

# Chapter 2

## The Moving Body as the Articulator, Meme and Affective Link in Political Communication on TikTok



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### 2.1 Introduction

Since the popularization of TikTok, the platform owned by Chinese company ByteDance, many have inquired about the political consequences of this social medium and the way it might transform the form and content of contemporary political communication. The diffusion of TikTok has been impressive in speed (Kaye et al., 2022), with over a billion active users as of the beginning of 2023, with a particularly high volume of users among the youngest cohort (Vogels et al., 2022). But it is not a matter of quantitative success that makes people interested about the political implications of this platform; qualitative considerations are just as important. Many see this new platform as embodying the spirit of Generation Z vis-a-vis previous generations (Stahl & Literat, 2022), with its greater valuing of positivity and collaboration (Katz et al., 2022) and an acid memetic humour. The platform's content is to a great extent nonpolitical, focusing on content with an entertainment focus rather than on current news and political issues. As TikTok's slogan suggests, the primary aim of this app is to "make your day" (TikTok, 2023a) and "powering creativity while enjoying you" (TikTok, 2023b). Yet, the platform is progressively being deployed to political ends by candidates in recent elections across the globe. While it is already customarily used for political communication in certain regions (particularly in Latin America), it is still some way from becoming a fixture in others.

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Yet, looking at the trajectory of other social media such as Facebook and Twitter that were initially more entertainment-oriented and then became progressively geared to political ends, it is fair to assume that something similar will soon happen with TikTok too.

To explore the political consequences of TikTok, this chapter will approach the video-sharing platforms as the bearer of a second wave of social media that differs from the first one of Facebook and Twitter and their “media logic” (Altheide, 2015). While research on the political uses of TikTok is still at a very early stage, some of the initial work in this area has revealed evidence that political content channelled through it shares some well-known features of TikTok communication in general, namely its focus on entertainment, self-irony, creativity, visual exuberance and positivity (Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Vijay & Gekker, 2021). However, to date the commentary on the nature of political communication in the TikTok era remains limited in its theoretical grasp; more wide-ranging empirical and conceptual investigations are necessary. What is the nature of political communication on TikTok? How does it differ from that channelled on other platforms? How does the specific style and aesthetic of TikTok determine politics on this social medium?

Our argument focuses on one specific aspect of TikTok communication: the central role played by the *moving body*. TikTok has become known to the general public for the recurrence of such performances as “dance crazes” or “lip-syncs,” in which users perform dance choreography of a “challenge” related to a popular song, or in which participants mime the singing or the speaking of a famous song, movie, or TV series scene. These practices hardly exhaust the almost infinite gamut of genres and “communicative forms” (Schellewald, 2021) that are available on the platform, ranging from educational videos to comedy sketches, so-called “satisfying videos” (2019) and all other forms of entertainment. Yet, the element of corporeal movement and communication is the signature feature of TikTok, transcending the specific format of dance crazes and lip-syncs. It is also visible in many other TikTok genres, where users often use bodily movements as a key element of their message; for example, by pointing their hands to different images or text boxes to multimodally communicate their message or transform viral gags, emblematic movie scenes, or topical events into playback and overacted playlets. To be fair, this corporeal element is shared with other platforms such as Instagram. But on TikTok it appears in an even more marked fashion, and as we shall see it carries important consequences for communication on this platform.

To understand politics and political communication on TikTok—its form, content, and purpose—we need to start from this all-important signature feature and draw the necessary conclusions. TikTok politics is a politics of moving corporeality in which the moving body acts as the leading, articulating mechanism. Obviously, the body has been an important element in political communication for a long time before the internet and social media. One can appreciate the theatrics and choreographies of political rituals and displays of leadership and power across history, from the politically loaded significance of ceremonial dances in ancient Maya and Aztec civilisations (Looper, 2020) to fascist propaganda and rituals described by Walter

Benjamin (2017). However, in the age of digital reproduction, the role of the body as a medium appears in a variety of new occasions and formats that require specific attention, from selfies and short videos (Kraidy, 2013) to animojies<sup>1</sup> and augmented reality masks.

Our contention is that TikTok body or corporeal communication has acquired an even more prominent dimension, acting as a central articulatory mechanism of discourse. On TikTok, political leaders are compelled to use their entire body as a means of addressing their target audiences and in so doing they have to adopt a posture that is different from first generation social media, such as Facebook and Twitter in which the dominant media was textual, with multimedia accompanying it, and from established forms of audio-visual communication such as TV that lacked the element of *body self-representation* and the interactivity of “social video.” While this view of political communication on TikTok as corporeal obviously leaves out other tendencies and practices, it goes a very long way to explain some of the ways TikTok is practically used by political leaders and parties.

To develop our discussion, we shall proceed as follows. After introducing our discussion by presenting different relevant streams of literature and developing a theoretical framework, we move to the main body of our analysis. We proceed to show three levels: form, content, and function. We show that corporeal communication is central from the standpoint of form as the body acts as an articulating mechanism bringing together different forms of media. We see similarities between this articulating function and the total theatre famously theorised by Richard Wagner. In terms of content, we talk about “embodied memetics,” in which the body acts as the signifier of memes stemming from popular culture products of various kinds—TV series, songs, dances, etc.—thereby transforming motion into its primary source of signification. In so doing, the body brings political communication into contact with popular culture, with moves, expressions, and gestures that people are already familiar with because of their cultural consumption, cited in videos.

In terms of function, our thesis is that bodily communication is crucial as a means of creative, discursive, and affective connection with the audience, which is made particularly urgent by present political circumstances, marked by a high level of popular distrust in political parties and leaders. In so doing, the performance of the body serves to display the human side of the political leader and the “backstage” of official political communication. These practices aim at engendering a sense of authenticity and direct contact between the leader and the led.

For each analytical level thus expounded, we shall operate in the following way: first we highlight the specificity in media logic of TikTok vis-a-vis other forms of communication and other social media, and then attempt to trace the political consequences of these characteristics. In so doing, we will demonstrate how the specific affordances and logic of TikTok are reflected in the political messages channelled through it. In terms of examples, we draw on cases from both Europe and Latin

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<sup>1</sup> Animojis are animated emojis able to capture or record the user’s facial expression. These emojis tend to be customisable to emulate the user’s traits. Apple introduced them in their iOS 12 operating system under the name of “Memojis.”

America, a region that, as we shall see, has become the world's laboratory of political communication on TikTok, where the corporeal dimension discussed here is all the more apparent.

## 2.2 The Body in Political Communication on TikTok

To understand the role played by the body in political communication on TikTok we need to operate in three-stages, starting by elucidating the specificity of this platform compared to other media and social media in particular. Then we zoom in on the way the body operates as a key element of its communication in a manner different from previous forms of communication. Finally, we end by discussing how the body operated in political communication before TikTok. This will provide us with a useful framework for our ensuing empirical analysis.

Founded in 2016 by the company musically, TikTok that is known as Douyin in China, has embodied a new style of online communication markedly different from other social media. It asserts that its mission is “to inspire creativity and bring joy” (TikTok, 2022). We can best approach TikTok as the representative of a second generation of social media, alongside other platforms such as Twitch, and to a certain extent Instagram and Snapchat that together share with TikTok a strong focus on visual material, video in particular. TikTok has been instrumental in the development of so-called “social video,” namely video-based social media, and in the popularisation of “reels.” This term, officially used by Instagram and Facebook, indicates short, looped videos, normally between 15 s and a minute. Given the short time available and the fact that these videos are typically watched in a sequence of tens of videos, they tend to contain highly simplified and emotionally intense content.

Many of these reels have a strong focus on the body and bodily communication. The most famous cases are dance crazes, in which users participate in collective challenges in which they try to imitate the dance moves that are trending at any specific point in time. In this context, imitating or “miming” dance moves is central to the way people produce content on the platform, to the point that scholars have spoken of “imitation publics” to indicate the different approach and logic underpinning this platform (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). This genre has been so successful that it has forced the music industry to transform its digital marketing strategies, making the launch of these dance challenges and their viral diffusion a central element of their campaigns (Radovanović, 2022).

Dance crazes are a perfect example of the bodily communication that is central to TikTok; we claim that TikTok is fundamentally a “body medium” or more precisely a “moving body medium,” in the sense that its form and content revolve around the moving body. Obviously, the body has been a longstanding object of attention in culture. From the famous prehistoric statues of fertility goddesses to the emergence of performing arts such as theatre and dance in the ancient world, the body has been the protagonist of many forms of communication. Its various movements and postures have been used to communicate all sorts of situations and emotions—a non-verbal

form of communication covered by the field of *kinesics* that is concerned with body movements and the interpretation of facial expressions and gestures (Birdwhistell, 2010). Over the course of the modern era the body has gone on to become the object of various media: photography, film, television, and mostly recently the internet (Fortunati et al., 2003). Further, the development of fashion has made the body, its appearance, and the style attributed to it, a central element of popular culture (Davis, 1994). In other words, the body has long been mediated and symbolised. The development of the internet, and most recently of social video, has created the conditions for bodily communication to acquire even more prominence.

The early internet and the first wave of social media were by and large dominated by text, with multimedia content mostly being an accompaniment. However, visual and video content, in particular, have progressively taken prominence. Among other aspects, the higher byte size of video content as compared to text content means that video now accounts for around 2/3 of internet traffic. YouTube has been decisive in this popularisation of video, becoming one of the most popular social network sites, especially among young people (though many would not consider it a social network). Further, subscription-based, videos-streaming services such as Netflix have made films and TV series easily available to hundreds of millions of internet users. The next step in this diffusion of online video is “social video,” namely social networks that are entirely focused on this format. TikTok is obviously the most prominent, but the format of short videos it created was soon emulated by other websites. Instagram has introduced a reel feature, released in the year 2020, while YouTube introduced a sub-platform called “YouTube Shorts” in 2021. All of these platforms lend a central role to the body and its self-representation. If Instagram has been widely discussed as a platform that has reshaped people’s body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), TikTok is likely to have an even greater impact (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). But this is not just a matter to preoccupy psychologists; the self-representation of the body on TikTok can be seen as the centre-point of a new grammar that is bound to influence many forms of communication.

To theorise this body of grammar, we can use the notions of “media logic” (Altheide, 2015) and “social media logic” (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). These notions try to capture the way in which different media carry a series of fundamental rules that organise their functioning and, in the case of social media, people’s behaviour on them. Our contention is that to capture the logic of TikTok besides the four features of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication, identified by Van Dijck and Poell for social media (2013), we should add “moving corporeality,” to express the fact that TikTok involves the moving body as a central feature. Bodily communication is central to social video as seen in a number of typical contents from the display of sporting skills, cosplays, to sexualisation of one’s body and its gait, all the way to dancing and lip-syncing. The typical TikTok video presents someone moving either to the tune of a famous song or in a myriad of other situations and conditions that can spark the curiosity of the audience.

The centrality of the body in TikTok videos raises important questions for political communication that has indeed frequently used the body as a channel of expression: to inspire trust, to channel personal charisma, and to communicate emotions deemed

effective in mobilising the audience. A clear example is the importance played by the body of the leader in various political performances: speaking at a rally, delivering a speech in parliament or on the campaign trail, interacting with voters. This is perhaps most visible in dictators such as Benito Mussolini who were singularly famous for the way they managed to use the stage, the facial expressions they utilised, and the way they aimed at being presented on the mass media of the day to create the image of the leader and his cult of personality. On the left are the similar cases of Mao Tse-tung, Castro, and other figures that became associated with famous gestures and facial expressions. But bodily communication has also been a common element of democratic politics in Western countries. Many memorable moments of contemporary politics have had important elements of bodily communication: Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe at a UN assembly meeting in 1960; Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling during his visit in Warsaw in 1970 to apologise for German war crimes; President Obama famously reaching his hand towards the audience during speeches; Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's feisty declamatory movements; and Donald Trump's signature smirks during television debates.

The diffusion of cinema and television has only made bodily communication more important. It is true that they have reduced "bodily mass communication" (Marvin & Simonson, 2004) in the form of physical interaction on the campaign trail. However, those media made the leader's body a pervasive presence in the public's consciousness, enabling citizens to see their leader without the need of attending a physical event. The mediated representation of leaders and their body has been a crucial element in the trend towards the mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) with its correlate of personalization (McAllister, 2007). A famous instance in this evolution of political communication was the 1960 debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, in which the former was deemed to have won, because he looked younger and more pleasing than Nixon (Druckman, 2003). Ever since, political candidates have tried to maximise their TV performances, to become as telegenic as possible, and to transform their communication into soundbites to be easily picked up by the TV evening news.

Mediated bodily communication is strongly tied to emotions such as anger, sadness, hope, compassion, used in different political contexts, cultures, and ideologies (Newman, 1999). We want to explore how bodily communication serves political communication on TikTok. In other words, how does bodily communication serve to channel political content on this video-sharing platform? To what extent is TikTok's body-centred character redefining the relationship between politicians and their audience? To begin exploring these questions we focus in this chapter on three levels of bodily communication on TikTok: as a communicative form of TikTok, as memetic content, and finally as an affective element. Our contention is that these different levels can offer us interesting lessons about the way in which social media communication and political communication are being redefined in the era of video-sharing platforms.

### 2.3 Bodily Motion as (Political) Form

Form is the first level where Tik Tok politics is displayed as a politics of motion and corporeality, through the various (mostly unspoken) rules that articulate how political communication operates on the platform. The moving body is the organising principle of different genres of communication that are played out on TikTok. This is aided by the vertical format of videos on TikTok, as mostly viewed on a smartphone. That may appear to be a rather trivial characteristic, but it constitutes a difference with important consequences compared to other social media platforms that use a horizontal video format: TikTok's video format is perfectly suited to displaying people in their full height engaging in dance movements or other gestural movements. But like other social media platforms, TikTok is not just a series of features and "affordances" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). It also embodies a culture, an aesthetic, and even an ethos, embodied in a series of practices familiar to all users, made visible in different genres found on the platform.

Most TikTok genres have bodily communication (often showing the entire body rather than simply a "talking head") as their centre. The most famous case is that of dance challenges. This was first popularised by the app DubMash that has since been discontinued but remains a signature feature of TikTok. Participants dance to the tune over the rhythmic section of a famous song, using either the moves that have been popularised by the singer in a videoclip, or by a famous influencer, or by creating anew this choreography. The dance is then mimed and reinterpreted by various other participants that engage in the challenge, with beginners and amateur users having to defy the fear of ridicule customarily attached to being seen as a mediocre or goofy dancer. These practices are a demonstration of the platform's performative and imitative logic. They evidence how the sharing logic proper to first-generation social media is substituted by a logic of "mimicking" what others do (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Here the bodily element is all-evident: dancing is an action that involves the display and the movement of the body in its entirety, and with the *mimesis* proper to TikTok it involves people repeating and reinterpreting the movement of others.

Dancing is, however, far from being the only genre of expression centring on bodily motion. The other famous TikTok genre following along the same lines is lip-syncing, where the movement of the face and, more specifically, the lips, become the communication focus. This is an occasion to show one's ability to interpret a given song, convincingly or ironically, or as a means to parade one's beauty or distinctive look (Arrieta, 2021). Other forms are instruction videos showing how to use one's dexterity to face the most disparate situations, often in a rather ludicrous form. Another example of the use of motion is imitation of famous film or TV series films and of facial expression contained therein. For example, the oft-utilised scene of the famous film *Love Actually* where Mark confesses his love to Juliet by showing a series of cards on her doorstep, or the one of the film *Joe Black* where Susan asks Joe the reason why he does not have a love partner. Other videos resort to mime or slapstick, often in combination with comedy. TikTok videos recapture a primordial element of cinema, the surprise and excitement of motion as a spectacle

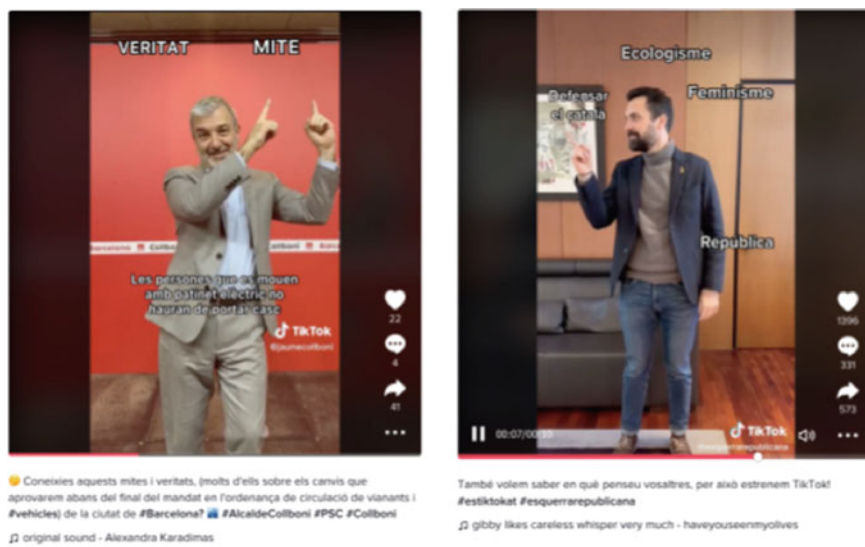
in its own right—as in the slapstick of Buster Keaton, with people falling, trampling over, or failing in ways that elicit laughter. Another famous genre involving moving corporeality is that of “text-pointing videos,” in which participants point their fingers to different parts of the screen where text boxes appear. This format has been used for the most disparate purposes, such as providing instructions, making a point about a given social situation, or making jokes about oneself and one’s condition.

From a formal standpoint, in defining the grammar of TikTok we could say that the moving body acts as an “articulating medium,” namely as a medium which organises many other media. In a way, TikTok is reminiscent of Richard Wagner’s theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: total art (Brown, 2016). Wagner dreamed of an art form that could bring together different art media—most notably music, singing, sculpture and scenography painting, literature in the form of the libretti used by the characters, etc. Whereas for Wagner opera’s theatrical acting would have brought together these different media, with TikTok it is bodily movement that performs the same role: music acting as a soundtrack, the text popping up around the screen or used as a caption, the spoken word, images, videos and other media are all brought together by the movement of the body organising them around itself. Indeed, some people have described TikTok videos precisely as a form of theatre (Boffone, 2022). One could object that on the contrary, it is sound that acts as the platform’s central element. Indeed, sound clips are a basic element in the content creation dynamics of this platform and are the most identifiable and the most frequently replicated element in any user challenge, enabling TikTok users to navigate across millions of videos. However, ultimately the moving body has greater overall cognitive weight, especially given that a sizable number of users watch TikTok with the sound off.

This role of the body as formal articulator of the content is also very visible in political propaganda where political messages are woven around the body of the politician. The videos posted by politicians on the platform often take the form of a small unedited scene in which a small action is performed, be it a short dance routine, or the uttering of a sentence, or a facial expression, or a mix of all these. In Latin America it has now become common to see leading politicians break into some dance moves to the benefit of the camera. Examples include leaders such as Gabriel Boric and José Antonio Kast in Chile, Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernandez in Colombia, and Keiko Fujimori in Peru. Outside Latin America, mostly because of “fear of cringe,” namely the fear of appearing ridiculous, bodily communication is limited to various gestures and expressions that are an important channel of communication (Hartung et al., 2022). One example is the political use of the aforementioned format of finger-pointing videos. This format has for example been used by Catalan politicians Jaume Collboni and Roger Torrent over the course of the 2023 regional elections to communicate proposals as well as to express principles and values (see Fig. 2.1). This format is well-suited to political propaganda that often involves the need to present bits of information and combine them in a coherent, entertaining fashion.

In other videos, leaders are seen as performing accentuated gestures, often those that have become customarily associated with them as a distinctive trait stemming from their record of media performances. These gestures of politicians have become





**Fig. 2.1** The body as an articulator of a multimodal and intertextual discourse within TikTok. Left: Jaume Collboni using a choreographed challenge to contest myths against his political record. Right: Roger Torrent Using a Choreographed challenge to stress his Party's principles (Esquerra Republicana, 2021)

the object of various forms of online communication such as sticker packs on Telegram representing the leader in various well-known situations. In TikTok, the communicative potential of the leader's gestural and body language idiosyncrasies becomes manifest in a very particular genre of challenge: playbacks. TikTok's interface is specifically designed to favour the (re)appropriation of other people's audios as the base of one's content. This application resource is most often used to emulate trending choreographies or to lip-synch humorous, viral gags. However, it is also politically exploited in disparate ways e.g., to praise its eloquence and charm.

Imitating the leader's gestures and expressions or syncing one's lips to the leader's speech has become an increasingly common way to celebrate the leader's charisma on TikTok. For example, in the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections, supporters of Bolsonaro had playback challenges with audio speeches and declarations of their leader, including some very controversial statements he had made (see Fig. 2.2), as a way to express their identification with him, in body and mind. In other words, when approached from a formal perspective the body of the leader, or that of supporters imitating the leader, becomes a sign in its own right, a canvas on which political messages are transmitted.

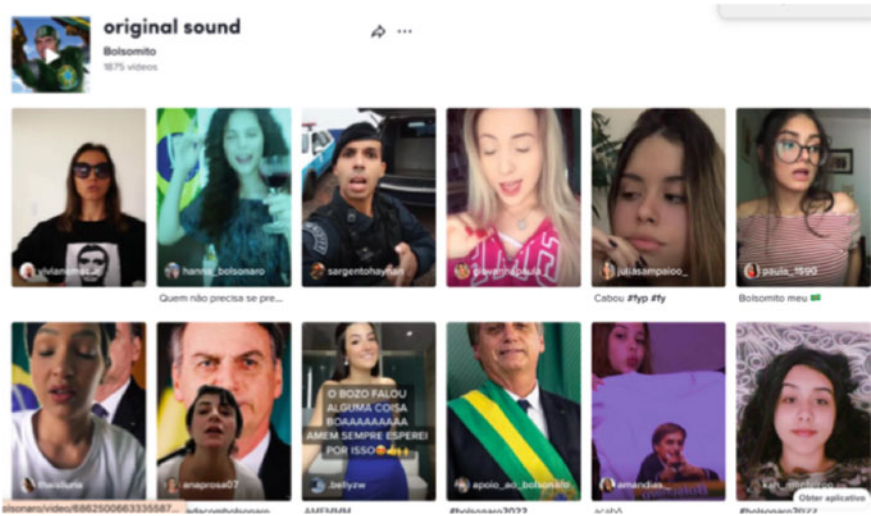


Fig. 2.2 TikTok playback challenges as a celebration of the Leader’s Charisma. Screenshot of a viral discourse of Bolsonaro playback by 1875 users throughout Brazil’s 2018 presidential elections

### 2.4 The Body as Memetic Content

As we move from form to content, moving corporeality is key to appreciate the contents and meanings channelled via TikTok and the multiple mental and emotional associations that TikTok videos are meant to elicit in the target public. TikTok videos revolve around “embodied memes” (Boffone, 2022), as a type of meme that rather than appearing in the form of an image or a text, is incorporated and performed in the body of content creators, in this case politicians. Memes have become a central element of contemporary digital culture. They are images, written texts, videos, and sound clips—or remixed combinations of these elements—that digitally networked communities create and transform to express themselves in the age of digital reproduction. For this reason, memes have been defined as “multimodal texts that facilitate participation by reappropriation by balancing a fixed premise with novel expression” (Milner, 2014). The most famous form of memes are visual memes, commonly known as image macros. In a nutshell, these are memes whose message is articulated by textually or graphically superposing layers of meaning and irony over screen-shot stock photos and frozen frames, or remixing other culturally resonant elements reducible to a motionless visual resource (e.g., emojis, cropped or transformed photos, sketched characters of memetic culture). However, the rise of TikTok, along with the emergence of a new streaming culture around platforms such as Twitch, has led to the classical archetype of a meme rapidly melding into a new “age” of post-classical memetics: an age where a plurality of video-based memes and memetic virtual challenges overshadow (or fiercely compete) with the prominence of image macros.

TikTok in particular has become a key place where meme culture thrives, not just in the form of images, but also video formats with a number of recognisable rules (Brown et al., 2022). In this new setting, the old templates of memetic humour, based on the visual remixing of motionless images on raster graphic editors (e.g., Photoshop, Gimp), are contested by a new sort of memetic creativity shaped by a media logic configured by (or invested in) the interface of new social media platforms such as Twitch or Kwai, with Bytdance's TikTok at the head. This is what can be described as an "embodied memetic," namely a memetic communication in which the body becomes the supreme means of expression, through which content generators communicate a variety of messages, codes, meanings, and situations that like normal memes follow expectable and established patterns. Indeed, the radically memetic codes of communication that reign on TikTok are based on the playful remixing of a plural set of visual, textual, and aural elements, from viral choruses to augmented reality filters, with the moving body, however, usually playing a pivotal role.

This can be appreciated in TikTok's archetypical challenges, dance crazes, and playbacks, in which thousands of users mimetically perform while memetically transforming or twisting their meaning. For instance, at a political level this is observable in how users "playback" or dance to viral songs while de-contextualizing the lyrics of their chorus to give them a political twist. This becomes clear in the way gestures, facial expressions, and corporal language transform the original meaning: imprinting layers of irony over the original message or dislocating its intended sense according to the user's political interests. This way of making political preferences, taking sides on electoral campaigns, or participating in the public discussion of controversial topics, is becoming increasingly popular within the platform. It can take multiple forms, from the political appropriation of so-called "spite songs" celebrating one's adversaries' defeat to the playback of festive songs in support of their own proposal.

Aware of the normalisation of dancing and "playbacking" as natural forms of expression within the platform, parties, candidates, and movements across the globe have started to launch their own dancing and playbacking challenges. Two examples of this campaign tactic can be found in the 2022 Brazilian presidential elections. Figure 2.3 contrasts two similar challenges of this sort brought forward by the supporters of Bolsonaro and Lula in that election campaign, providing screenshots of six illustrative examples posted by supporters of both candidates. In the upper row, three TikTok users, including the Brazilian Paris Saint Germain football player Neymar Jr., are displayed dancing the same jingle in support of the former far-right president. In the row below, another three users, this time Lulistas, dance to Us Magrão and Mc Rahell's theme "*Vai dar PT*," a humorous and sexually spicy theme in support of Lula. Some posts of the latter garnered more than three hundred thousand likes and millions of views. These "wars of choreographies" that are increasingly encountered in contemporary electoral campaigns highlight the power of the body and the memetic and participative qualities of dancing and playbacking on TikTok. But they also fundamentally highlight how the content of TikTok messages are fundamentally emotional in nature, often revolving around communicating allegiance and identification with one's candidate rather than any substantial content.

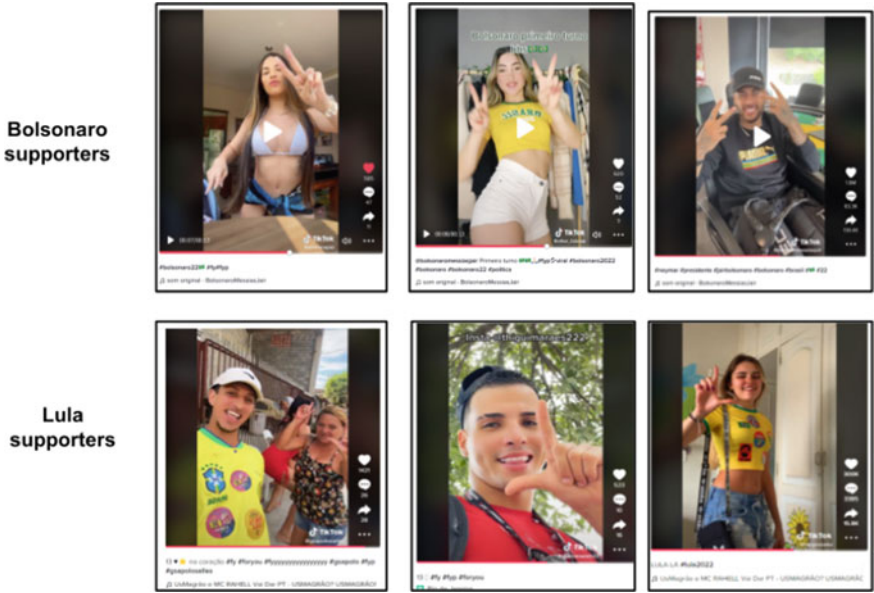
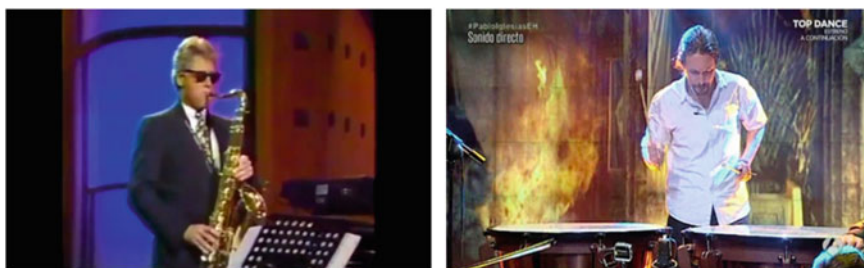


Fig. 2.3 Choreographed political jingles and the political affordances of TikTok dances. Three mimetic re-appropriations of the same electoral jingle

### 2.5 The Body as Affective Link

The third element of bodily communication on TikTok that we discuss here concerns the way in which the body is used as an affective link to create a sense of connection between the political leader and his/her audience of reference. Our argument is that a key value of TikTok communication from the standpoint of politicians lies in the way the body performance can help them create a bond of trust with their supporters, at a time marked by general distrust and great suspicion of political institutions and political leaders. Bodily communication—the display of the politician’s body, of her/his gait, moves, expression—can be a means of breaking down the barrier of officiality and the distance felt by many citizens vis-a-vis their political representatives. In many political TikTok videos the leader is presented in more intimate and private contexts than the ones customarily associated with the political process e.g., at home or in the backstage of political tours and campaigns.

As Danielson and Rolandsson (2020) have remarked, throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, within a media setting dominated by entertainment television, the “political performance of the personal” had already become a relevant communicative practice. With TikTok this performance of the self acquires even greater prominence. Figure 2.4 provides two examples of iconic performances of this sort adjusting the media logic of television. The image on the right captures the saxophone solo made by the Democratic candidate Bill Clinton in CBS’s Arsenio Hall show throughout his 1992 presidential race to the White House. The more recent image on the left

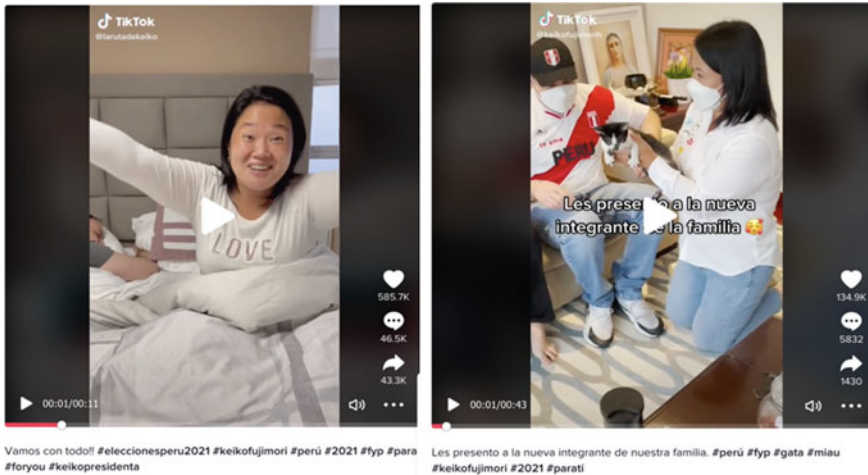


**Fig. 2.4** The political performance of the self in entertainment television. Left: Bill Clinton playing a Saxophone Solo on CBS's *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1992). Right: Pablo Iglesias playing game of *Throne's* soundtrack in Antena 3's *Hormiguero* (2016)

presents PODEMOS' leader Pablo Iglesias playing the *Game of Thrones* intro theme with a kettle drum at Antena 3's *El Hormiguero*, the most watched entertainment show on Spanish television. Over the last three decades, politicians have often not shied away from dancing, playing musical instruments, or singing as a means to endear themselves to mass audiences.

On TikTok, the political performance of the self is partly different from what took shape during the dominant era of TV, in the sense that it is, at least *prima facie*, less staged and more intimate, with its setting often being a personal space such as the home or even the bedroom. It has often been remarked that TikTok's aesthetic is quite different from that of Instagram because of its emphasis on authenticity and intimacy, clearly manifested by the fact that it dwells in spheres of one's personal experience that otherwise remain out of sight, as one's house (Unni & Weinstein, 2021). This "homely" element is also seen in much of the political propaganda that is channelled via TikTok in which leaders often try to present themselves in a more endearing light by showing themselves in domestic scenarios of their quotidian life or with their family and friends, as normal and ordinary people who have similar life patterns and needs to the ones of audiences that they are targeting. An example of this communication is offered by the far-right Peruvian presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori, the daughter and former official First Lady of the dictator Alberto Fujimori. Fujimori has used TikTok to broadcast episodes of her personal and family life, presenting herself as an ordinary woman engaging in everyday situations and chores. This becomes most evident when she addresses followers on election day from her bedroom or introduces her followers to her pets as "new family members" (see Fig. 2.5).

This type of Tik Tok content breaks with the rigid rules of conduct expected from an official representative but also with the codes of mainstream media and the political theatrics of institutional communication. To the contrary, here the aesthetic is clearly oriented towards simplicity, authenticity, and directness. The everyday life setting sometimes even becomes the backdrop for TikTok *challenges*. Participation in these viral trends allows the leader to present himself as an equal "netizen" of its networked community, openly embracing the app's participatory culture. For



**Fig. 2.5** The political performance of the self in TikTok. Left: Keiko Fujimori appealing to voters from her bed on election day. Right: Keiko Fujimori introducing her followers to an adopted pet as a “New Family Member”

instance, as displayed in Fig. 2.6, during his 2021 presidential election campaign in Chile, José Antonio Kast opted for Q&A challenges “testing” his knowledge of subcultural trends (i.e., *K-Pop* music, *Anime* series) or playing to emulate iconic memes, while Ecuador’s President Guillermo Lasso celebrated the state provision of subsidised houses by participating in dance challenges with their new tenants. Similarly, other Latin American political personalities such as Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, head of the Buenos Aires city government, entertain their audiences by participating in the most varied musical challenges—from using Rihanna’s song “Where Have You Been” and slow-motion video effects to ironically overdramatise his sport routines, to posting emotive “rewind” videos on New Year’s Eve with Miley Cyrus’s “You’ll Always Find Your Way Back Home” as a soundtrack.

Beyond participating in these challenges, political candidates and representatives deliver their political performance of the self by resorting to multiple other forms of “entertainment” content. For example, as displayed in Fig. 2.7, if Antonio Kast cosplayed Star Wars characters wishing their followers “*may the force be with you,*” then Colombia’s president Gustavo Petro tasted local cuisine specialties or kicked football penalties “against corruption.” Meanwhile, in Venezuela, President Nicolas Maduro chose to share personal anecdotes, dancing to salsa music, playing baseball or singing romantic karaoke songs to his wife. These calculated displays of cheerfulness and joviality aim to project an impression of accessibility and trustworthiness in the public. However, they must be equally seen as a strategic effort to accommodate their public persona to a new stage in the “mediatization of politics” where, paraphrasing Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999, p. 251), “to get media attention” political agents are

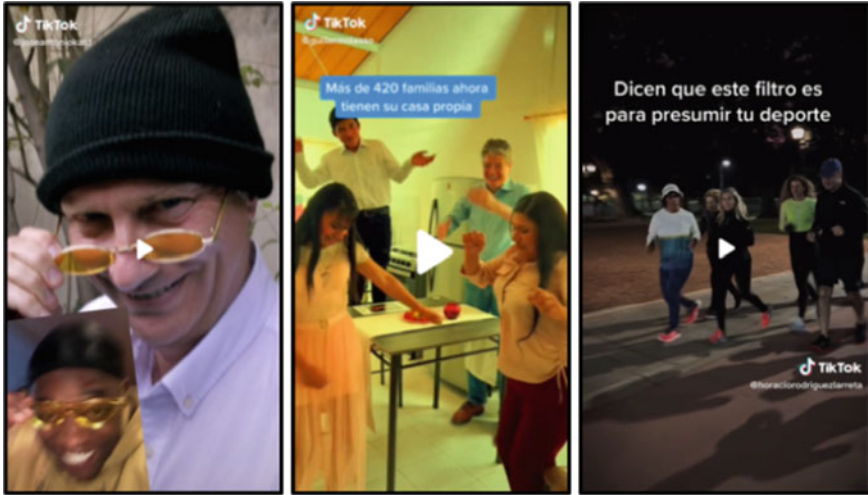


Fig. 2.6 The political performance of the self through TikTok challenges. Left: Jose Antonio Kast, 2022. Center: Guillermo Lasso. Right: Horacio Rodriguez Larreta



Fig. 2.7 The political performance of the self through varied entertainment content. Left: Gustavo Petro, 2022. Center: Nicolas Maduro, 2022. Right: Jose Antonio Kast

forced to “fashion” their public performance to meet TikTok’s needs regarding form, timing, location, and framing.

Central to these performances is the projection of authenticity: political leaders on TikTok try to be seen as if they were just caught by the camera in an unstaged and spontaneous situation. Indeed, authenticity is well known as one of the key elements

of TikTok culture and what sets it apart from the more staged and elevated ethos and aesthetics of other platforms such as Instagram. The paradox in this is that, as many influencers highlight, there is very little complete authenticity here; even the apparently simple video can often take a lot of time to produce (Guineadu et al., 2022). Rather than authenticity in the sense of a completely unscripted and spontaneous performance, there is often an element of calculated and staged projection of one's personal self in which specific elements of one's own self, life, and house are offered to the public very selectively.

In this context the body always plays an important role in the selective and calculated revelation of the self, but it is caught in a contradiction that is difficult to resolve. On the one hand, it creates an impression of directness and access to the politician as person; on the other hand, this impression is by and large an illusion as the politician continues to be physically remote. The ever-present risk remains of falling prey to "cringe," namely the possibility of appearing as inauthentic and goofy, contrary to what the idea of TikTok authenticity would want them to achieve.

The lengths to which a growing number of politicians go to use TikTok despite these evident risks makes apparent how concerned they are about the distance of their target electorate. The politics of TikTok authenticity speaks volumes about the fact that we live in times of profound citizen distrust of political institutions and political organisations such as political parties. This situation compels politicians to compensate for distrust in organisations by acting themselves as direct affective links between the electorate and political power, as the case with the "hyperleaders" of digital parties (Gerbaudo, 2018).

TikTok, with the centrality of the body in its communication, constitutes an ideal terrain in which to show the leader in his/her human corporeality, to demonstrate that the leader is ultimately a person made of flesh and bones, just as is the person viewing him or her, someone who goes about the same daily routines as everyone else. Identification with the leader, unable to be channelled through traditional ideological media, is now mediated through the shared human experiences that tie the leader and the led: eating, sleeping, family life, etc. Yet it remains to be seen whether this approach is effective in its ultimate objective and the extent to which, on the contrary, it might run the risk of backfiring, producing instead of empathy, identification, and compassion between the leader and the led, a condition of apathy and disdain towards the body of the leader and its obsessive display.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The body has always played a role in culture and in political communication; the history of modern politics is to a great extent a history of the different ways in which the body of political leaders and supporters have been communicated and mediated. In the era of TikTok and social video this mediation of the body is undergoing another round of profound transformation hinging on the way political communication and propaganda operates, perhaps carrying important implications for how



political campaigns are organised and their messages constructed. More than ever the body, or more specifically the moving body as it is manifested in communicative practices as dancing or lip-syncing, is at the centre of political communication; its overbearing presence has much to tell us about how TikTok shapes contemporary political communication.

We have considered three main ways in which this corporeality of political communication on TikTok plays out: the body as articulator of messages, the body as a meme, and the body as an affective link. First, from a formal standpoint the body has become the articulating medium that brings together many other media, as seen in a variety of formats and genres that have been adapted to political ends. Second, the body becomes the vessel of memes, with gestures and moves reproducing well-known, stereotypical contents related to TV series and other popular culture contents. Finally, all these performances revolve around a central end: using the body as a way of fostering an affective bond between the leader and supporters, at a time when a major goal for politicians is overcoming the profound distrust that affects contemporary political institutions and organisations.

Approaching TikTok politics from the standpoint of the body and its self-representation reveals the symbolic power of how communication on this platform can lead to political persuasion and propaganda, going a long way to explaining why politicians are moving in droves to this platform. Yet, as we have begun to suggest, these practices also reveal profound contradictions that are likely to come further to the fore in coming years. We live in a time in which communication focuses ever more on our most human and idiosyncratic features of our bodies, gestures, smirks, and gait; yet these very features become the object of mediation, of filters and video edits, and the object of algorithmic measuring and cataloguing.

Furthermore, we live in times in which the self-presentation of the body has become a calculated and intentional act; yet, at the same time this act has to be presented as spontaneous, authentic, and unfiltered if it is to achieve its desired effect. Researching political communication in the era of social video means being alert to this double bind and cognizant of the fact that what matters here first and foremost is not content in a rational and cognitive form, but rather primarily emotions, trust, and collective identification. Provided we are aware of this, studying political communication on TikTok can teach us important lessons about contemporary politics and the way in which it has turned the body not only into a sign, but also into a battlefield.

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