



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:
The 25th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024

UNVEILING TIKTOK'S SHADOW: A TYPOLOGY OF WHITE NATIONALIST NARRATIVES AS EUDAIMONIC ENTERTAINMENT

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Extended Abstract

In an era dominated by social media influence, understanding the manifestation of white nationalism on platforms like TikTok is crucial for comprehending extremist content dissemination. This research delves into the interplay between content and form in TikTok videos, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which creators exploit platform-specific features to propagate white nationalist narratives.

The theoretical underpinning of this study is rooted in the Identity Approach, encompassing both the Social Identity Theory and the Self-Categorization Theory (see Hornsey, 2008 for an overview). Social Identity Theory highlights the idea of social identity, where individuals define themselves as interchangeable group members, leading to the formation of in-group and out-group distinctions. This results in in-group favoritism, and often leads to intergroup discrimination. Self-Categorization Theory further elucidates

Suggested Citation (APA): Niemann-Lenz, J., Kleinen-von Königslöw, K., Kantenwein, L., Oelschlägel, L. & Scherf, H. (2024, October). *Unveiling TikTok's Shadow: A Typology of White Nationalist Narratives as Eudaimonic Entertainment*. Paper (or panel) presented at AoIR2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

the individual's role within a group. It asserts that individuals align themselves with group members during the social comparison process, leading to the formation of both individual and collective identities through a categorization process. Both theories are closely linked to understanding phenomena such as nationalism (ibid., p. 204). In light of the Identity Approach, the content viewed, shared and published on digital platforms serves a dual purpose: to demonstrate one's own group affiliation and to consolidate the identity of the group, especially if it is harmonized in form and content.

Indeed, research on nationalist videos disseminated on digital platforms has identified recurring motifs, such as nature symbolizing patriotism and the portrayal of women confined to traditional roles. Alt- and neo-right movements master the art of ambiguity in public spaces, with videos often featuring subtle allusions rather than explicit expressions of extremism. The utilization of anachronistic visuals and symbols, along with coded language ("dog whistling") play a role in conveying these ideologies (Krämer, 2017). While previous studies have focused on platforms such as YouTube and Twitter/X, we aim to fill the gap on TikTok, which currently has over 20.9 million monthly users worldwide, predominantly teenagers (Weimann & Masri, 2023). As TikTok is an entertainment platform, it is important to consider the entertainment process. "Eudaimonic entertainment, associated with meaningful and morally complex content, can trigger positive emotions. However, when studying white nationalism, it is imperative to explore its potential negative consequences, such as "dark inspiration" (Frischlich, 2021). The interplay between entertainment features and extremist propaganda remains under-researched, especially in the context of TikTok's young audience.

Against this background, we analyze and categorize white-nationalist content on TikTok. We seek to understand the nuanced interplay between content and form in these videos, shedding light on the ways creators utilize platform-specific features to propagate white-nationalist narratives. To pursue this goal, we conducted a qualitative content analysis. Using three accounts trained to show as much white nationalist content as possible, a total of 300 videos were collected on German TikTok. After excluding videos that were not unequivocally categorized as white-nationalist, a random sample of 75 videos was drawn for analysis. Videos were coded based on content categories, including objective description and narratives, as well as formal elements. Content descriptions captured individuals, environments, and symbols depicted in the videos. Narratives focused on linking the depicted elements to the referenced narratives of white nationalism, placing them in a social and political context. Finally, formal elements such as music, stylistic elements, effects, camera angles, and editing style were identified. Each video was assessed by two coders. Based on these codings, a typology was developed, focusing on the interconnection between content and form. In total, we identified seven types, while only eight videos remained unclassified due to their significant deviations from the rest of the sample.

Nationalistic Militarism (19 videos): These videos glorify military and war in a white-nationalist and, particularly, fascist context. They celebrate uniformity and reject individuality, featuring footage of marching or fighting soldiers paired with bass-heavy music reminiscent of video games or action films. Videos with Nazi references portray the ideal of a strong, sacrificial warrior. Modern armies are also glorified. These videos often use black-and-white or color-altered visuals, deliberate distortion, and vintage effects to create an intentionally aged appearance.

Traditionalism (19 videos): This type combines modern stylistic elements with traditional European motifs. It idealizes European culture, societal roles, and landscapes, portraying narratives that align with white-nationalist ideals. The videos showcase naturalistic paintings and camera shots, accompanied by optimistic electronic music. Elements of feudal or ancient European culture are selectively presented to romanticize these aspects. Traditional architecture, medieval castles, rural villages, and statues are featured, with men depicted as knights and women associated with domestic roles.

AfD Edit (10 videos): Inspired by the format of "Kpop Edits," these videos aim to build parasocial relationships with leading figures of the German right-wing extremist party Alternative for Germany (AfD). They feature dynamic editing with snippets of speeches, combined with modern electronic or hip-hop music. The content tends to simplify political messages, favoring the AfD over other parties and portraying AfD personalities as admirable.

Stylized Political Speech/News Video (9 videos): This type repurposes professional television footage of white-nationalist political figures for TikTok, enhancing them with platform-specific elements. Videos include fast and short subtitles, occasional humorous elements like GIFs or laughing people, and rare additional music. Unlike other types, these videos fully articulate arguments and present narratives directly.

Infographic/Documentation (4 videos): This category involves repackaging content from documentaries, journalistic formats, or scientific presentations to disseminate white-nationalist narratives. The use of serious and factual approaches aims to lend credibility to the presented narratives.

Demo Recordings (3 videos): Amateur recordings from the perspective of participants in white-nationalist demonstrations are featured in this type. These videos capture the symbolism and propaganda of the events, with an unpolished, personal style that aligns with a distrust of established media.

Patriotic Self-Presentation (3 videos): This type consists of selfie videos from individuals expressing their white-nationalist identity by incorporating national symbols such as the German flag or eagle. The videos use fast consecutive images, paired with modern electronic or hip-hop music, to construct a sense of identity around the nation.

Our typology of nationalist videos on German TikTok offers nuanced insights into the specific strategies extremists use for narrative dissemination on the platform, and sheds light on potential avenues for platform moderation. It can serve as a basis for subsequent quantifying research, as well as for developing effective countermeasures and interventions to mitigate the spread of extremist content. Exploring the influence of eudaimonic entertainment contributes to a deeper understanding of the emotional appeal and recruitment strategies embedded in extremist narratives. In addition, we will discuss methodological challenges at the conference, such as our ethical considerations and barriers to research, such as account suspensions and accessibility of filter bubbles. These reflections on our exploratory approach provide valuable insights into the complexities researchers face when studying online extremism and may guide future research.

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