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## #FREE LUIGI BETWEEN PLAYFUL RESISTANCE AND RUPTURE

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### Context

On December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Brian Thompson, CEO of UnitedHealthcare was killed in New York City. The shooting quickly galvanized public critiques of the American healthcare system. The *AP News* (2024) characterized the response to the shooting as a “glimpse into an unusual American moment” (Catalini 2024), a symptom of polarization, economic discontent, and a growing tolerance for political violence. Our proposal focuses upon user-generated content featuring Luigi Mangione, the 26-year-old suspect, arrested days later. Indeed, the lionization of Mangione across popular social media platforms signalled the social rupture of internet practices, of generational allegiances, and of class consciousness. According to Emerson College Polling (December 2024), the case especially captured the imagination of young Americans: “41% of voters aged 18-29 find the killer’s actions acceptable”. For the Network Contagion Research Institute, the glorification of violence implicit (or explicit) in many of the circulating memes represented a “mainstreaming” of a “phenomenon [that] was once largely confined to niche online subcultures” (2024). For others, it marked “the start of a class war” (Watercutter 2024). And, despite the intensity of political polarization in the U.S, the case seemed to blur the typical partisan divide of American politics. Mangione’s online trail included criticism of the two dominant American parties. His archived posts were ambiguous enough to allow him to be claimed by the left and right as a kind of equal opportunity populist.

We address the multiple meanings attributed to Mangione’s act and explore the extent to which the case marks complex cultural and political realignments. We focus upon the way the content unfolded on TikTok to explore whether the online response marked a transformation of forms of online politics and fandom. Scholars have explored how creative, humorous, and sexual content can constitute meaningful critical discourse (Bobba 2021; Cervi et al. 2023). We build on this literature, exploring how TikTok affordances encourage the convergence of heterogeneous politics in creative and often ambiguous calls to connection and action. Our case study examines the “everyday

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dissidence” (“Ruptures” cfp) and “playful activism” (Cervi & Divon 2023) that emerged with the circulation of content related to the Mangione case.

## **Objectives**

Studies of political activism on TikTok analyze how its affordances can be mobilized to consolidate alternative frames to mainstream coverage, to signal support, and to create connection with those sharing similar views (Le Compte & Klug 2021). However, while TikTok affordances permit “visibility, editability, association, and persistence” (Abbas et al. 2022), they are also subject to conformity and ephemerality. Our goals for this study include 1) assessing the kinds of content that circulated following the arrest of Mangione, with attention to ambiguous and contradictory meanings; 2) analyzing the sentiment expressed in the most popular content; 3) studying the reach and durability of content across platforms; and 4) considering the effects of bots and content moderation in the evolution of #FreeLuigi and related content.

## **Corpus**

In the days after Mangione’s arrest on December 9, 2024, the hashtag #FreeLuigi was taken up across social media platforms, with his X.com (Twitter) swelling to almost 300,000 followers. (Rahman 2024). Mangione’s popularity surged across other platforms, where users produced content consonant with the subcultural conventions of the platform (Watercutter 2024). Given the popularity of Mangione with young adults, we focused our initial study on TikTok, known for its young user base. Our corpus was produced by scraping the posts and comments available from TikTok in December 2024 using Zeeschuijmer (Stijn, 2023) and the keyword, *luigimangione*. In total, we extracted 145 publications and 3486 comments.

## **Methods**

At the end of December 2024, we used mixed methods to analyze all available posts and comments (TikTok), collecting memes before automated censorship removed them (a theme the paper will address). Using BERTopic for structural topic modeling (Grootendorst, 2022), we analyzed key themes and the emotional registers in which they were expressed (Carson 2021). We also employed zero-shot classification for sentiment analysis to assess the variety of meanings associated with the case. Content was classified along a spectrum of sentiment: angry, sad, lustful, hopeful, and joyful. Topics ranged from the resolutely political, to the quasi-religious (Luigi as Jesus), or to the sexual (“Hot Luigi”) and playful (Luigi’s alibis), with many posts mixing seemingly incongruous themes (Tuters & Mueller 2024). For the next phase, we will collect more data and widen the search to other platforms using social network analysis using Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) to trace the reach of the most popular themes and memes linked to the Mangione case (e.g., hashtags: #TeamLuigi, #FreeLuigi, #DenyDelayDepose and phrases: e.g., “my empathy is reserved for people who deserve it” or “free my man”). Following a typology that emerged from the topic and sentiment analyses of the first phase, we will assess how conformist (surfing the trend), sexual (“thirst traps”), ironic (ambiguous), and explicitly political content might mingle to consolidate counterhegemonic narratives (Hagen & de Zeeuw 2023).

We also examine the durability and evolution of the narratives linked to the Mangione case in all their diversity: as sex symbol, as exemplification of racial inequality in the

social justice system, and as galvanizer of a critique of the American health care system (and, more widely, of monopoly capitalism and the billionaire class). To determine the durability and reach of the various narratives over time, we are repeating the steps of our analysis once a month for the first four months of 2025. This temporal analysis will allow us to determine which kinds of content have been most subject to moderation and censorship and help us to see which content—despite contradictions and ambiguity—work in tandem to consolidate viral counternarratives.

While some researchers attributed the initial surge of #FreeLuigi content to bots (Baruchin 2024), the durability of related campaigns suggests that the Mangione case has grassroots resonance. Like many viral internet campaigns, it mingles algorithmic amplification and groundswells of interest from various publics. As of today, Mangione has over 500,000 followers on X.com. The hashtag still has associated accounts providing updates to Mangione’s legal case on TikTok and Facebook. Advocacy and “news update” accounts on Instagram have over 20K each and while initially taken down, Mangione’s personal Instagram account has regained 6000 followers. The recent appearance of Mangione’s face on a mural in London offers some indication of the persistence and reach of #Luigi as a romantic anti-hero (Reuters, February 26,2025).

Our initial findings point to the kinds of “playful activism” and “countersignaling” described by Cervi & Divon (2023), content that is political, transgressive and ambiguous at once. Since Mangione’s arrest, we’ve witnessed a quickening of the pace of polarized interpretation, as well as an increasing severity of reprisals. In some senses, the #FreeLuigi campaign has followed what looks like the life cycle of online campaigns and subcultures, with phases of creativity, conformity, and moral panics and backlash. In this sense, what some might call play looks like polarized struggles for interpretation. The campaign underscores the paradoxes of users who must mobilize on social platforms owned by figures they seek to critique and resist obliquely or directly (Hagen & Venturini 2024; Compte & Klug 2021).

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