot shows the comparison between the stance of the videos and the stance of their comments. Obviously, the predominance of blue across the grid suggests that the comments skew pro-Luigi, regardless of the stance or format of the videos. This indicates a broader trend of audience support for Luigi in the YouTube discourse, which could stem from public sentiment.

The evaluation of the relationship between stances of video formats and their comments reveals a contrasting pattern. When we inspect pro-Luigi videos, comments on News videos tend to be more supportive of Luigi compared to those on Non-News videos. In the same way, when analyzing anti-Luigi videos, comments on News videos exhibit less support for Luigi than those on Non-News videos. This suggests that the alignment between the stance of comments and News videos is stronger than that observed with Non-News videos. It highlights the greater opinion-leading influence of News videos compared to Non-News content.

Compared to the stance of comments on Non-News videos, the comments on News videos are relatively more supportive of Luigi. In the context of the known generally favorable attitude of society at large towards Luigi, this partly reflects a relatively higher willingness to post comments reflecting personal opinions underneath the News video than Non-News video. It is worth noting that the comments on the anti-Luigi Non-News videos exhibit a stance that diverges significantly from the video's position. Most comments complain about the insurance system, criticizing it as unequal and unfair to individuals. Moreover, this negative reaction extends to deeper class issues, with commentators utilizing the situation to express their exasperation and disgust at capitalist exploitation.

## 5.4 The Main Narratives in the Comment Section



Figure 5: Word cloud for comments of News with pro-Luigi stance.

Supportive News content about Luigi Mangione is replete with confirmatory words like “Luigi,” “healthcare,” “insurance,” and “people,” among other confirmatory words, suggesting his active positioning in the healthcare field. The presence of words such as “love,” “free,” and “care” in the text suggests a plea for available medical action and for people to show compassion. The positive naming of things such as “profit” and the simultaneous presentation of words such as “murder” as positive terms suggest a positive contribution by Luigi and the use of critical language about negative practices in the industry. The public response is likely to be mostly filled with gratitude and honor, pointing to the need for broader reforms driven by Luigi’s great accomplishments. All of these points can be amplified through journalistic content in the affirmation of public opinion, which sees Luigi as the creator of subsequent healthcare reforms.



Figure 6: Word cloud for comments of News with neutral stance.

The word cloud stands for remarks that are neutral in respect to News and are addressed to Luigi Mangione. Words and phrases such as “people”, “prison”, “healthcare”, and “system” bear out focus on a broader range of social issues rather than intense criticism or backing of the enterprise. The words “insurance”, “jury”, and “justiceiscoming” show the same situation of both healthcare and legal services without siding with one view more than the other. “CEO” and “MONSTAMILKCEO” are the terms that indicate the factual affordance to mention the role of Luigi by the audience without giving away any judgment. In general, the whole point of view is rather impartial, concentrating on the social-political aspects of the topic without pointing the finger at Luigi directly. This format likely presents Luigi within a broader societal or political context without expressing clear bias, offering viewers a balanced perspective. The audience response to this type of content is often analytical, engaging with the presented facts rather than reacting emotionally. Neutral videos serve as a foundation for viewers to form their own opinions, fostering discussions grounded in evidence rather than sentiment.



Figure 7: Word cloud for comments of News with anti-Luigi stance.

Criticism against Luigi Mangione was severe, with emotionally charged language like “disturbing,” “painful,” “enemy,” and “killed”, among other emotionally charged terms used to criticize his actions and character. This inflammatory rhetoric highlights Mangione as the perpetrator of the extreme act of violence that killed the health insurance company’s CEO. The story goes from telling a tale about the failing of the system to condemnation of Luigi’s personal responsibility, an unsafe man compelled by his anger and resentment rather than a reformer with a will for justice. Recurrent references to “cancer” and “treatment” point toward resentment because of medical failures, but murderous acting belies legitimate criticism. Frequent use of such terms as “media,” “rules,” and “CEO” suggests a broad critique of corporate greed and exploitation, but the behavior of Luigi places him, if anything, utterly outside this critique, making him an actor of violence rather than any form of real change. The general public generally thought of him as a criminal who could not justify his behavior whatsoever. This view was further engrained by the authoritative News reports portraying the criticism as fact-based and justified, fixing in the public’s mind the image of Mangione as a dangerous man who needed to be held legally and morally accountable for his violent behavior.



Figure 8: Word cloud for comments of Non-News with pro-Luigi stance.

This word cloud shows Non-News comments that support Luigi Mangione. The presence of middle words such as “people”, “care”, “health”, and “better” indicates the supportive attitude that identifies Luigi with improvement in healthcare. Other words, like “right”, “need”, and “free”, indicate an endorsement by the people of accessible health care and changes in the system. Positive descriptors, such as “love” and “better”, indicate adoration; “Billions” and “profit” might connote favor of wealth redistribution or business success. This story of Luigi pits him as an agent toward change in a positive direction and is very well-received by his followers.

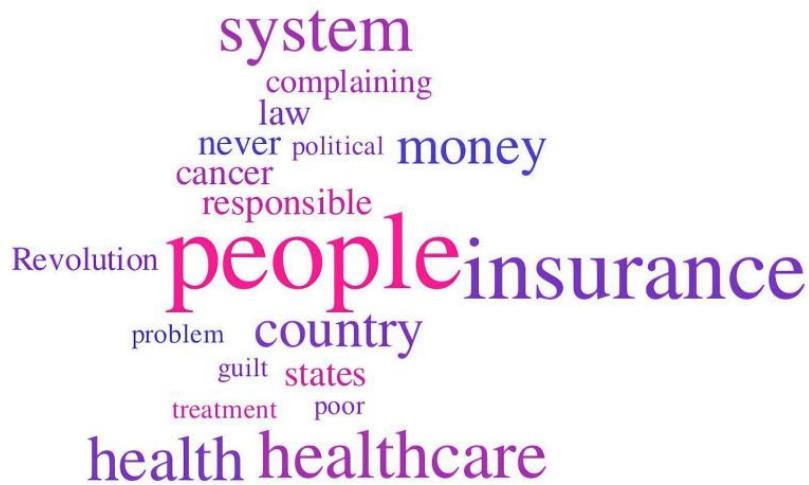


Figure 9: Word cloud for comments of Non-News with neutral stance.

Neutral commentary on healthcare systems and corporate dynamics focuses on providing clear, fact-based analysis without expressing positive or negative bias. Terms that are most commonly used in everyday conversations include “insurance,” “CEO,” “company,” and “patient”; these all center on the way in which the business of healthcare operates and how companies impact the industry. Other discussions on healthcare issues use such terms as “family,” “medical,” and “choice,” reflecting the more practical aspects of considering healthcare delivery and patient choices. The material would interest a targeted audience seeking explanation and importantly, objectivity with no polarized argumentation. Consequences are that audience

responses are reasoned and fact-based, therefore fostering informative discussions rather than emotive reactions, and placing understanding above emotional responses. Such an analytic approach helps the audiences inform themselves and have meaningful conversations with regard to complex issues of healthcare and business engagement.

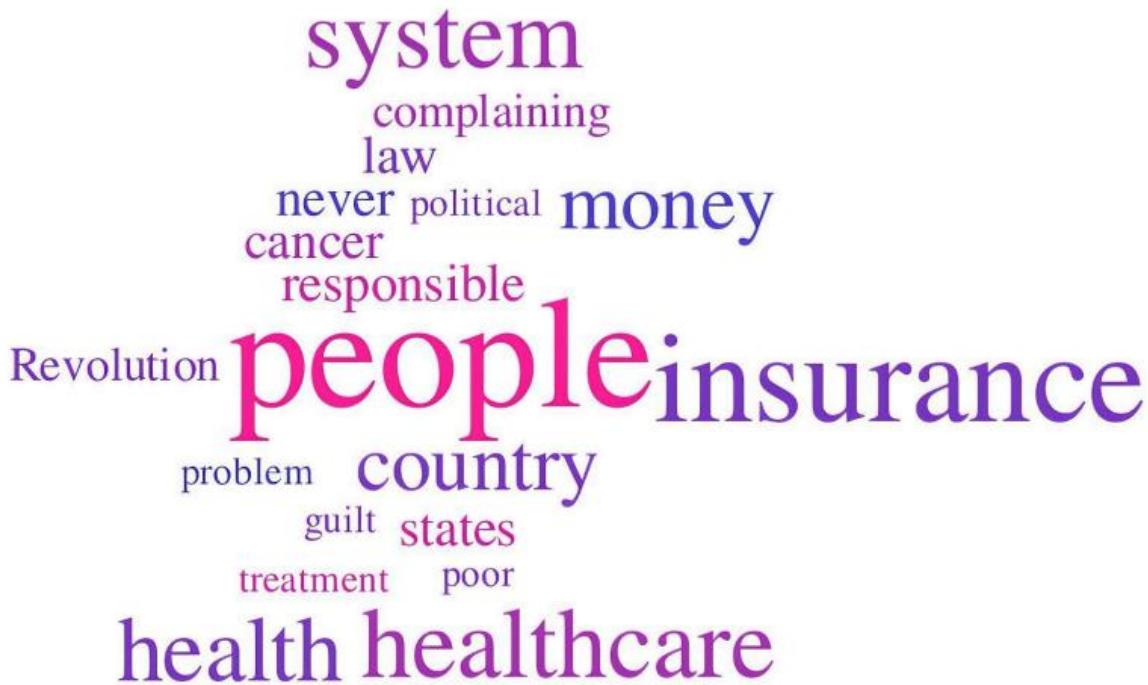


Figure 10: Word cloud for comments of Non-News with anti-Luigi stance.

This would frame Luigi Mangione as an extremist actor if the video shows him directly killing the chief executive officer of the health insurance company. In this shift from systemic critique to questions of morality and legitimacy of his personal actions, in this context, words such as “system,” “responsibility,” “guilt,” and “whining” would sound more appropriately used in analyzing Luigi’s motivations rather than the mere critique of the healthcare system. He is not portrayed as any kind of symbol of the system; he is shown to have revenge on an already corrupt system in a way that was fiercely personal. The reaction of the public to such content will most likely be complex and polarized. Others may perceive his behavior as “extreme justice,” with him being a victim of a corrupt healthcare system that was forced into desperation. While a significant number of other people would squarely condemn his violence, want to see him arraigned in court, and protest that such acts are never justifiable. This might easily stir in every form an emotional debate of understanding his motive or condemning the method.

In short, YouTube comments about Luigi Mangione illustrate highly polarized public opinion, made in the wake of the media’s tone. Those commentators who are sympathetic to Luigi put as their main theme his commitment to national health reform. The concepts of sympathy, availability, and improvement of a system are central to this argument. Such terms as “compassion”, “health”, and “better” amongst others are strong markers of admiration of his quest to bring change to the health system. These neutral reviews put neighbors into analytical talks by focusing on positively driven facts about health care and corporate dynamics. These insights thereby compel viewers to be on the lookout for forming original judgments. The incomplete or insufficient healthcare service caused the patients to suffer and die for no reason. He further says that as health care progresses, the number of errors will decrease and the services will be

more effective. On the other hand, discussing the topic, anti-Luigi material highlights negative views assuming a highly unrealistic stance pulling down the hero of the film and making his valid complaints go unnoticed. Consciously, there is no way to describe the copiousness of disrespect and contempt in these texts that explicates the public as a critic of his methods, if not legally, then ethically. This inconsistency in the public reaction proves that the issue, whether one is against, for, or indifferent to the narrative, is the crucial means of controlling people's opinions. In any case, Luigi Mangione does shine as a complicated personality, the one that happens to be revered by those who see him as a reform activist and, at the same time, the one condemned by those who view him as the one who inflicts unwarranted lethal damage. It also becomes symbolic of a larger, very complex public discourse through which flows the dominant influence of the media on societal attitude and the very critical part the actors play in either advocating reform or being blamed.

## 6 Discussion

The aim of the project was first to find out the dominant voices and actors in the discourse of Luigi Mangione's issue by studying the posting trend of News and Non-News YouTube videos. A dramatic increase in News video uploads during the key dates and decreases after 21 December suggested the formats' informative nature that only focuses on the issue when there is new information to be delivered to the masses. Non-News videos show a less fluctuating trend in uploads illustrating extended discussions regarding the background and contextual information on the issue. Among Non-News videos, Commentary videos were the dominant voices, while the upload frequency of other formats decreased over time. This reflects how commentary and discussion about the issue sustained itself throughout the timeline, while the other forms of videos that require high resources, such as Comedy had some limitations.

The second analysis was conducted to identify the stance-taking of these videos over time. The beeswarm plot showed that the Anti-Luigi videos were dominant in the earlier period and became more balanced as time passed. Proportionately, News videos with anti-Luigi stances were high while Non-News videos were relatively evenly distributed in terms of stances. The overall trend shift from anti-Luigi to more balanced stances shows the public sentiment towards the issue.

The third analysis was on whether comments aligned with the video's stances or not. The overall positions in comments show a pro-Luigi stance regardless of the stances and formats of the videos that explicitly represent public opinion. We found out that the alignment between the stances of comment and News videos is stronger than Non-News videos that highlight the significant influence of information from News format.

Lastly, we investigated the main narratives in the comment section. The findings showed that the comments of pro-Luigi News videos demonstrated that he is widely recognized for his influential contributions to healthcare, with public discussion emphasizing feelings of compassion, reform, and gratitude for his efforts. This shows how News content can amplify this perception by portraying Luigi as a prime mover in meaningful healthcare reform. The comments of neutrally stanced News videos as a whole focused on the socio-political aspects of the issue of Luigi and maintained a fairly unbiased view. Criticism of Luigi Mangione was intense and deeply personal, painting him as a violent and dangerous individual in the comment section of anti-Luigi News videos. His actions including the killing of a health insurance CEO, were driven by anger and resentment rather than a genuine desire for reform.

This narrative, reinforced by authoritative news reports, solidified the public perception of Mangione as a criminal whose behavior was indefensible and incompatible with any meaningful critique of systemic issues. The comments in Non-News pro-Luigi videos often indicated a supportive attitude with the hopes for changes in the healthcare system, while responses in

neutral videos were fact-based and derived informative discussion rather than emotive reactions. Comparatively, audiences of anti-Luigi videos framed Luigi Mangione as an extremist actor and questioned the legitimacy of the action.

## 7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the research provided insight into how controversial topics like the murder case by Luigi Mangione are narrated and framed in the YouTube issue space. YouTube is a space for discussion where a range of styles and formats of videos arise. These various formats function differently depending on their aim and targeted audience. For instance, News videos may prioritize the effectiveness of their informative function over their aesthetic function (García-Avilés and de Lara 2018). Furthermore, YouTube is a participatory issue space where audiences engage in conversation in the comment section (Boyd 2014). This research, therefore, sheds light on the stance-taking on the side of creators and channels with different video formats, and audience reactions. However, the causal relationship between the video formats and the audience comments was not clearly shown. Rather, it was apparent that audiences tend to take a supportive stance towards Luigi Mangione regardless of the videos they consume.

This research has inherent limitations and challenges. To begin with, we did not study the whole set of videos regarding the issue of Luigi Mangione but minimized and operationalized the dataset into analyzable size. The dataset sorted by comment count still has significance, but may fail to map the whole discursive practices. To address the gap in our research, we could analyze videos with fewer comments to explore why they have lower engagement. This might be due to YouTube’s content moderation or the content being less appealing. Furthermore, there are some potential biases when using LLMs for large-scale qualitative analysis, including stance ranking and narrative conclusions across 259 videos. Additionally, the videos we extracted may have already been moderated by YouTube algorithms, which only present us with videos YouTube allows us to see. Furthermore, according to Ziems et al. (2024), “LLMs can augment but not entirely replace the traditional CSS research pipeline”. The authors note that it is inevitable for researchers to manually validate the generative results. Therefore, while the LLM was employed as a “truth generator,” we also manually analyzed and mapped the main narratives of the six most representative videos. Notably, our manual findings aligned with the stances generated by the LLM, lending some validity to the model’s conclusions. The content analysis of word cloud is similar to the stance-taking results generated by LLMs, that is they are all pro-Luigi but with slightly different narratives. This alignment highlights the potential for researchers to effectively collaborate with LLMs in future studies. It also underscores the importance of critically considering how LLMs are utilized for both quantitative and qualitative text analysis, as well as the need to establish robust methods for validating their outputs.

Therefore, future research should investigate the potential impact of YouTube’s content moderation policies and algorithmic dynamics on the balance of discourse: whether such practices disproportionately amplify or suppress certain narrative perspectives. From a social perspective, the platform’s handling of polarizing content needs to be more transparent and represent different positions fairly to prevent distortions in public opinion. From a technical perspective, improving tools such as Prompt Compass to detect and account for bias could increase the accuracy and reliability of position analysis in social media research.

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## Kung Fu films as method: Viewing the dilemma of Chinese Wuxia culture in the Western context

Peizhe Li<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This essay critically examines the phenomenon of cultural appropriation in Kung Fu films within the Western context, analyzing how the cultural and philosophical core of Chinese Wuxia traditions has been transformed and commodified for global audiences. Beginning with Bruce Lee's international breakthrough in the 1970s, Kung Fu films have served as a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures, yet this cross-cultural translation has often resulted in the reduction of Kung Fu from a complex cultural tradition to a visual spectacle divorced from its spiritual foundations. The study explores three key dimensions: what has been appropriated (the transformation of Wuxia culture into 'oriental spectacle'), why this appropriation occurs (commercial imperatives and cultural-economic mediation), and how it manifests (through identity passing and cultural hybridization). Drawing on examples from Kung Fu Panda to Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, the analysis reveals how Western cinema has both exploited and potentially preserved Chinese cultural elements. The essay concludes by advocating for a non-Western-centric perspective that recognizes the agency of Chinese cultural producers and the possibility for more equitable cross-cultural dialogue in global cinema.

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## 1 Introduction

The first breakthrough of Chinese cinema worldwide should be attributed to Kung Fu films. Beginning with the first worldwide popularity of Bruce Lee's films in the 1970s, while breaking the one-way importation of the Western cinema industry into China, it has also taken the first step to compete with Western blockbusters for the international market and cultural share, reshaping the Western imagination of Chinese society and artistic expressions (Shu 2003). The image of 'Kung fu' has since been a striking symbol of Chinese identity to attach the local Chinese culture to the global audience, offering the public an entry point into the rich traditions of Chinese philosophy and storytelling (Li 2001).

Unlike its independently disseminated image in the international arena, the local manifestations of Kung Fu are demonstrated as an attached product of Chinese Wuxia texts. As the source of the cultural and spiritual core of Kung fu, Wuxia, or Chinese martial arts, is a literary and cinematic tradition centred on the expression of chivalry, honour and collective morality rooted in Chinese traditional philosophy and folklore. Thus, Kung fu, or *Wushu* as its local name, is one of the concrete presentations of Wuxia culture embedded with Chinese social-cultural values such as positive personal growth, justice and national loyalty (Hill 2018). However, with the expansion of international influence, the 'Westernized version' of Kung Fu culture in the global cinema market has gradually dissolved its core of Wuxia culture and switched into an 'oriental spectacle' (Chen 2021). This phenomenon involves cultural appropriation, which means the unauthorised use of Kung Fu culture for consumption and profit without a complete understanding of its Wuxia cultural core (Baker 2018; W. C. Wang 2008). Therefore, while recognising the positive role of Kung Fu films in the translation of Chinese culture, the problem of cultural appropriation in Kung Fu films and the dilemma of disseminating Wuxia culture in the Western context need to be further examined. This essay will critically review the phenomenon of cultural appropriation in Kung Fu films in the Western context and attempt to analyse the reasons and approaches behind this appropriation. Through this analysis, this essay also aims to provide an insight into the broader implications of using Kung Fu as a medium for cross-cultural dialogue and its role in the evolving narrative of Chinese cultural identity.

## 2 What's been appropriated: the core of Kung Fu

From Chinese Wushu to the hybridised version of Kung Fu for the Western film market, appropriation in Kung Fu cinema emerges and deepens with the spreading and evaluating process of Kung Fu culture, starting from drawing on the aesthetic and physical aspects of martial elements and further extending to misunderstand or strip away the philosophical and narrative core of Chinese Wuxia culture (Chang 2007). One of the most prominent appropriations in Kung Fu films is the transformation of Kung Fu into a visual spectacle, where both the Chinese and Western film industries should be blamed. As exporters, the Hong Kong film industry produced the earliest batch of internationally orientated Kung Fu films represented by Bruce Lee's films (Li 2001), which have actively borrowed Western cinema's narrative conventions and focused on adding visually striking shots, such as close-ups of martial arts actions and the actor's body (Wong and Rinehart 2013). It shifts the focus of the Kung Fu film's narrative away from the cultural dimension into the visual dimension, drawing the Western public attention to the martial arts body movements rather than the cultural connotation. In addition, when absorbed into Western cinema, Kung Fu narratives have not escaped the conventions of Western film patterns with the emphasis on the intricate combat choreography and physicality of martial arts, where the philosophical core and cultural significance of Kung Fu still face the neglect (W. C. Wang 2008). A typical example is *Kung Fu Panda*, whose focus is humour

and action sequences, while the underlying values of personal growth and discipline, as rooted in Chinese Wuxia culture, are presented in a diluted form (C. Wang 2017). The consequence of this overemphasis on Kung Fu's artistic and physical elements is that expressions of Kung Fu about martial arts action are initially shaped and appropriated as an independent 'visual spectacle' from its initial introduction to Western society.

In addition, the differences in social ideologies between China and the West may lead to barriers to cross-cultural translation (Himood 2009), and thus, the dissemination of the spiritual core of Kung Fu culture about traditional Chinese Wuxia culture and philosophy would also encounter the obstacles. With the ideological barrier, the Western narrative tends to ignore those cultural and philosophical elements rather than seeking for a complete understanding when using or discussing Kung Fu culture (Chen 2021). As a result, the core of Kung Fu has not been negatively interrupted and affected by Western appropriation. However, this neglect is also the direct cause for simplifying Kung Fu as a cultural symbol representing an 'exotic' and 'mystical' East. For instance, incomplete knowledge of Kung Fu's cultural base may give rise to a consensus among West films to frequently depict Kung Fu masters as wise and disciplined figures, reinforcing stereotypes that essentialize Chinese identity (Cao 2016). While such portrayals can foster admiration, they also confine Chinese culture to a narrow set of characteristics, overlooking the diversity and complexity of Chinese Wuxia traditions. This westernised image of Kung Fu has been removed from its local context and reinvented in the Western imagination as a stereotypical 'oriental spectacle', detached from its original cultural meaning under the appropriation process.

### 3 Why appropriated: a commercial success

The appropriation of Kung Fu can be attributed to its market and cultural adaptation as a cultural product, where Kung Fu elements share the potential to be reshaped to align with commercial and cultural imperatives to fit in the globalization process. This process can be seen as a cultural-economic mediation process, where cultural elements are commodified and adapted to meet the demands of global audiences (Tse, Shin, and Tsang 2020). During this reconciliation, the 'fashionability' of Kung Fu in the worldwide context has gradually been established through a combination of cultural values and economic dynamics (Tse, Shin, and Tsang 2020), while this pursuit of commercial popularity is still accompanied by the dissolution of the cultural and philosophical core of Kung Fu films under cultural appropriation.

As briefly mentioned in the previous analysis, with its attractive visuals and universal themes such resilience and self-discipline, Kung Fu can offer an easily translatable framework that aligns with Western cinematic preferences. Therefore, compared with the background Wuxia philosophy and traditions, Kung Fu is better suited to be directly absorbed into Western market and capture audience attention while transcending linguistic and cultural barriers with the visual effects from martial arts. However, simplifying its cultural roots may result in a product prioritizing accessibility over authenticity. Further, when participating in the Western cinema market, Kung Fu with its commercial appeal would be appropriated during cultural hybridisation. While this blending can present a dynamic interaction and recreation between Kung Fu culture and Western narratives, during entering the Western system, Kung Fu elements tend to undergo the process of 'Western validation', specifically resulting in a reconfiguration of its narrative themes, shifting the focus from collective values and moral dilemmas found in Wuxia traditions to the Western or universal norm (Tse, Shin, and Tsang 2020; Ryoo 2009).

A typical example to further describe the cultural appropriation during hybridisation is *Kung Fu Panda* (Figure 1). It presents as a blend of humour and Kung Fu actions that resonates with global viewers, reflecting a series of universal values such as braveness, valuable friendships and family links. The cultural connotations presented by these values comes from Western

traditional values and narrative habits which usually focus on individual heroism, which are apart from the original cultural roots of Kung Fu. This commodification reshapes Kung Fu into a universally consumable spectacle, detaching it from its deeper cultural and philosophical foundations.



Figure 1: Kung Fu Panda, 2019

### 3.1 How appropriated: the ambiguous identity

The appropriating approach of Kung Fu culture in Western cinema is mainly reflected in adaptation and transplantation. During this process, the elements of Kung Fu are reshaped to fit commercial and narrative needs, making it more accessible to a global audience. As a result, the identity of Kung Fu has generally become ambiguous when crossing cultural boundaries, providing a linkage for the fusion and interaction between Chinese cultural genes and Western cultural implantation.

A central aspect of this appropriation is 'identity passing', which refers to adapting cultural and identity markers to align with another identity in different cultural contexts (Oh 2020). By imitating or recreating the classic sequences, martial arts actions and characters of Kung Fu masters from Chinese Wuxia films, Western cinema has created a 'Kung Fu identity' in its cultural context. However, this Westernised identity stops at imitating these superficial performance elements of Kung Fu; the deeper connotations of Kung Fu in the context of Wuxia culture may lose among Western audiences. Thus, this identity passing reflects a power relationship raised from the cultural hybridisation of Chinese and Western culture at the intersection of Kung Fu, while in shaping new identities, Western cultures have unconsciously appropriated the Kung Fu elements by ignoring the cultural roots behind them. Kung Fu, here as an intersection, can further be interpreted as a 'third space' from Homi Bhabha, offering a dynamic space for interaction and reinvention of various cultures, which may also enable the appearance of the inequality of cultural power (Bhandari 2022). This power inequality first occurred at the beginning of the internationalisation of Chinese Kung Fu cinema, with Bruce Lee's films, such as *The Way of the Dragon*, being the most typical.

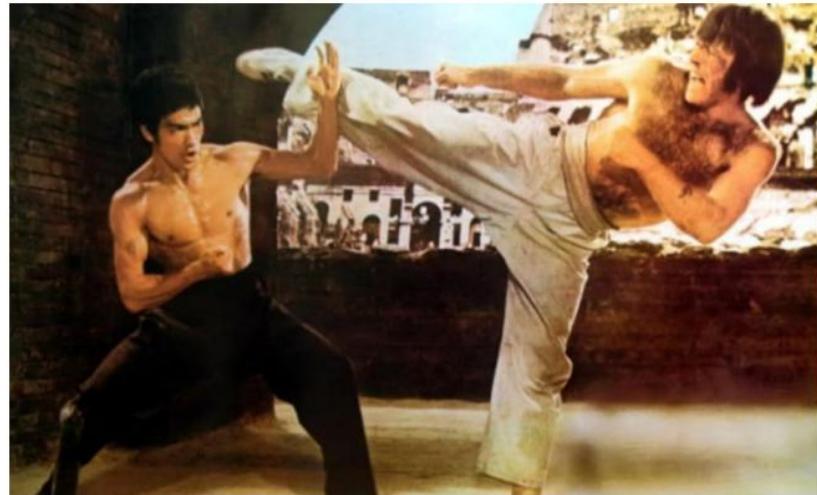


Figure 2: The Way of the Dragon

In the film *The Way of the Dragon*, Bruce Lee's martial arts moves are interpreted as dramatic 'performative violence' and his character was interpreted as an 'exotic hero' instead of the original image of a patriotic young man (Bowman 2011). This example proves that Western culture, as a strong culture, dominates the narrative in the process of interaction and re-creation in the 'third space', symbolising Kung Fu culture, a weak culture, as an element of 'entertainment' or 'performance'. Thus, cultural appropriation and exploitation continue to exist in this power imbalance during the identity reconstruction process of Kung Fu and Wuxia culture.

### 3.2 Beyond the west: pursuit of balance

Existing Western theories, such as cultural appropriation and hybridization utilized in this paper, often focus on power imbalance and cultural exploitation, emphasising the passivity of non-Western cultures in globalisation process. Although these theories can reveal the problems in the dissemination of Kung Fu films, the limitation of the over-reliance on the Western-dominated narrative logic remains in the use of these theories, neglecting the non-Western cultural agency and the complex binary interactions in cross-cultural cooperation rather than simply 'appropriating' and 'being appropriated'. Therefore, when stepping out of the Western theoretical framework to analyse the communication dilemma of Kung Fu films and Wuxia culture, a new perspective will help to re-examine the role of Kung Fu films in the global cross-cultural dialogue.

An example can be picked up to delve into this non-Western perspective. The China-US coproduced Wuxia film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* used to be a hit with Western audiences (Figure 3). Belonging to the Wuxia genre, it also contains many martial arts scenes. However, despite being a film for the global market like *The Way of the Dragon* or *Kung Fu Panda*, this film did not choose Kung Fu as its selling point. It retained more Wuxia elements in its plot, such as the emphasis on 'chivalry' and 'inner cultivation' (Wang and Yeh 2005). The worldwide popularity of this film can show that commercialisation does not necessarily mean sacrificing local cultural expression, while the respect for and utilisation of cultural agency can be a tool for enhancing cultural visibility during the intercultural communication. By actively preserving cultural elements and creating a narrative in the cross-cultural cooperation process with the United States, the film producers broke away from the Western-centric standpoint of overemphasising cultural exploitation on the weak culture in cultural appropriation theory.

Through retaining the agency of the Wuxia narrative, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has refused the continuation of 'spectacle consumption' and formed a relatively equal 'cultural negotiation' when aiming at worldwide cultural translation and commercial success. Furthermore, the communication model of this film may also figure out the possibility that Kung Fu films can transcend existing Western theoretical frameworks, escape from the passive label of 'appropriation', and become active players in global cross-cultural dialogue.



Figure 3: Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 2016

## 4 Conclusion

In summary, this article mainly criticised the neglect of the cultural essence of Kung Fu films and the appropriation of Kung Fu culture in the Western context. The simplification and reshaping of the identity of Kung Fu culture in Western societies are also discussed in terms of the objects, reasons and appropriation modes. Finally, this paper explores the equal way for disseminating

Kung Fu films and Chinese Wuxia culture in cross-cultural exchanges from non-Western-centric perspectives. Cultural appropriation and oppression still exist in Chinese Wuxia culture and Kung Fu, and further research is needed on ways to balance commercialisation and artistic agency.

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## “Queer Visibility”: The Predominance of Visual Exposure in Queer Politics

Lotte Manders<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper examines how the narrative of activist progress, specifically related to the contemporary use of “queer visibility”, relates to Guy Debord’s concept of the “situation”. Through a critical theory lens focusing on how identity is mediated through media, this study explores the relationship between queer identity and visibility, illuminating how being visible is also being partial. The paper argues that contemporary “queer visibility” may imply that being visible already means contesting the norm, however, the visible can make passive in certain instances while making active in others. By bringing Debord’s situationist theory into conversation with Judith Butler’s notion of queer identity formation and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition of paranoia, this paper concludes that effective queer politics requires remaining critical and taking an active position in shaping dialogues between generalities and exclusions.

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## 1 Introduction

Around the 1980s, there was a shift making queer identities gain visuality in media; in order to survive, queer identities needed to become visible. In cinema, this meant a rise in experimental and activist films, also referred to as New Queer Cinema (Rich 2013). But were there seemed to be progress for queer activism on the one hand, there proved to be a remaining problem on the other as the term “lesbian invisibility” gained momentum (Castle 1993; Enszer 2021; Hart and Smith 1998). This meant that within the project of visibility certain identities remained hidden. Recently there has been an increase in lesbian characters in television series (Smith 2020). “Queer visibility” then remains to be a goal to be achieved in activism, but what does it mean to be visible in the contemporary political landscape?

This paper will look at how the narrative of activist progress, specifically related to the contemporary use of “queer visibility”, relates to Guy Debord’s “situation”. The extent to which the relation between queer and visible triggers problematics will be examined through a critical theory scope focussing on how identity is mediated through media. Discussions between the terms queer and visible will illuminate that being visible is also being partial: when showing one thing, there is always another thing not being shown. This is crucial to examine further, as contemporary “queer visibility” might imply that being visible already means contesting the norm. However, the visible can in certain instances make passive, whilst in others make active.

First, this paper will lay out the relations between Guy Debord’s explication of the spectacle and the term “visuality”. The generalizing nature of the spectacle is contested by Debord’s notion of the situation. The situation aims to play; meaning to actively change the rules of the game. This tactic will be brought in conversation in Judith Butler’s notion of queer identity formation as a critical and political movement. This paper will then be concluded by relating Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition of paranoia to the conversations between Debord’s situation and Butler’s critically queer subject formation.

## 2 Hidden within the Visuals of the Spectacle

It is crucial to problematize the term “visuality” in “queer visuality” in the contemporary state of queer politics. One cannot just be visible, there are complex structures at work beneath that what is shown. To further expand on this it is helpful to first have a look at thesis 10 from Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord first explains that the spectacle aims to unify: “The concept of the spectacle brings together and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena. [...] the appearances of a social organization of appearances that needs to be grasped in its general truth.” (Debord 1995, 14). The spectacle operates through picking and choosing specific visual elements, appearances, in order to make an easily digestible sensual experience of a reality. The final sentence of the 10th thesis concludes by stating that what appears is a highly constructed form: “... any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle’s essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life – and as a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*.” (14). The realm of the visible is then not a given: the spectacle serves as a constructed form that differs from lived experience itself.

This generalizing quality of the spectacle has a specific relation to visuality, as Debord explicates in his 18th thesis: “Since the spectacle’s job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be *seen* via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society’s generalized abstraction” (17). All other senses get overshadowed by the major sense of sight. This causes certain material realities to be hidden, one can simply not sense all reality with only one sense. The thesis ends by Debord stating that the spectacle is

“the opposite of dialogue.” (17). This then refers back to the negation of life that the 10th thesis refers to. Human activity is always a conversation, a dialogue between the different senses. To be predominantly visible is therefore simultaneously to distance oneself from life itself; by being visible the spectacle hides that it hides behind the promise of a visual general truth.

The negation of the pluralistic nature of human senses also infects the political idea of identity formation, as Debord’s 17th thesis states: “At the same time all individual reality, being directly dependent on social power and completely shaped by that power, has assumed a social character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality *is not* that it is allowed to *appear*.” (16). Being an individual, completely detached from their place within political hierarchies, is yet another illusion. The meaning of *appear* in this thesis is then not only connected to looks, but also to pretending: pretending to be detached. The spectacle’s aversion to dialogue that the 18th thesis highlights is then also present in the construction of identity itself.

But, the spectacle’s constructed reality should not be seen as something totally distinct from social reality. The interplay between spectacle and lived experience is further explained through thesis 8: “The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus the spectacle [...] is itself a product of real activity. Likewise, lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle’s mechanisms of contemplation” (14). Debord illustrates here that reality bleeds into the spectacle, and that in turn spectacle infects reality. Where the 18th thesis states that the spectacle is the opposite of dialogue, the 8th thesis shows that, even though the spectacle wants to be uniform, it is always dependent upon lived reality.

The spectacle then hides dialogue on different levels. The 10th thesis explicated that the spectacle creates one general truth, and that this general truth opposes life itself. The 18th thesis then explains that this negation of life takes place in the realm of the senses, as it has a strong preference for the sense of sight above all others. To be able to sense is to be able to be in dialogue; the spectacle ignores this. The same illusion of monism is present in identity formation as the 17th thesis highlights how identity is always connected to political discourse, which is exactly what the spectacle aims to hide. But even though the spectacle aims to hide conflict on different levels of lived reality, it is also shaped through social reality, as the 8th thesis explains. The spectacles aversion to, and dependence upon, dialogue is crucial in critiquing the visual nature of queer politics, as this paper will examine further that to be queer means to be in conflict. Without directly talking about issues of queer visibility, Debord does propose ways to contest the spectacle.

### 3 The Situation and Play

How can one break its ties with the spectacle when general truth and social reality tend to bleed into each other? Devin Penner lays out how Debord proposes the situation as a way to challenge this (Penner 2015). The situation defers from the spectacle, as it “point[s] towards a radical notion of politics as an inherently conflictual and divisive process.” (165). Where the spectacle tries to hide dialogue, the situation is transparent in its dependence upon it. As a result to the generalizing truth imposed by the dominant appearance of the spectacle, the spectator “lives *passively* through such spectacular representations” (167). When all truth is digestibly handed on a plate to the spectator, what else can the spectator do but to lean back and consume? The situation proposes to organise active spectators. These active participants of the situation are expected to organise revolution amongst themselves (167). The role of the spectator in the sit is already fixed, as Debord’s 18th thesis showed how humans cannot interfere with the spectacle. In order for a person to rip itself lose from the entanglements of

everyday spectacle, Debord insinuates that one should have “a ‘higher’ level of consciousness”, an encouragement to “become dialecticians” (Penner 2015, 169). The social character of such dialects then challenges the appearance of individuality that the 17th thesis refers to: it is then an active identity which is formed through sociality instead of individuality.

Being a dialectician then implies a certain state of intelligence; a person must be able to think philosophically and bring this into a debate amongst others. This is closely related to Johan Huizinga’s idea of “play” (169–170). Play here is a political tactic in which “the continual ability to change the rules of the game by all those who are subject to them” (171) is central. To be a dialectician is therefore to be a participant who is critical of political constraints that one is captured within, and to then take these constraints and change its conditions. A way in which the situation translates debates to the realm of the visible is through *détournement*: “Situationist *détournement* involves the purposeful and political diversion of something from its original meaning, [...] the appropriate translation of the term lies somewhere between ‘diversion’ and ‘subversion.’” (173–174). This form of play is then not only a protest against the norm, the spectacle, but also an illumination of it. Instead of then simply highlighting the general truth that thesis 10 refers to, *détournement* brings into practise what thesis 8 aims to explain: spectacle and social reality are always intertwined with each other.

The situation is then a technique embracing conflict. It demands participants to be active dialecticians who aim to educate each other through philosophical debates. This social project is then practised through the notion of play: first being aware of the rules of the game, and then aiming to rearrange them. A way in which the situation does this is through *détournement*, which aims to both show and protest against norms of visuality. In order to see whether this tactic is helpful for queer activism today, Butler’s *Critically Queer* will help problematize the role of dialectics in queer identity formation.

## 4 Queer Identity in the Margins of Repetitious Movements

Judith Butler shares certain positions of Debord regarding the mutually shaping qualities of lived reality and hegemonic power structures (as Debord has illustrated in his 8th thesis). Butler focusses specifically on the role of this mutual shaping in the process of identity formation: “Where there is an ‘I’ who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that ‘I’ and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will.” (Butler 1993, 18). An identity is never isolated, it is always shaped through discourse. To be a subject is therefore to point towards an effect of political frameworks. Simultaneously, to be a subject is also to influence discourse. An “I” is therefore simultaneously a product as a producing entity. What Butler highlights here, is what Debord also states in his 17th thesis: an isolated individuality is mere illusion.

But recognizing that one is shaped through history does not automatically mean that one is contesting the norms of spectacle, with this it is important to see the significance of naming as an act: “What it also means is that the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim [...] often demand a turn against this constitutive historicity [...] As much as identity terms must be used, as much as ‘outness’ is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production.” (19). Butler suggests here a paradox inherent in all naming; the inevitability of leaving something out. Relating this to the visual predominance of both the spectacle and *détournement* means that the construction of an image always means exclusion of phenomena not framed in the specific appearance. It is then not only the spectacle that excludes complete constitutive history, but *détournement* also inevitably cannot capture entirety. So even though the situation itself cannot repeat (Penner

[2015], 168), the possibility for a situation to happen emerges in similar movements as the movements of power itself. The act of making power structures visible inevitably opens up to the next project of incorporating exclusion into the field of visible knowledge. Power is then not so much a single instance, but instead a movement: “This [power] is less an ‘act,’ singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power.” (Butler [1993], 17). A norm is not isolated in time, it moves in a repetitious motion, this movement creating its power. Debord also implicates such repetition, as thesis 18 states that the spectacle opposes dialogue; without conversation it closes itself off to change, the only movement left then is repetition. By not only opposing the spectacle, but also subverting its structures, *détournement* appropriates certain movements of power for their own activist ends.

As the movement of power is mimetic, to be critically queer then means to keep organising new ways to visualize existence in the margins. Butler exemplifies this by explicating how the word “queer” derives from homophobia, but is reused as a way to form communities (18). But again, the notion of exclusion is inevitable, and they therefore also state that the use of the term “queer” is always related to specific discourses and to specific moments of exclusion (20). Both the existence, as the exclusory powers of the term “queer” reflect the continuous movements between norm and critical performance; spectacle and *détournement*.

The visible can then be both an opportunity to contest the norm as it is to affirm it. A contemporary example of “queer visibility” is helpful to further look into how it remains to be important to be critical of the process of naming in a queer context. In HBO’s *We’re Here* (2020-present) drag queens who have previously participated in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-present) aim to transform US citizens of varying cities into drag queens. In the fifth episode of the second season they do this by performing a marriage ceremony between two lesbian women of Evansville; the women then marry in drag (Warren and Ingram [2021]). On the one hand one could sense a rearrangement of norms: a marriage ceremony between two women in a conservative environment. But, as a media form, this episode mostly repeats norms without being critical of them. The women are put into drag make-up which they did not choose themselves, and which look very similar to the make-up style made fashionable by *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. This kind of drag therefore does not play with notions of the spectacle, but merely repeats the norms of “acceptable drag”; visual identities that have already been proven to be liked by a large public (as *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is widely popular (Campione [2023])). Drag, in this case, is then a pre-conditioned suit they put on, failing to critique heteronormative matrimonial structures. This is also done through formal techniques themselves, which hide the inner workings of film as a medium. The cuts are invisible, the people do not look at the camera; the spectator is made to forget that they are watching a media form. The spectator becomes passive.

Butler, in a similar fashion as Debord’s 17th thesis, highlights that identity is shaped through discourse, whilst effecting discourse. But by naming oneself as an “I”, there are inevitably dimensions which are left out. This makes the project of queer identification one that must move amongst the repetitious movement of power itself. Queer identity exists then between the gaps of such movements. The example of *We’re Here* shows how such movements of power infect the queer subject; risking to fail in continuing the critical project of reusing the term queer in a situationist fashion of subverting and protesting homophobia. Strategies of Debord’s situation are then still helpful for queer criticism, as Butler shows that dialectics inherent to identity formation keep opening up new opportunities for a situation to appear. This whole repetitious movement of power also signifies a certain inevitability. The inevitability of the spectacle will be examined through Sedgwick’s problematization of paranoid reading.

## 5 Anticipatory Mimicry in the Situation

Sedgwick further expands on repetitious movements of power in her description of patterns in paranoia: “embracing the twin propositions that one understand paranoia only by oneself practicing paranoid knowing, and that the way paranoia has of understanding anything is by imitating and embodying it.” (Sedgwick 2003, 131). Sedgwick highlights here that in paranoia a cycle emerged where one understands through repeating itself. This tactic of paranoia is similar to the project of the situation: subverting and diverting from the rules of the game as a way of understanding, and hereby aiming to oppose those rules. As argued in the relation between mimetic power and the possibility of the reoccurrence of critically queer positions, the situation as an act must repeat in order to challenge the generality of visuality.

The goal of mimicry of power as a way of appropriation for activist ends is then to expose the inner workings of the spectacle. The situation aims to wake up the passive consumers who are simply blind to see the power to which they are subservient. This aim to expose can also be connected to paranoia: “...paranoia is characterized by placing [...] an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge *per se* – knowledge in the form of exposure. Maybe that’s why paranoid knowing is so inescapably narrative.” (138). The project of the situation is mostly about exposing hidden reality, and claims that sharing of knowledge will eventually lead to this becoming visible of the real truth underneath the spectacle (especially in the demand for participants in the spectacle to have a higher sense of consciousness and to become intelligent dialecticians (Penner 2015, 169)). The confidence in exposure as an activist tactic relates Debord’s situation to paranoia. But does this then mean that Butler’s stressing of the critically queer position is also a form of paranoia?

Sedgwick senses that within specific feminist and queer oppositions to psychoanalysis thinkers have adopted “anticipatory mimesis” which is a “strategy whereby a certain, stylized violence of sexual differentiation must always be *presumed* or *self-assumed* – even, where necessary, imposed – simply on the ground that it can never be finally *ruled out*.” (Sedgwick 2003, 133). She refers to Butler when she explicates this (132–133), as she argues that a critique of certain phenomena can be so rigorous in its persuasion, that it leaves out all surprise: the outcome is persuasively predicted.

However, as previously argued, Butler stresses that in order to shape queer politics, one must be open to play. Play as a tactic can also be sensed in Sedgwick proposed alternative to paranoia: “It takes the weak theories and rearranges them into a new strong one. While paranoid theoretical proceedings both depend on and reinforce the structural dominance of monopolistic ‘strong theory’, there may also be benefit in exploring the extremely varied, dynamic, and historically contingent ways that strong theoretical constructs interact with weak ones in the ecology of knowing – an exploration that obviously can’t proceed without a respectful interest in weak as well as strong theoretical acts.” (146). Here, a strong theory is one which covers a “wide generality” (134), whilst weak theory is more tangible: “affect theory must be effective to be weak” (134). Sedgwick argues that both strong and weak theories are nourishing for a healthy formation of knowledge. With a reparative reading one recognizes weak theories, things left out of the general picture, and rearranges them into a new image; a new strong theory. This makes her project quite similar to that of Butler. Both aim to play: to remain critical about the marginal outside the freeze frame, outside general truth.

Where anticipatory mimesis rules out all surprises, for reparative reading “it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise.” (146). And where Sedgwick argues that Butler’s critique has a strong predicting sense, a quote used earlier in this paper proves otherwise: “Performativity, then, is to be read not as self-expression or self-presentation, but as the unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms.” (Butler 1993, 28). Here the word “unanticipated” is crucial; the norm gains its power in repetitious motion, but discourse changes, making

the outcome always a surprise (23). Butler and Debord then both play with exposure. What makes Debord more paranoid than Butler is how he leaves out the repetition of the situation. Butler lays out how exposure is always incomplete, even the term “queer” inevitably leaves out new specific marginalized entities (20). Combining then Debord and Butler makes the situation as a political queer project a nourishing conversation between paranoid and reparative reading.

## 6 Conclusion

Just because something calls itself queer, it does not mean that it is critical. Just because something is now visible, it does not mean that it exposes hidden truth. This paper has laid out how Debord explicates that social life is constructed out of inner conflict, and that it is the aim of the spectacle to hide such conflict under the predominance of a visual general truth. The situation is then proposed as an activist tactic; a form of play in which its active participants rearrange the parts of hegemony. Butler illustrates how the norm gains its power from a movement of repetition. This makes queer identity always a project, as the relations between discourse and identity are ever shifting. The reason why it is productive for contemporary “queer visibility” to be brought into conversation with Debord and Butler was argued through Sedgwick’s explication of movements between paranoid and reparative readings. When adding the mimicking aspects of power to the definition of the situation, a strategy of activism open to surprise emerges.

So where New Queer Cinema was aiming to radically make hidden queer identities visible (Rich 2013), the repetitious movement of powerful images risks that contemporary queer visibility becomes spectacle. *We're Here* therefore does not simply solve the problem of “lesbian invisibility” by showing lesbians (Warren and Ingram 2021), but through its form it lacks critical engagement with norms linked to identity formation. The situation as a supposedly strong theory could be further examined by comparing it to other different activist movements. By doing this, one could bring nuance to critical statements about the generality of situationism.

It is then not to say that exposure has no importance in queer politics. The project of queer visibility should still aim to infiltrate the realm of visuality, but in this it remains important to reexamine the picture that has then been formed. Therefore queer identity formation means remaining critical: taking an active position in shaping dialogues between generalities and exclusions.

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## Navigating the precarious career of Chinese content creators: In the case of “Thurman 猫一杯”

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### Abstract

Content-creating platforms have been a part of netizens' lives for quite some time, starting with the introduction of YouTube and evolving into the rise of short video platforms. Being a content creator has become a viable profession, offering opportunities for those skilled at capturing audience attention to achieve both visibility and financial success. However, navigating the digital environment is far from straightforward. Cancel culture persists, adding a complex layer of precarity to the careers of content creators. Beyond the unstable working conditions shaped by platform practices like content moderation and recommendation algorithms, government policies significantly influence content-creating platforms in China (Li and Ng, 2024), such as Red and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). By examining the rise and fall of “Thurman 猫一杯”, a former cross-platform content creator on Chinese social media, this essay explores the interplay between creativity, platform dependency, and economic instability, while situating creators as both entrepreneurs and platform laborers in an increasingly precarious digital ecosystem.

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# 1 Introduction

According to Poell, Nieborg, and Van Dijck (2019), “Platformization is a process akin to industrialization or electrification, referring to a multifaceted transformation of globalized societies”. The rise of different kinds of platforms brought every social actant’s distance closer, which includes but is not restricted to economic ties and self-identification. However, different from traditional contract workers who work under certain working contracts that protect the safety of both employees and employers, the careers of content creators on social media platforms are rather more similar to the careers of entrepreneurs (Lin and De Kloet 2019). Platform visibility in China is mediated by the state’s socioeconomic and political agenda, with the Chinese government’s “Internet+” and “Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation” initiatives, promoting digital entrepreneurship and social stability (Lin and De Kloet 2019). Despite the freedom and supportive attitude from the government that content creators on social media gain, the contents they create are constrained by platforms, government, and society, hence the content creator career is becoming increasingly precarious, and unpredictable. While this state-platform relationship enables rural and marginalized creators to enter the digital economy, it simultaneously subjects them to strict censorship and algorithmic gatekeeping to maintain ideological conformity (Lin and De Kloet 2019). In the meantime, China operates a state-controlled, corporately run ecosystem of platforms revolving around their big three companies Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (BAT).

The national authorities of entertainment industries in China also play an important role in moderating the diverse content on social media platforms to fit into the general socialist ideology of the Chinese government. According to a guideline released by the China Association of Performing Art (CAPA), it is stated in Article 2, “Love the motherland, support the Party’s principles and policies, consciously abide by the laws and regulations of the country, abide by the relevant regulations of the cultural and performing industries, and consciously accept the supervision of the relevant government departments and social supervision” (文旅之声 2021). It shows the determination to restrict the direction of entertainment content that should follow the general ideology of the mainstream political environment, restricting the ideology that is other than or against the “mainstream” ideology, and prompting the idea of patriotism. According to Li and Ng (2024), the specific regulatory environment in China on social media platforms indicates the crucial role that platforms are playing, it serves as space both where canceling occurs and, via governance practices, as important actors that can significantly shape the directions and outcomes of particular cancel events.

This essay investigates the precarity of platform labor in the influencer economy, examining how digital platforms shape the careers of content creators. In this essay, I will specifically discuss the cross-platform content creator culture in China, which is also known as “网红(wang hong)” culture or cyber-celebrity culture, using the case of the Chinese influencer “Thurman 猫一杯”, it explores the tensions between creativity, platform dependency, and economic instability. By studying Thurman’s rise and fall, the essay contextualizes the ambiguous role of creators as both entrepreneurs and (free) platform labor within a precarious digital ecosystem. My research question is: **How does the influencer economy in China, shaped by digital platforms and government regulation, create precarity for content creators?**

## 1.1 Theoretical Framework

This essay looks into the precarious career of Chinese content creators within the theoretical context of platform labor and digital capitalism. Building on Van Doorn (2022) concept of platform labor, which emphasizes the entangled nature of entrepreneurship and precarious work within digital platforms. In this case, content creators such as “Thurman 猫一杯”

simultaneously act as entrepreneurs and laborers. Content creators use platforms to attract followers, translating digital traffic and public attention into economic capital through advertising and brand collaborations. Yet, their (Thurman's) digital property is controlled by platforms, leaving them vulnerable to policy violations and account suspensions. This dual identity complicates their agency, positioning them as both beneficiaries and subjects of digital capitalism's structural inequities.

Despite different levels of control and moderation of social media platforms, Gillespie's insights into platforms as "custodians of the internet" (Gillespie 2018) highlight their role as gatekeepers that shape and control user-generated content through content moderation, algorithmic visibility, and policy enforcement. Social media platforms have enabled the emergence of large volumes of previously unpredicted user-generated content, among which every form of illegal and inappropriate content could exist. How platforms intervene, manage, and present the content they host has become "essential, constitutional, definitional" (Gillespie 2018). While the model of content moderation remains problematic due to the biased composition of the moderation labor force, in Gillespie's book, he points out a lot of issues that are embedded in the moderation labor, which are described as "fundamentally conservative and inflexible" (Gillespie 2018). In China, the dynamics of platform labor are further compounded by the regulatory framework of state capitalism. As Lin and De Kloet (2019) argue, platform visibility in China is mediated by the state's socioeconomic and political agendas, where platforms like Douyin and Red are tightly interwoven with government initiatives such as "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation." While these initiatives promote digital entrepreneurship and inclusion, they also subject creators to heightened censorship and ideological conformity, which in the end might leave the content creator in a situation where they might be easily canceled, and lose everything that they have been working for.

The essay also incorporates Van Dijck (2021) framework and the metaphor of a tree as the platform ecosystem on platformization to analyze the Chinese ecosystem's corporately run, state-regulated platforms. Unlike Western platform models dominated by corporate surveillance and libertarian capitalism, China's digital environment exemplifies state surveillance and techno-nationalism around the BBAT (Baidu, Byte-Dance, Alibaba, and Tencent). Increasingly, the ideological clash between state powers manifests itself as a techno-corporate clash. Such clashes reveal that rather than operating as distinct platform ecosystems, they are intertwined at various levels. The entanglement between American, Chinese, and European interests in the global governance of digital innovation is a driver of mounting tensions between continental superpowers and their allies 2021.

Thurman 猫一杯's downfall as a content creator is contextualized within these theoretical frameworks. Her rise exemplifies the entrepreneurial potential facilitated by platformization, while her fall underscores the precariousness amplified by regulatory controls and cultural governance. Drawing on Li and Ng (2024) exploration of cancel culture in China, the essay examines how platforms function as spaces where creators are not only celebrated but also disciplined and censored, reflecting the intertwined power of corporate and state apparatuses.

Finally, the essay situates its analysis within the broader discourse on the culture industry, referencing the Frankfurt School's critique of mass media as a site of commodification and ideological control (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944). This perspective allows for a deeper interrogation of how Chinese content creators, operating under the dual pressures of market forces and state regulation, navigate the contradictions of creative autonomy and labor precarity in the platform economy. By putting together these theoretical insights, the essay provides a nuanced framework for understanding the interplay of creativity, dependency, and regulation in the careers of Chinese content creators.

## 1.2 Methodology

This essay adopted the usage of content analysis and discourse analysis. By analyzing both firsthand resources such as the original content from “Thurman猫一杯”, videos and comments that discuss the unfair situation put on Thurman 猫一杯, news articles that report on this issue, and un-banned content on international platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. By analyzing closely the discourse revolve the cancellation of Thurman 猫一杯, this essay developed a nuanced understanding of how this is happening, what is general public’s attitude on her being canceled, and how Thurman herself as a former full-time content creator finds herself another way out under the circumstance of being canceled. Moreover, an OSINV (Open source investigation) method of investigating people is also adopted in this essay, and the process is ethical.

## 2 The case of “Thurman 猫一杯”

“Thurman猫一杯” was considered a macro-influencer, with 19 million followers on DouYin, 7 million followers on Red, 4 million followers on Bilibili, 6 Million followers on Kuaishou, and 1.2 million followers on Weibo (环球网 | 2024). Her content mainly focused on telling funny stories that happened to her and stories about her family members using heavy beauty filters and exaggerated performances. According to herself, she graduated from Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne (ECSCP), a fashion institute in Paris, and worked as a designer in Yves Saint Laurant, and this information is considered fake according to Chinese netizen’s investigation. Due to her experience in Paris, and herself as a Cantonese person, her videos often incorporate different languages, including Mandarin, Cantonese, and French. The clashing of different cultures made her distinguishable among the content creators, audiences might find interest in her due to both their relatability and curiosity in another culture. With her experience in fashion, she also established her clothing brand, OMETOO. I was also one of her followers on RED, personally, I felt deeply attracted to her content as there are a lot of common languages among people who have international backgrounds in China, especially in her case, she has an international background in Paris, which make it even more relatable.

Her career as a content creator is successful, from a monetization perspective, she moved beyond merely being a content creator, collaborating with different brands, attending platform events, and establishing her clothing brand. Her fan base shared an interesting phenomenon, despite being supportive of her content, they tend to mention Thurman a lot under other content creators’ content, especially when there is a guinea pig doing something funny, her followers would mention Thurman in the comment section, and jokingly tell others that they have found Thurman in the wild (figure 1). This kind of joke continues, and it will also extend to other pet animals, not limited to guinea pigs, and as a response, Thurman would make videos out of it to “complain” about this phenomenon. This not only helped this phenomenon to grow, which further increased her exposure to non-followers noticing her but also shortened the distance between herself as an influencer and the audience.



Figure 1: Thurman and her guinea pig

Additionally, she also interacts with similar content creators whose focus is also international Chinese audiences, such as “徐五八”, a Dutch-Chinese influencer on Red and Wechat shorts (figure 2), as Thurman focuses on telling stories about Chinese lifestyle and French lifestyle, 徐五八 focuses on “abstract” acting, a new niche of social media culture that is rising on Chinese social media, according to Beijing News, “Abstraction is an internet term for entertaining the crowd by flirting with one’s own words” (新京报 2024). It usually happens in the form of blogging, and the point is to release some irrelevant and crazy mental status, it is a representation of the contemporary mental status of the young people in China. Due to the research on abstraction being very limited, little source is found on this topic, so this essay will not extend to this topic. Collaboration with similar content creators, also led to further discussion on her romantic relationship, which also further increased her popularity.



Figure 2: Thurman and 徐五八 in Paris

However, Thurman's influencer career saw a sudden shift when she posted a video of her finding a Chinese primary school student, QingLang's winter homework in a bathroom in Paris during the Chinese New Year, the homework is untouched, left blank, Thurman even bought a pencil and tried to finish the homework for him.

The video soon went viral, based on the fact that she has a "helpful" fan base, her followers blew up the comment section of other creators to look for QingLang and tried to help the student get his homework back. Under the comment section of the original video, there is even

someone who claimed to be QingLang's uncle to claim the homework to be his nephew's. With the popularity of this video continuing to grow, even official news channels started to report on this incident and it also hopped on the trendy topic list on multiple social media platforms. Therefore, Thurman posted another video to clarify that the owner of the homework is already found, please do not look for QingLang anymore. However, to stop this trend, the whole situation became uncontrollable, and netizens started to investigate the authenticity of this story as it took up a great amount of digital public space to look for QingLang. Ultimately, authority and netizens both figured out that the whole thing is fictional, it is completely made up by Thurman and her colleagues to attract traffic. Soon after the truth was revealed, Thurman posted an apology video, without exaggerating beauty filter and acting, she apologized sincerely for this story she made and apologized for taking up the public spaces. However the apology, her social media accounts across all platforms were banned from posting, replying, and commenting, and in the end, her accounts across all domestic platforms were completely banned, including her personal clothing brand OMETO. Additionally, other creators who used to collaborate with her mostly removed the collaboration videos with her immediately after Thurman got canceled.



Figure 3: The video where Thurman found the homework of a primary school student in Paris

### 3 Discussion

#### 3.1 Creativity, Platform Moderation, and Regulation

The career trajectory of “Thurman 猫一杯” illustrates the precarious balance that Chinese content creators must navigate when attracting traffic and popularity. Thurman’s initial success highlights how creativity and platformization offer opportunities for financial gain and cultural visibility. Her unique storytelling, infused with international elements and humor, attracted millions of followers across various platforms, effectively showcasing her entrepreneurial potential. This entrepreneurialism, however, is inherently tied to platform dependency. Thurman’s monetization strategies—from brand collaborations to launching her own clothing line—are emblematic of how Chinese influencers leverage platforms to convert visibility into revenue. Yet, these platforms are not neutral intermediaries but active gatekeepers, exerting control over content, visibility, and monetization channels. As Gillespie (2018) points out, platforms shape what content is seen and how creators’ work is valued through algorithmic and policy enforcement. In Thurman’s case, the revelation that her viral story was fabricated underscores the fragility of this dependency. Once the narrative unraveled, platforms immediately enacted

punitive measures, demonstrating their authority to dismantle a creator's career with little recourse.

Adding another layer of complexity is the regulatory environment of Chinese platforms. The state's emphasis on ideological conformity means that creators must not only adhere to platform policies but also navigate government censorship and propaganda frameworks. Thurman's story intersects with these dynamics, as her fabricated tale drew significant public and governmental attention, culminating in a backlash that resulted in her deplatforming. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "In order to thoroughly implement the spirit of the 19th CPC National Congress and the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, effectively enhance the level of school education, continuously regulate out-of-school training (including online training and offline training), and effectively alleviate the excessive burden of homework on students at the stage of compulsory education and the burden of out-of-school training" (中共中央办公厅国务院办公厅 [2021]). Thurman's fictional story significantly obligated the government's tendency to cut the study burden for primary school students. The cancellation of her accounts across major platforms reflects how tightly corporate and state interests are interwoven in China's digital economy. In addition to the cancellation of Thurman, governmental officers in the educational department might also be affected as Thurman's incident again mentions the notorious past where school work functions as a burden for young students.

### 3.2 Cancel Culture and Public Sentiment

Cancel culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the precarity of digital labor in China. While the public's ability to critique and "cancel" creators can be seen as a form of collective accountability, it often devolves into disproportionate punishment. In Thurman's case, public outrage over her fabricated video triggered both mass denunciation and platform intervention. As Li and Ng (2024) argue, platforms function as spaces where creators are simultaneously celebrated and disciplined, as pointed out in ancient philosophy, "水能载舟,亦能覆舟 (water may keep the boat afloat but may also sink it; the people can support a regime or overturn it)" (小雨讲国学 | ). This duality was evident in Thurman's trajectory: her initial popularity was amplified by her fans' active engagement across platforms, but this same engagement turned against her when her content was exposed as deceptive. Moreover, the public response to Thurman's scandal underscores the performative nature of cancel culture. Netizens not only criticized her actions but also participated in amplifying the controversy, further entrenching her downfall. This phenomenon reflects the heightened stakes of visibility in the influencer economy, where public attention can be both a creator's greatest asset and the most significant liability.

### 3.3 Cultural and Structural

The "Thurman 猫一杯" case also reveals broader cultural and structural tensions within China's platform ecosystem. Van Dijck (2021) metaphor of the platform ecosystem as a tree—with intertwined roots of state and corporate power—is particularly applicable in the Chinese context. Platforms like Douyin and Red are not merely businesses but extensions of the Chinese socio-political agenda, exemplifying a model of techno-nationalism. This intertwining creates a precarious environment for creators, who must balance the demands of audience engagement, platform policies, and governmental regulations. Thurman's downfall illustrates how these pressures converge. Her fabricated narrative, while designed to maximize engagement, inadvertently violated the implicit norms of authenticity and accountability valued by both platforms and audiences. The subsequent punitive measures—account bans and de-platforming—highlight how platforms operate as arbiters of public discourse, enforcing both their corporate policies

and the ideological priorities of the state.

## 4 Conclusion

The rise and fall of “Thurman 猫一杯” encapsulate the precarious nature of platform labor in China. Her career illustrates the tensions between creativity, platform dependency, and regulatory control in the influencer economy. By situating Thurman’s experience within frameworks of platform labor and platformization, this essay reveals the structural inequities and cultural dynamics shaping Chinese content creators’ careers. Thurman’s case underscores the need for nuanced perspectives on digital labor in China. As the platform economy evolves, the challenges faced by creators like Thurman raise critical questions about the sustainability and fairness of digital work in a highly regulated and interconnected ecosystem. Her case highlights the pressing need for systemic changes that better protect creators from arbitrary disruptions, including clearer platform policies and more balanced regulatory frameworks.

## 5 Further Notes

After investigating Thurman’s case, I discovered that even though the state completely banned her Chinese social media platforms, she recently became active on overseas platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. With 384k followers on YouTube and 63k followers on Instagram, Thurman mainly posted her former content on YouTube to attract new followers and life updates on Instagram, with a consistent performing style. Not only Thurman but other Chinese influencers gave up on the Chinese social media platform and chose international social media platforms as their place to create content. There are also more and more “Western” content creators starting to create content on Chinese social media. I see this as a digital diaspora and could be used for further research.

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## Who is the Artist in the Age of AI?: A Discussion on Creative Labor, Automation, and Knowledge Extractivism

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### Abstract

This paper explores the developing relationship between artificial intelligence (AI) and creativity, focusing on how generative tools such as Midjourney, ChatGPT, and Stable Diffusion challenge traditional understandings of artistic production, authorship, and labor. Drawing on the relational-materialist framework developed by Celis Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz (2024) and grounded in Lievrouw's (2014) diagram of mediation, this paper examines the dynamic interactions between technological artifacts, creative practices, and social arrangements. Central to this analysis are the concepts of creative labor, automation, and distributed agency, which help to demonstrate how AI tools function not only as instruments but also as active agents in the creative process. While AI is often celebrated for democratizing creativity and enabling new forms of artistic expression, the paper highlights the ethical and economic concerns surrounding the commodification and automation of creative labor. The concept of "knowledge extractivism" (Pasquinelli and Joler 2021) is used to describe how AI systems are trained on vast datasets of human-generated content, often without consent or compensation, raising critical questions about ownership, distribution of value, and exploitation. In addition, the notion of "mean images" (Steyerl 2023) highlights how AI-generated outputs often reflect statistical averages rather than true innovation. By situating AI creativity within broader systems of data capitalism and epistemic colonialism, the paper challenges narratives of co-creation and calls for a more critical understanding of agency, authorship, and power in AI-driven cultural production. Ultimately, it argues that while AI can augment human creativity, it is not inherently creative. Instead, it functions by remixing and repurposing human labor, necessitating new regulatory frameworks and ethical considerations to ensure a fairer creative future.

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## 1 Introduction

The emergence of generative AI tools such as Midjourney, ChatGPT, and Stable Diffusion has disrupted the creative industries by offering new ways to produce art, music, literature, and more. These AI technologies have prompted debates about the nature of creativity and the role that AI plays in the creative process. On one hand, AI is framed as a collaborator that complements or even expands human creativity and democratizes access to creative tools. On the other hand, it raises concerns about exploitation, ownership, and the ethical implications of using AI systems trained on huge datasets of hidden human labor. There are differing views on the impact of generative AI tools in the creative industries, with some fearing for their jobs and others arguing that machines will not replace human creativity, but rather enhance it (Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz 2024). The question is, who is the creative one, and how can we even define creativity? In their relational-materialist approach, Celis Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz (2024) shift the focus from traditional definitions of creativity to the relational spaces in which it operates. They argue that creativity is not an exclusive attribute of either humans or machines, but results from interactions between technologies, social practices, and the broader socioeconomic structures in which they are located. The relationship between artifacts, practices, and social arrangements is brought together in Lievrouw's diagram of mediation (Lievrouw 2014), on which they base their relational-materialist approach to creativity and AI. Within this relational space, they focus on these three core concepts: creative labor, automation, and distributed agency. Other researchers also discuss the related concept of creative labor, which refers to the human labor involved in the production of art and culture. As AI technologies increasingly automate creative processes, the role of human creators becomes complicated. While AI can enhance human creativity by enabling faster production of creative content, it also has the potential to devalue human labor by automating tasks traditionally performed by artists, musicians, and writers. Moreover, the commodification of creative labor through AI tools raises ethical concerns about who truly benefits from the creative process and how value is distributed (Steinhoff 2022).

This leads to the concept of distributed agency, where creativity is no longer seen as an exclusively human attribute but rather as the product of human-machine collaboration. Celis Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz (2024) argue that AI systems are not passive tools but active agents in the creative process. However, this distributed agency also conceals the underlying labor dynamics, particularly when AI systems are trained on massive datasets of human-created works. The parasitic nature of AI's reliance on human-generated content for training introduces the concept of "knowledge extractivism" (Pasquinelli and Joler 2020), where AI tools extract and repurpose human creativity and creations without acknowledging or compensating the original creators. This paper studies the discussion of AI and creativity using the relational-materialist framework suggested by Celis Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz (2024) based on Lievrouw's Lievrouw (2014) diagram of mediation and connecting this to other concepts and theories that have been written around this topic.

## 2 The underlying concept of the relational-materialist approach

Lievrouw's diagram of mediation, particularly as it relates to communication and media studies, visualizes the process by which media technologies, practices, and institutions shape and influence communication. It provides a framework for understanding the role of media in society, focusing on how media mediate relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions. The

diagram divides the concept of mediation into three main components: Artifacts, Practices, and Arrangements. Artifacts are the technological tools and devices used for communication, such as smartphones, computers, or broadcasting equipment. They are the material aspects of media that make communication possible. Practices refer to the social practices or ways in which people use media to interact and communicate. They include behaviors such as posting on social media, watching television, or reading online news. Arrangements are the organizational structures and institutions that shape how media technologies and practices are regulated, distributed, and controlled. It includes the legal, political, and economic frameworks that define the media landscape. Lievrouw's model emphasizes that media not only transmit messages but also mediate social relationships, shaping how we perceive and interact with the world.

### 3 The Process of Creation in the Age of AI

Is AI a technology or tool that helps us humans be creative, or does it simply exploit human creators? Creative labor refers to the human work involved in producing art, culture, music, or anything creative with a physical outcome. In the past, this work was only done by humans, and creativity was seen as a uniquely human attribute. Today, with the rise of AI tools and image generators, the role of human labor in the creative process has changed, and the question of ownership and who the creative person is has arisen. Aesthetics and creativity have always been considered a uniquely human trait, and “its intractability and complexity have long appeared as insusceptible to algorithmic reduction” (Manovich and Arielli 2021). Algorithms do not create anything new, but remix or regenerate the data on which they have been trained, which is why Manovich and Arielli (Manovich and Arielli 2021) call it “computational mannerism”. They wonder how the creative process will evolve in the future, when AI-produced artworks might be considered more aesthetically pleasing and, in that sense, better than human-produced artworks.

Celis Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz (Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz 2024) argue that we cannot study only human or technical creativity, but that it is always a relationship or even co-creation. The study of creativity in the age of AI should always focus on the relationships that Lievrouw proposed in her diagram of mediation. They claim that there is always an interaction or relationship between technologies, practices, and the social arrangements within which they function or evolve.

Creative labor for them is an example of the relationship between social arrangements and material practices because all forms of labor are also a form of capitalism and stuck between “a demand for innovation and a demand to adjust to existing institutional structures and patterns” (Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz 2024). Increasing automation is another important part of social arrangements, but connected to artifacts because it is directly linked to the capitalist nature of many countries and cultures, and has to do with the technology itself. Many AI tools can now automate large parts of the creative process, allowing for faster (content) production and greater accessibility, but also devaluing human labor by reducing the role of the creator to that of an editor or curator. The automation of creative tasks raises important questions about the commodification of creative labor, and Steinhoff (Steinhoff 2022) discusses the rise of synthetic data and how this automation threatens the connection between creative output and human input. Looking again at social arrangements and practices, AI-generated output and content may lead to a threat to the value of human-created art, as machines and tools become capable of generating content on a scale far beyond what human artists can produce. Creative labor may no longer be considered valuable in the future, and the human role will be merely that of an algorithmic function or prompt engineer within a larger system of cultural production (Steinhoff 2022).

The commodification of creative labor is, like I pointed out earlier, is closely tied to the

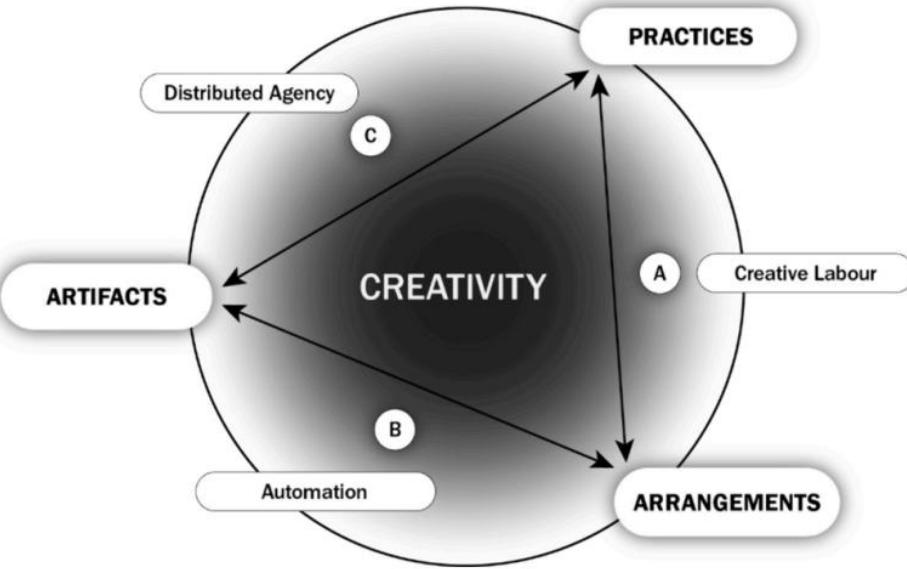


Figure 1: Diagram of mediation combined with AI & Creativity (Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz [2024])

political economy of AI. Pasquinelli and Joler Pasquinelli and Joler (2020) state that AI systems rely on big datasets of human-created content (like designs, paintings, writing or music) to train their models. This creates a scenario where human creativity is systematically harvested and repurposed for profit by tech companies, often without the creators' knowledge or consent. As AI continues to automate creative processes, the creators of original works are left out of the value chain, while the corporations that control the AI tools get the financial benefits through marketing and profiting from them. In their paper, they explain that they do not like the term artificial intelligence or anything similar and argue that the “creativity of machine learning is limited to the detection of styles from the training data, and then random improvisation within these styles. In other words, machine learning can explore and improvise only within the logical boundaries that are set by the training data. For all these issues, and its degree of information compression, it would be more accurate to term machine learning art as statistical art.” (Pasquinelli and Joler 2020). This would mean that, by their definitions, AI is not creative, and it is not really a co-creation between humans and AI tools, since human creative labor has been exploited to enable any AI to produce creative or artistic output. We have to ask ourselves who truly benefits from the creative process. The redistribution of creative agency and labor presents a direct question or even threat to traditional understandings of ownership and creative labor.

## 4 Who is the “Creative Agent”?

In the context of AI and creativity, the concept of distributed agency challenges the traditional notion of creativity as an exclusively human attribute. Celis Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz (2024) argue that AI tools, far from being passive instruments, actively participate in the creative process, reshaping how creativity is produced and understood. This shifts the focus from a human-centered model of creativity to one where agency is distributed between humans and machines. They explain this distributed agency through the diagram of mediation from Lievrouw Lievrouw (2014) that I mentioned earlier. Distributed agency, or generally the discussion of agency, falls into the relationship between material prac-

tices and technological devices in the diagram. In traditional creative processes, the artist's intent and inspiration were seen as central to the production of art. However, in an age where AI tools can autonomously generate creative outputs, the lines between human and machine agency become blurred. AI tools like DALL·E and Midjourney are not only tools that execute the commands of their human users; they are active agents that contribute to the creative process by making decisions, combining elements, and producing outputs that may not align with the human creator's original vision. Hayles (2023) introduces the concept of technosymbiosis, where humans and AI collaborate symbiotically, with both entities contributing to the creative process. In this framework, AI is not just a facilitator of human ideas but an autonomous actor with its own form of agency. This reframing of agency challenges traditional ideas of authorship and creativity, suggesting that the artistic output of AI systems is the product of a distributed network. She claims that "when humans, nonhumans, and computational media interact, they form cognitive assemblages, collectivities through which information, interpretations, and meanings circulate" (Hayles 2023). In this assemblage, the decision-making and creation process is distributed, and the issue is not whether an AI has agency, but how it is deciding, based on what and what effects it will have on humans and other technologies or media (Hayles 2023).

Hertzmann (2018) also discusses who the owner or creator in the relationship between creativity and AI, but he has a more positive and agential view of AI in general. He said that we have always used tools or technologies to communicate or create art, whether it is a brush and a canvas or a camera. However, he believes in artistic creation as a social practice and that humans always have agency in the creative process, even when working with AI. The credit belongs to the human as the artist because we are the ones who train algorithms, making us the mastermind behind AI-generated creations. From this perspective, while AI may participate in the creative process, it does so as an extension of human labor, rather than as an independent agent. Hertzmann (2018) claims that "computers cannot be credited with authorship of art in our current understanding", but that this might change in the future of AI tools, and considering that his essay is from six years ago, maybe his view would be different now.

Generally, the concept of distributed agency is further complicated by the fact that the AI platforms and technologies are mostly controlled by large companies, which own the algorithms and the datasets that train and power these tools. Humans and machines may be co-creators in some use cases and creative processes, but we should not forget the economic power relations that come with these tech companies and AI tools. Human creators, whose works are used to train these models, are often left out of the value chain, which raises important questions about ownership and ethics in the age of AI. To summarize the discussion about creative labor and automation, Celis Bueno et al. Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz (2024) state that "AI automation and labor are not easily differentiated but rather intermeshed in ways that complicate clear analyses regarding the origins of value or the location of creative practices".

## 5 Knowledge Extractivism as the Foundation of AI Tools

As discussed in earlier sections of this essay, AI tools are trained on big datasets, which raises concerns about creative labor but also about the exploitation of human creativity. Even if we see AI tools as co-creators, the underlying and hidden labor behind the technology often remains obscured. The outputs of AI are often the results of uncredited labor by human artists, writers etc., whose works and data have been harvested without consent. The extraction of creative labor is further critiqued by Steyerl (2023), who introduces the concept of "mean images" to describe AI-generated visual outputs. These images are statistical averages of the data used to train AI models, resulting in works that are derivative rather than truly

original. Steyerl Steyerl (2023) argues that AI tools do not produce images based on actual references, but instead rely on stochastic discrimination to create hallucinated approximations of artistic works. “These renderings represent averaged versions of mass online booty, hijacked by dragnets... They replace likenesses with likelinesses” (Steyerl 2023). In this sense, AI tools not only fail to innovate but also commodify creativity by reducing it to statistical probabilities. This process devalues human creativity by masking its origins in data extraction. According to her, AI has a parasitic nature as it relies on human-generated content and scrapes every available online data. This content is then used to train AI models, which produce new works that are sold or distributed for profit, while the original creators receive no compensation or recognition. This creates a situation where human creators are systematically excluded from the value chain, while the corporations that control the AI tools benefit financially.

This exploitation of human labor and their data is a part of a concept called “knowledge extractivism”, a part of Pasquinelli and Joler’s Pasquinelli and Joler (2020) Nooscope Manifesto mainly referring to this exact extraction of human-generated content and repurposing it for their own purposes within AI systems, for example to transform it into new forms of creative output. They argue that AI’s reliance on large-scale data scraping mirrors the dynamics of colonial exploitation, where resources (in this case, human-made creative works) are extracted from marginalized creators and repackaged for profit by tech companies. This form of exploitation is intrinsic to the data economy, where AI models compress vast amounts of creative knowledge into statistical models that are then used to generate new outputs. They state that “the modern project to mechanise human reason has clearly mutated, in the twenty-first century, into a corporate regime of knowledge extractivism and epistemic colonialism” (Pasquinelli and Joler 2020).

Moreover, AI’s exploitation of human creativity aligns with broader concerns about the political economy of cultural production in the age of data capitalism. Steinhoff Steinhoff (2022) argues that AI-driven synthetic data further disconnects creative labor from its human source by creating automated systems that produce content without human intervention. This raises significant concerns about how AI tools, trained on human creativity, can undermine the value of original works while reaping profits for corporations that control the AI supply chain. By situating AI within this extractive economy, it becomes clear that while AI tools may augment creativity, they do so by commodifying and redistributing the value of human labor. This leads us to question how AI reshapes creative industries, particularly regarding the automation of creative labor and the redistribution of value within the AI-driven creative economy.

## 6 Conclusion

In this essay, I looked at different views on the relationship between AI and creativity and how we can define new roles within the creative process. This interconnected relationship between human/user and technology as described by Celis Bueno et al. Bueno, Chow, and Popowicz (2024) linked back to Lievrouw’s Lievrouw (2014) diagram of mediation, as distributed agency can be seen between “practices” and “artifacts”, and automation between “artifacts” and “arrangements”, and creative labor between “practices” and “arrangements”. Connecting the question of creativity within AI tools with Lievrouw’s ideas was a very interesting link, because I agree that generative AI is part of our social arrangements, but also of how we use it and how we use what AI tools enable. This threefold way of looking at generative AI moves away from a binary understanding of human/user versus technology or machine creativity. As generative AI tools evolve, they are not only changing creative practices but also influencing societal perceptions of creativity, ownership, and agency. The concept of distributed agency got me thinking about ownership and copyright of creative output. Did the creation come about

because of human creativity or because of the trained AI model? There is always a relationship and interaction between the human/user and the technology, and the understanding of creativity changes as a result.

On the one hand, AI is framed as a collaborator that complements or even extends human creativity and democratizes access to creative tools. On the other hand, concerns are raised about exploitation, ownership, and the ethical implications of using AI systems trained on massive datasets of hidden human labor. Both sides offer valid and important arguments, and in the process of researching this essay, my view of AI art and these tools as a co-creator has changed a bit. I mainly saw the benefits of being able to create anything I could imagine, but I did not think as much about the issues of ownership and the benefits only to the large corporations that own these AI tools. In general, I think that AI can function as a co-creator, but it is not creative itself, because it can only remix the human-generated input data and create these statistical renderings, as Pasquinelli and Joler Pasquinelli and Joler (2020) and Steyerl Steyerl (2023) put it. For the future and our (creative) use of AI, we need to find improved regulations and ways to create better value chains. But how AI and creativity will evolve and who will have the agency will only show in the future.

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## The Mediality of Affect in Encounters of Frustration, Fear, and Trauma

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### Abstract

Affect has been widely discussed in terms of how it is defined, applied, and studied in media studies. In their accounts of affective politics in online spaces, Boler and Davis contest the most prominent understanding of affect in media studies, where affect generally referred to as “the force and potential of the various intensities of embodiment” leaves much to be desired as a means of navigating affective relations in social media platforms. The interaction between humans and technology, as well as between other humans through technology, is an essential component to the affective turn in new media studies. In this essay, I articulate the resonant intensities of affect in relation to media and technology as it modulates into reverb within existing discourses on affect theory. I identify affective publics and their movements within social media platforms as politically charged, and draw comparisons between the popular understanding of affect as visceral sensations against a critical perspective of affect as mechanisms of networked publics. Lastly, I ruminate deeper into the operationalization of affect within bodies of technology and its potential feedback loop for manifest spaces of dissonance such as fear, frustration, and trauma.

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“Our point is not to equate or ‘reduce’ affect to emotion, feeling, or sensation, but rather to use each term in expanded ways that enable us to describe and account for the interconnections, interstices and metonymies of feeling, affect, emotion, sensation, and cognition, while foregrounding their sociality.” (Boler and Davis 2018, 80)

“Affect all too often becomes a mystified idea akin to force or energy and intimates an abstract celebration of the uncontrollable” (82)

## 1 Introduction

Affect has been widely discussed in terms of how it is defined, applied, and studied in media studies. In their accounts of affective politics in online spaces, Boler and Davis (2018) contest the most prominent understanding of affect in media studies, where affect generally referred to as “the force and potential of the various intensities of embodiment” (79), leaves much to be desired as a means of navigating affective relations in social media platforms. The interaction between humans and technology, as well as between other humans through technology, is an essential component to the affective turn in new media studies. As Paasonen (2015) puts it in her article *As Networks Fail: Affect, technology, and the notion of the user*, “...Through and within encounters with the bodies of technology, our life forces and capacities to act may increase or diminish, slow down, or speed up (Deleuze 1988, 125). Consequently, networks, devices, and applications modify our everyday routines and embodied potentialities for action” (703). Technology in this context serves as “agential” rather than instrumental, suggesting that technology and network devices too are “bodies that affect and are affected by human bodies” (703).

Referring to Lievrouw (2014)’s framework in the evolving field of new media studies, “communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements and formations as inseparable and mutually determining” (23). The extent of the embodiment of affect as it permeates through human experiences enmeshed with technological infrastructure, is mapped as a constant process of mediation. It is through structures of feeling and materialized sentiment of affective publics that “shapes the texture of these publics and affect becomes the drive that keeps them going” (Papacharissi 2016, 308).

In this essay, I articulate the resonant intensities of affect in relation to media and technology as it modulates into reverberate within existing discourses on affect theory. I identify affective publics and their movements within social media platforms as politically charged, and draw comparisons between the popular understanding of affect as visceral sensations against a critical perspective of affect as mechanisms of networked publics. Lastly, I ruminate deeper into the operationalization of affect within bodies of technology and its potential feedback loop for manifest spaces of dissonance such as fear, frustration, and trauma. I account for these recollections as a path to engage in more discourse about the affectual encounters of dissonant spaces with future bodies of technology and new media.

## 2 Affective Exchanges in Networked Publics

In order to provide a full spectrum of the conversations surrounding the conceptualization of affect in media studies, I include some definitions from relevant scholars and works that supplement and provide contrasting thoughts on the topic. As mentioned above, many scholars consider affect to be a force or intensity that acts as foreground to “emotion, feeling, cognition, sensation and subjectivity” (Boler and Davis 2018, 80). Affect is a moment of “suspense, a shift, an attunement between entities” (Cho 2015, 44), it is an “unstructured non-conscious experience transmitted between bodies, which has the capacity to create affective resonances

below the threshold of articulated meaning” (Paasonen 2015, 702). It is worth noting that these excerpts from Paasonen (2015) and Cho (2015) also refer to a widely received definition of affect by Massumi, whose works prove to be highly influential within the discourses of affect in media theory. Cho (2015), for example, refers to “Massumi’s equation (1995, 2002) of affect with intensity and emergence, a plane of the virtual, the generative potential of the event not yet determined” (45). However, I aim to emphasize the mechanism of affect within affective publics as more than just an autonomous or elusive force, which we will discuss further in this essay.

Cho (2015) accounts for the “overwhelming sensation of strangeness” (47) he experienced while scrolling down the bottomless depths of Tumblr, illustrating a visceral reaction while on the platform as he navigates through expressions of queerness on social media. He explains this experience as reverb, “how intensity interacts with refrain over time and as a function of repetition... in my conception, reverb is refrain that has the additional quality of amplification or diminishment (intensity) through echo or refrain; in this sense, it can be modulated to serve a purpose” (53). This correlates to Paasonen (2019)’s understanding of resonance in *Resonant Networks: On affect and social media*, as “circulation of social media content evokes specific kinds of networked resonance that contribute to its affective stickiness, the intensities of which grow, linger, and fade away at varying speeds as user attention and interest perpetually circulates, moves, shifts, and relocates... Instances of resonance render things interesting, desirable, and important while their reverberation affords them with temporal extension” (60). While resonance attaches stickiness to affective publics, refrain is the durability of resonance repeated over time through reverb.

Paasonen (2019) and Cho (2015) construct the notion of stickiness in affective publics through the resonance and reverb of affect within networked devices and platforms. Following previously laid definitions of affect, I would then like to pose the question: if affect is simply a sensation or force, how does it initiate or drive embodied movement in online spaces?

Papacharissi (2016) connects the affective exchanges of bodies and bodies of technology using examples of collectively-produced news about historical moments like the Occupy movement and the resignation of Hosni Mubarak uploaded on social media platforms, in this case Twitter, to explain affective publics as “networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (311). Here Papacharissi (2016) provides an explanation of how the affordances of Twitter, through its storytelling structures of “texture, tonality, discursivity, and narrative modality” (320) are able to drive discourses that are spread to create the feeling of community within networked publics. The instantaneous updates surrounding momentous events relevant to those feelings of community are inherently affective and sustain those structures of feeling.

Papacharissi (2016) suggests affect as “pre-emotive intensity subjectively experienced and connected to, in this context, to processes of pre-mediation or anticipation of events prior to their occurrence” (311). The idea that pre-mediation is filled with affect allows us to acknowledge its intangible quality whilst also relating its eventual appearance and re-appearance as the events continue to occur. These examples of important political events allow us to explore and dissect Papacharissi (2016)’s proposition in understanding the materiality of affective publics, and is further explained by Paasonen (2019) in her excerpt from *Resonant Networks*, “A possibility for contact, communication, and exchange does not, however, automatically result in, or fuel, a sense of togetherness or belonging: community building, whether online or offline, involves acts of exclusion, and even those of policing, given that there can be no ‘us’ without ‘them’ and no inside without an outside (Joseph, 2002)” (52).

Paasonen (2015)’s work in *As Networks Fail* consists of a collection of forty-five student essays, where she reveals “retrospective reflections of sensation after the fact” (702) in her students’ experiences of their struggles with technology and devices. As the students’ express

negative emotions and feelings of incompetence when faced with failure to succeed in using networks and devices, Paasonen (2015) points out that lack of control felt by her students lead to the notion of devices as having affect over their everyday existence as “human and nonhuman agency is fundamentally entangled” (712). For Paasonen (2015), the accumulation of sensation grows along with its intensity, and thus “human–technology relations gain a sticky affective charge in the negative register” (705).

Similar to other scholars, Paasonen (2015) indicates that affect exists as a precursor, a transformative process of sensation into a state of emotion. Paasonen (2015) also asserts that although fleeting sensations and testimonies of affect could be difficult to capture through recollections of these failed encounters, it supports the enmeshment of affect and emotion. The entanglement of affect and emotion is a significant and recurring theme in the discourse of affect, which I will later discuss in this paper leaning towards a political lens.

### 3 Affect as “Emotions on the Move”

“The qualitative descriptions of ‘affect’ in social media are conceptually overshadowed by the language of emotion — and yet emotions are presented as simply what people ‘express’, not a web of intersubjectively produced sociality... Affect understood as ‘intensity’ all too often gestures at something it does not explain, while using rhetorical strategies that further mystify the term.” (Boler and Davis 2018, 82)

“We suggest, alternatively, conceptualizing affect as emotions on the move. Affect may be understood as emotions that are collectively or intersubjectively manifested, experienced, and mobilized, out of the ‘private’, individual realm and into shared, even public spaces, which may then be channeled into movement(s).” (81)

In the beginning of this paper, I mentioned Massumi’s seminal influence in affect theory for media studies. In fact, many of the authors discussed in this paper have referenced Massumi to bolster, or in contrast, to criticize Massumi’s body of work within the field of affect. After elaborating on Cho (2015), Paasonen (2015), and Papacharissi (2016)’s central concepts pertaining to affective networks, resonance, and reverb, in this section I lean towards Boler and Davis (2018)’s approach to better examine affect within networked publics, and their support of affect theory as rooted in feminist critique studies.

Boler and Davis (2018)’s iteration of affect as “emotions on the move” is strongly distinct from affect as the “elusive” or autonomous force characteristic of Massumi’s influential studies. In their work, Boler and Davis (2018) note the pertinence of acknowledging emotions as a key factor in politics and media as technology is inseparable in society. They highlight their aim to integrate affect theory with feminist and digital media studies, specifically leaning toward feminist critical studies of emotion that associate affect as relational and inherently political.

Boler and Davis (2018) challenge Massumi’s binary distinction between cognition and affect, and emotion and affect. They include excerpts from Massumi’s essay *The Autonomy of Affect* as “not ownable or recognizable, and is thus resistant to critique”. Affect as resistant to critique in the eyes of Boler and Davis (2018) is a romanticized conception, and “such bifurcations work against — or at a minimum appear to ignore — long-standing feminist theorizing that has sought, for decades, to theorize beyond the binaries of body and cognition, and emotion and rationality, showing the ways these mutually shape and form what and how we know (Campbell, 1994; Frye, 1983; Hochschild, 1987; Jaggar, 1989; Lorde, 1997)” (80).

This is not to say that Boler and Davis (2018) object towards all concepts existing in the current discourses of affect within new media research. In fact, they acknowledge Papacharissi (2016)’s work on understanding affective attunement and her five propositions to interpret the “texture of networked publics, and tonality of expression as it relates to social media” (Boler and Davis 2018, 81). However, they view the influence of Massumi’s earlier works

in Papacharissi (2016)'s and other scholars' formulation that rely on alleged presence, and therefore alleged autonomy, of affect slightly amiss for the purposes of observing affect from feminist and political perspectives in media theories. They state, "While the attention to affective attunement is potentially useful, in deploying a definition of affect as quantitative, pre-personal, non-conscious, and non-signifying, one is left with a myriad of questions about how particular emotions are targeted, produced and manipulated within the affective politics of digital media" (Boler and Davis 2018, 81).

Continuing Boler and Davis (2018)'s acknowledgement for the engagement of Papacharissi (2016)'s affective publics as mobilized online and offline, the excerpt above further delineates their disengagement with Massumi's account of non-conscious affect in favor of theories that address the emotionality within society and online communities through structures of storytelling that flow co-constitutively from social media into public spaces. Boler and Davis (2018) ultimately emphasize the importance of affective discourse in digital networks by conceptualizing affect as a collective contribution which rely on social contexts, human interaction and the embodiment of affect into emotion that simultaneously (re)occur.

Yet, there seems to be a progressive shift in the recent works from Massumi, particularly in his book *Ontopower* (2015), where he addresses similar views as Boler and Davis (2018) through the examination of politics and governmental power exercised in broadcast media shortly after the terrors of 9/11. Massumi (2015) specifically addresses fear and the affective modulation of fear through channels that catch the affective attunement of the public. The terror alert system set in place by Bush's administration was an exercise of power in a "social environment within which government now operated was of such complexity that it made a mirage of any idea that there could be a one-to-one correlation between official speech or image production and the form and content of response" (174).

Massumi (2015) here acknowledges the complexity of networked bodies, and although in his article he refers to broadcast media, I argue that it could also be applicable in the context of social media. Through their proposed understanding of affect, Boler and Davis (2018) direct attention towards a shift in a political "crisis of truth". By unpacking "truthiness" and "post-truth" they illustrate observations of a U.S. political landscape where the individual and collective sense of "truthiness" prioritizes the perception and interpretation of facts that then influences public opinion regardless of their factuality. This mirrors Massumi (2015)'s accounts of fear and the affective modulation of fear by government, as "the alert system was designed to modulate that fear. It could raise it a pitch, then lower it before it became too intense, or even worse, before habituation dampened response. Timing was everything. Less fear itself than fear fatigue became an issue of public concern. Affective modulation of the populace was now an official, central function of an increasingly time-sensitive government" (171).

Even though Massumi (2015) still refers to an "autonomous force of existence", he applies it in relation to fear and the "quasi-casual relation to itself" (182), thus equating fear to possessing a double-feature, fear as emotion and as affective force. Through this understanding of affect and emotion as inseparable along with his declaration of fear as an ontopower, Massumi (2015) in this body of work claims the "full spectrum of fear, up to and including its becoming-autonomous as a regenerative ground of existence, in action and in-action, in feeling and without it with thought" (185). By framing affect in the context of fear, and fear's ability to be experienced "nonconsciously, wrapped in action, before it unfurls from it and is felt as itself, in its distinction from the action with which it arose..." (176), Massumi (2015)'s work, at least in his probings of fear, bears more of a resemblance to Boler and Davis (2018)'s definition of "affect as emotions on the move".

## 4 Frustration, Fear, and Trauma in Networked Publics

“Affective feedback loops are central to the creation of these personalized emotional and informational ecosystems, as they are the mechanism by which affect circulates from the user, into the algorithmically determined product, which returns ‘desired’ content back to the user... In this movement, the relations established by social media platforms are as much relations between people and econo-technologically instantiated version of self, as they are between separate individuals ‘mediated’ by technologies.” (Boler and Davis [2018], 76)

“My fear is that algorithmic media provides the technoscientific instrument for making trauma time an operative tool of state and capital... As instruments of automated media reliant on computational process for production and distribution, algorithms ‘anticipate the automation of subjectivity’ (Andrejevic 2019, 11) and, by implication, the potential for automated trauma.” (Richardson [2023], 429)

The last section of this essay goes further into the negative registers of affect in media, and how it assembles itself in new forms of technology. We have already discussed, through a political lens, of Massumi ([2015])’s dissection of fear as well as Papacharissi ([2016])’s framework of the agential nature of affective publics. Meanwhile, in addition to its illustration of the entanglement between humans and networked devices, Paasonen ([2019])’s work in *Resonant Networks* insinuates the connection between affective publics brought together by intensities of feeling, as she states “...following Zizi Papacharissi (2015), affective publics involve shared articulations of emotion that bring forth more or less temporary sense of connection, which, with a contagious kind of intensity, can fuel political action... It then follows that a scholarly focus on affect should not be confined to ‘good vibrations’ and pleasurable exchanges, just as investigations into resonance ought not exclude dissonances from their agenda” (52–53). Finally, Boler and Davis ([2018]) express their urgency for scholars towards understanding the “interplay of affect, emotion and digital media to understand the ‘networked subject’ of contemporary politics” (82).

The discussion of affective feedback loops from Boler and Davis ([2018]) in the excerpt above provides room to widen the scope onto racialized, classed, and gendered nuances of mediatized politics by incorporating critical algorithm studies. They suggest that “Algorithmic governance refers to the ways in which our digitally-mediatised experiences of the world — and hence our exposure, values, and reality — are shaped by artificial intelligence of algorithms designed according to commodified, consumer-oriented logics” (83).

Within the context of affective and networked publics, Richardson ([2023]) provides a comprehensive introduction to algorithmic trauma that relates to the facets of affective discourse in media theory. “Returning to the proposition that media shapes trauma and trauma shapes media, algorithmic trauma and its affective ruptures can be conceptualized as distinct from traumas manifested in other media. Autonomous, traumatic, and machinic, affect animates ever-shifting relations within and between technical systems, flesh bodies, and worldly contexts. Algorithmic systems introduce a radical computational contingency into both the arrival of the traumatic event and its latent return which renders the virtual potential of trauma into coded probability” (440). In relation to Davis and Boler and Davis ([2018]), the affective feedback loop fundamentally trained to direct “desired” content back to the user, in the framing of traumatic algorithms circulates and thus perpetuates traumatic content through algorithms and its architectures of machine learning.

Richardson ([2023]) illustrates collective trauma occurring “through recursive mediations, taken up by and transmitted through different media technological renderings”. To reckon with the mediality of trauma, then, is also to confront its material and affective dynamics within situated contexts (Atkinson and Richardson 2013). But as Jenny Edkins (2003, 58) argues, trauma is also tightly bound to power, and in the context of political abuse, “trauma

involves confronting the arbitrary, contingent, and ungrounded nature of authority structures” (429). The potential reverberation of trauma as it courses through affective feedback loops, and its inherently political sources of war, discrimination, and other social issues possess a bleak outlook towards our relationship with technology, however it is an outlook that I take as necessary to build collective action and affective politics against infrastructures that remain invisible yet continuously gain power.

## 5 Conclusion

The discussions surrounding affect within networked publics continue in tandem with the development of technology. In this current day, and almost surely in the futures to come, society remains tethered to devices and its afforded affective networks. I illustrate this using central concepts of affect theory discussed in this paper, from the conceptual understanding of affect itself, the sticky resonance and reverberation in networked publics of social media that oscillates and is relational to offline publics, and the affective feedback loop of affect in positive and negative registers.

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## Reading the Shapeshifting Monster in Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) Through Layers of Divulged Distrust

Eden Tweedie<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article presents a critical reading of John Carpenter's film *The Thing* (1982), arguing that its narrative of distrust offers an extension to conventional monster theory. The author proposes a "beyond the body" approach, positing that monstrosity is located not in the alien's physical form, but in the atmosphere of suspicion its presence engenders. Drawing on theorists including Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Sarah Juliet Lauro, the analysis examines how the shapeshifting antagonist acts as a catalyst, exposing dormant layers of distrust at personal, social, and societal levels. The article investigates how Carpenter's formal techniques, including characterization and mise-en-scene, depict the characters' descent into paranoia, leading to violence that blurs the line between human and monster. At a societal level, the film is interpreted as a microcosm of its contemporary context—a post-Watergate era marked by skepticism towards institutions such as science and government. The author concludes that by decoupling monstrosity from a visible, physical body, *The Thing* suggests that true monstrosity is a latent and fundamental aspect of human interaction, revealed only under pressure.

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When you can't trust anyone, can you even trust yourself? This timeless conundrum is explored in John Carpenter's 1982 box office flop turned cult classic. *The Thing* features a shapeshifting monster which infiltrates an isolated community with something more than genre-anticipated gore and death. The monstrous presence infects the 109-minute movie with rife distrust. At the time of its release, the idea of the 'universal mass', loss of autonomy, and rampant technology were (and still are) consuming. The ensuing distrust in organizations and social structures are mirrored in *The Thing*, as the narrative centers on a group of researchers in an Antarctic base who are beset by a thawed-out extraterrestrial parasite that shapeshifts into other life forms. Once understood, this creates a situation in which any of the characters could be the 'Thing'. This community-busting premise leads to the collapse of not only social structures, but interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. The deterioration of trust amongst the group ironically causes the characters to behave just as monstrously as the parasite they fear. Drawing on zombie and monster theory, I argue for an extension of these theories: that it is not only the monsters in film and television that represent societal and cultural fears, but rather the mere presence of a monster uncovers layers of distrust within humanity that, in times of peace and certainty, lay dormant. In the following sections I expand upon this perception of monstrosity from the visible to the conceptual, to uncover deeper levels of monstrous distrust. By drawing parallels between the real and the fictional, we can unearth what the extraterrestrial reveals about earth, and how the invisible and ever-changing monster provides commentary and criticism of static earth-bound systems. For the context of this paper, the personal will be defined as the relationship to one's own identity; the social as the dynamics between humans; and the societal as the wider governmental structures in modern society. By analyzing the formal elements Carpenter uses to imply the presence of the monster in *The Thing*, distrust is divulged at the personal, social, and societal level. By situating this research in zombie and monster theory and *The Thing*'s cultural context, each subsection (personal, social, societal) will analyze how the distrust narrative is created – ultimately arguing for an extension of how we study monstrosity in media.

## 1 Beyond the monster's body

In *Monster Theory: A Reader*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the monster itself is an embodiment of societal and cultural fears, often dealing with our relationships to the world, each other, and ourselves. Where Cohen argues that "[t]he monster's body is a cultural body" (Cohen 1996, 4), I argue for a 'beyond the

body' approach – where it's not the visible, physical monster that directly represents cultural fears, but the distrustful atmosphere surrounding it. If "[t]o consider our current monsters is to reflect on how we think about ourselves and our connection to the world..." then the invisible or shape-shifting monster speaks directly to the culture of skepticism that has only intensified since the digital revolution (Weinstock 2013, 75). The 1980's saw the collapse of 'traditional' communism, an acceleration of globalization, and the end of the Cold War. As the digital revolution also gained momentum, fears about technology spawned a raft of sci-fi and horror films, such as *E.T. (1982)*, *Little Shop of Horrors (1986)*, and *Predator (1987)*. Filmmakers took advantage of the prevailing zeitgeist to amplify fear in their audiences through the body genre of horror. The alien Thing's fluidity calls to mind what Sarah Juliet Lauro in *Zombie Theory: A Reader* coins as "semiotic fecundity" – its ability to bear a variety of cultural concerns (2017, 6). Unlike a zombie, the Thing's monstrosity is not always overtly visible, therefore it is representative of contemporary anxieties while also manifesting them in the human characters. The monster achieves this symbolic power by summoning distrust due to its hidden and ever-changing nature.

## 2 From failure to classic

In an active and vibrant horror film decade, one would think that *The Thing* would have been commercially successful, but this was not the case. In fact, *The Thing* took several decades to reach the screen in the first place. Originating as a 1938 short story by John W. Campbell, the rights to *Who Goes There?* were acquired by Universal Studios. Carpenter accepted Universal's offer of a director's position on the *Who Goes There?* adaptation entitled *The Thing* (Addison 2013, 155). His "technique of terror", with gory special effects and tension in distrust, can be viewed as part of a tradition of surrealist art (Conrich and Woods 2004, 97). Despite its cinematic brilliance, the film was badly received, grossing just over 19 million US dollars during its time in theaters (Addison 2013, 154). The brutally honest view of the distrustful human condition fell short in comparison to the family-friendly box-office favourite *E.T.*, which offered a reassuringly hopeful view of humanity (Conrich and Woods 2004, 97). The pessimistic stance of *The Thing* also stood in stark contrast with the "Reagan-style masculinity and optimism" of 1980's America (Addison 2013, 157). I would venture that *The Thing* suffered by comparison, because it 'hit too close to home' for audience sensibilities on issues such as distrust in social systems and relationships. Similarly to the zombie's ability to function as a cultural signifier, *The Thing*'s monster represents a "...mostly unmapped territory of the collective unconscious" (Lauro 2017, 7). *The Thing* was ill-suited to the cultural climate of the 80's, but twenty years later viewers began to reevaluate it, and the film's popularity benefitted from online fan culture. This grounded *The Thing* and its shape-shifting villain as not merely a monster but "...a mode for theoretical work itself" (14).

## 3 Up close and personal

Monstrosity in humans is revealed through the ways in which distrust prompts them to act, elucidated through Carpenter's characters and his gruesome visual effects. In *The Thing*, Carpenter's characters are "...outsiders, rebels, distrustful of society and its systems" (Conrich and Woods 2004, 103). The audience is encouraged to find a piece of themselves in the characters, leading them to draw parallels to their own lives and question what they would do in this extreme situation. At the same time, the audience is invited to judge the characters for the severity of their actions, albeit prompted by distrust and distress. This is particularly noteworthy, given that seven of the eleven deaths are not directly caused by the Thing, but rather the human characters' purposeful killings enacted out of fear. In the interests of their own safety and survival, the group determines that they must kill one of their own, when they believe that individual is infected. Clark tries to kill MacReady, shortly after a medium-long shot of Clark holding a knife behind his back – symbolic of distrust. Clark is prompted to do so, not because he believes MacReady is the Thing, but rather because he is frustrated by MacReady's leadership tactics. Before Clark gets the chance to act on his pent-up anger, MacReady shoots him in the head. As the Thing is not only invisible (hidden in the bodies it inhabits) but also ever-changing, it doesn't directly manifest distrust, however the monster brings to light pre-existing distrust ordinarily hidden under the surface.

Monstrosity can be defined as an entity or act that is outrageously evil, an "...invisible disease that eats away at the body... and manifests visibly through symptomatic behavior" (Weinstock 2013, 276). In *The Thing*, because the monster is shapeshifting, monstrosity manifests differently in each of its victims. Each time the Thing assimilates one of the crew members, it not only looks different, but acts differently. The Thing is first shown as a distorted human face, then as an octopus-like creature, as jaws bursting out of Palmer's stomach, as a head with spider legs, a human that splits in two, and finally as a gruesome dinosaur-esque entity. The only thing that visually connects these 'Things' is the excess of gore which Carpenter employs.

Gushing blood, oozing from the bodies of the infected, speaks to the idea of the 'collective mass', characteristic of zombie studies (Lauro 2017). From the inside out, we are all human and all capable of succumbing to our darkest desires and our inner beast. The many different re-creations of the same monster represent different types of personal monstrosity. Monsters feed on the innate monstrosity of the human condition, further reinforcing the importance of decoupling monstrosity from appearance as a "...cultural shift that aligns monstrosity not with physical difference, but with antithetical moral values" (Weinstock 2013, 276). Suspicion within the crew, further heightened by the presence of the monster, takes a toll on the characters' mental states and leads to unnecessary deaths. Even MacReady – the headstrong, overly confident, self-proclaimed leader – is shown lacking confidence and being distrustful of himself. He can't truly prove to the other crew members that he isn't the Thing, leading him to doubt himself. He puts on a tough exterior, but his lips and hands shake as he commands the others,

and this is not only due to the sub-zero temperatures. The distrust in oneself connects to "...what existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre refers to as our monstrous freedom", in that we alone are responsible for our actions (Weinstock 2013, 277-278). Our dormant inner monster is awakened, and as such, the audience is entreated to reevaluate their definition of what a monster is, and to question if there is a difference between a human and a monster at all. Ultimately, this lessening of trust in the 'true order' of things leads to a lack of confidence and trust in the only one we can ever 'truly' rely on – ourselves.

## 4 Sociality of skepticism

The palpable distrust, created by the presence of the monster, leads to the breakdown of relationships and social structures. It's not just monster theorists or horror filmmakers who have shown such social issues through film. 'Social problem films' – those that integrate larger social conflict into the individual conflict of their characters – were popular in the 80's. The genre of horror became focused on a post-structuralist vision of who we are as humans (Yang 2013, 11). As a presence from another planet shakes up societal structures (often centering around authority), underlying problems on earth are exposed. In alien invasion films "...distrust is portrayed as valuable for survival", and skepticism is key in not only surviving alien attacks, but living in our highly surveilled society (63). This distrust is represented in the social dynamics of the characters in *The Thing*. As Bennings burns to his death after being assimilated by the Thing, the remaining characters form a circle around him. Carpenter positions the actors in this manner to represent their simultaneously equal, yet separate state. In the presence of a common enemy they are united by default, however their inability to trust one another divides them in their fight against it. As Heather Addison notes in *Cinema's Darkest Vision* notes, "[t]he film argues that unlimited individualism is destructive and may lead to humanity perishing from the earth" (2013, 162).

In an effort to find out who among the remaining members is infected, MacReady devises a blood test. As he draws samples from the members, a tight shot focuses on each character's face, as Carpenter slowly pans the camera to the next crew member. This allows the audience to witness the characters' anxious anticipation, as their eyes move from side to side, ready to act if a crewmate suddenly turns. Carpenter holds his nerve, retaining the slow pan, so his audience is not only fixed on each face, but also on the space between them. The empty space in the frame combines with the eerie soundtrack to infer the monster's presence. This dead space is also representative of, despite their literal proximity, the distance and distrust they have in one another. The Thing lurks between them *and* within them, even though it cannot be seen. This suspicion, or intuition, prompts MacReady to utter phrases such as "not too close" and "you stay there" while conducting the test. But even before the alien divulges distrust, the men keep their distance, making it easier for them to "...dispense with one another – and

for the viewers to register little sympathy when they do" (Katovich and Kinkade 1993, 628). Where Robert Cumhow argues that

"the creature is a metaphor for the already deteriorated condition of human interaction" (Addison 2013, 161), I argue that it is not simply the creature that represents this deterioration. It is rather the creature's *presence* that exposes these hidden layers of distrust and suspicion in human interactions and relationships.

## 5 Society and the self

The distrust at the micro-level of Carpenter's on-screen characters represents public distrust at the macro-level within society. *The Thing* shares elements of zombie outbreak narratives, in that there is governmental, political, and scientific distrust at work – through infection and spread (Lauro 2017). Media scholars have argued that zombies are not a singular cultural figure, but are representative of larger world issues, commonly centered around capitalism and commodification (Lauro 2017). In Micheal Katovich and Patrick Kinkade's reading of *The Thing* through a social and political science perspective, they state that "[i]nstitutional trust had been shattered with Watergate and Vietnam, and paranoia as a national zeitgeist had taken hold" (Katovich and Kinkade 1993, 621). This distrust in organizations and social structures can be deduced in *The Thing*, and are as equally relevant now as they were in the 80's. Particularly in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and uncanny-valley Artificial Intelligence, we have seen resistance to forces of governmental control and technological advancement.

The distrust narrative in *The Thing* is created not through the collective mass' distrust of systems, but rather of the individual's distrust of everyone, including the societal structures they operate in. Zombies are often used as a cultural signifier, as their bodies literally represent decay and distrust through the monstrous visible. They are "...a figure that grapples with the fundamental irreconcilability of capitalism and humanism" (Lauro 2017, 4). Unlike a zombie, where monstrosity is overt, in *The Thing*, infection is unseen until the monster has completely taken hold from within. This reinforces the idea that we are all the same, all capable of decay and monstrous behaviour. It only makes sense that a society created by those who are capable of monstrosity, create – and therefore operate in – monstrous systems. Carpenter suggests that the leading forces of American society; science, military, government, and politics can't help in a life or death situation. The scientist, Blair, goes insane, the crew's weapons are rendered almost useless, and the politics of leadership drives the men further apart rather than closer together. The characters' "...attempts to deal with this creature involve more subtle metaphorical constructions of social groups' faith (or lack thereof) in humanity and its destructive devices" (Katovich and Kinkade 1993, 628). An example of this lack of faith is the motif of gaze, which implies the monster's presence and embodies distrust within one another and society. Due to the heightened stress, the characters' motions are jittery and their eyes dart stealthily. Despite the low-key lighting and flickering lamps used to convey the presence of something otherworldly, the characters' eyes remain visible and telling. By making sure that

the eyes are always sharp, and instructing the actors to emote through their eyes, Carpenter conveys the presence of a monster that can only be seen through the distress apparent in his characters' gaze.

The setting of Antarctica also lends itself to a cold, sterile, impersonal micro-representation of our current reality. "Media and popular culture have worked together to create an 'outbreak narrative', where the spread of an epidemic moves... from marginalized, deviant or underdeveloped groups to native, mainstream, or developed society, and accordingly play on common stereotypes connected to concepts of othering" (Curtis and Han 2020, 2). With this in mind, it is interesting to note the order of deaths in *The Thing*. Initially infecting a dog, the Thing gradually makes its way up the chain of command in what would seem as intellectual order,

leaving the 'leader' (Childs) and the 'lone wolf' (MacReady) as the only known survivors. However, the film ends on a somber note. Even though two men have survived so far, they are doomed to either die of hypothermia, or to be killed at the hands of their teammate since one – or both – could yet be the Thing. Carpenter's ambiguous ending conveys the idea that existing capitalist, neoliberal, and self-serving societal structures have ultimately failed in the face of a real threat, calling for a change in the way we communicate and organize ourselves to foster trust.

## 6 Conclusion

The presence of the shapeshifting monster in *The Thing* exhibits various layers of distrust, through Carpenter's genre-specific mise-en-scene, lighting, camerawork, and characterization. In the development of a distrust narrative, monstrosity is not always visible, and it can be ever-changing. This further reinforces the importance of extending monster (and zombie) theory and decoupling monstrosity from appearance to what I call a 'beyond the body' approach. *The Thing* is a work that exposes "...the fragility of our bodies, our identities, our relationships, and our systems of meaning" (Addison 2013, 157). In *The Thing*, monstrosity goes beyond the physical monster itself, as the mere presence of the monster manifests distrust, and it is this distrust that wreaks havoc in human relationships and societal systems. Layers of distrust are made visible, ironically through the presence of an invisible, shapeshifting monster. Distrust is a necessary evil in contemporary society, to operate within it we must set our default disposition to be suspicious – often at the cost of mental and social health. It's not simply the monsters in our media that represent collective fears, how the monster's presence is implied and how the human characters react, reveal innate monstrosity within society and the self. Through an alien presence and the distrust that it manifests, monstrosity is exposed in our midst, revealing that on-screen beasts aren't uniquely monstrous, at least not while us humans are watching.

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