



WPMM41

Social Work: Master's Thesis in Welfare Policies and Management

Lund University

Welfare Policies and Management

Heiling in Plain Sight

The Aesthetic Camouflage of Extreme Far-Right Multimodal Communication on TikTok and its Challenges for German Prevention Strategy

Name: Maximilian Schubert

Supervisor: Roberto Scaramuzzino

Date: 22nd of May 2026

Abstract

Contemporary processes of radicalization into far-right extremism are increasingly shaped by digital, online communication environments that convey ideology through multiple communication modes, as well as aesthetic and culturally embedded forms of expression. Short form content platforms such as TikTok enable fast production and circulation of highly engaging content that creates communicative artifacts out of a combination of visual, auditory and linguistic elements. This paper introduces the original concept of aesthetic camouflage, describing a multimodal communication strategy through which extreme far-right actors ambiguate ideological signifiers within culturally normalized expressions to facilitate ideological expression between linguistic, visual and auditory modes of communication. Methodologically this paper applies multimodal discourse analysis to examine meaning construction across different communicative modes in short-form video artifacts. These results are then compared against a targeted reading of German prevention strategy against extremism. The contribution of aesthetic camouflage to the study of contemporary radicalization processes is twofold. First, analytical attention is shifted from isolated and explicit ideological communication towards multimodal configurations of meaning-making and ideological construction. Second, it shows how mainstreaming does not occur despite ambiguity but rather through ambiguity itself. Lastly, German prevention strategy requires a conceptual expansion towards multimodal, platform-specific and culturally embedded understanding of radicalization.

Keywords: Aesthetic Camouflage, Far-Right Extremism, Germany, Prevention Policy, Radicalization, TikTok, Multimodality

Preface

I want to start by thanking my supervisor Roberto Scaramuzzino for guiding me through this process. It was important to me to deal with the topics of this thesis, and I experienced great support in conducting an academic work about a topic that I have great interest in. Secondly, I want to thank John Woodlock for showing great interest in my initial draft for this thesis and motivating me to pull through with the topic all the way. I also want to thank everyone around me who listened to me complain, helped me discuss my thesis, took my mind off of it when needed, had lunch with me, sat in the library with me and who has just been part of my life throughout the process, you have made the work on this thesis immensely easier and I am super grateful for that. Lastly, a very special thank you goes out to the YouTube-Creator Marcant, who's content is – in my opinion – the most important German online content currently produced and the first reason I wanted to engage with this topic on a Master's degree level.

Table of Contents

TABLE OF FIGURES AND TABLES	VI
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	VII
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 German Context	2
1.2 The Right - Distinctions and Definitions	4
1.3 Prevention and Counter-Radicalization in the German Context	5
2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION	6
2.1 The Extreme Far-Right Online Ecosystem	7
2.2 Hybridized Prefatory Extremism (HYPE)	8
2.3 Radicalization	9
2.3.1 <i>Variables of Radicalization</i>	9
2.3.2 <i>The Internet and Radicalization</i>	10
2.3.3 <i>Mitigation Factors for Radicalization</i>	11
2.4 Mainstreaming	12
2.5 Aesthetic Camouflage	14
3 LITERATURE REVIEW	14
3.1 Extreme Far Right Internet Use and Online Radicalization	14
3.2 Mobilization and Recruitment Through Online Spaces	17
3.3 Mainstreaming the Extreme Far-Right	18
3.4 TikTok and the Far Right	21
4 EPISTEMOLOGY, ONTOLOGY, METHODOLOGY	23
4.1 Critical Realism	24
4.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis	24
4.3 Analytical Framework	26
4.4 Data	28
4.5 Ethical Considerations	29
5 ANALYSIS	29

5.1	Modal Features	30
5.1.1	<i>Visual Mode</i>	30
5.1.2	<i>Linguistic Mode</i>	32
5.1.3	<i>Auditory Mode</i>	33
5.2	Higher-Level-Mediated Actions.....	34
5.2.1	<i>Identity Construction</i>	34
5.2.2	<i>Masked Ideological Signaling</i>	37
5.2.3	<i>Emotional Activation</i>	42
5.2.4	<i>Aestheticization of Ideology</i>	43
5.3	Policy Challenges	44
6	CONCLUSION	47
7	LITERATURE	51
	APPENDIX	61
1	Example Coding Sheet	61

Table of Figures and Tables

Fig. 1 Right-Wing Criminal Offenses in Germany 2013-2024	3
Tab. 1 Suspects of Far-Right Extremist Politically Motivated Crimes.....	4
Fig. 2 Germanized Pride Flag used by Björn Höcke	20
Fig. 3 Flags of the German Empire and German Reich.....	32
Fig. 4 Young Woman Showing White Power Hand-Sign	34
Fig. 5 Clothing-Item to Signal Identity	36
Fig. 6 Young Woman in Christmas Sweater.....	38
Fig. 7 Artifact T-19 & Original Picture of Members of the “Hitlerjugend”	40
Fig. 8 SS-Soldier over Arctic Landscape.....	42
Fig. 9 Different Drawings from Artifact T-18	43
Fig. 10 Young Woman in Front of Landscape.....	44

List of Abbreviations

AfD – Alternative für Deutschland

BMI – German Interior Ministry

EFR – Extreme Far-Right

FES – Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

FR – Far-Right

FRE – Far-Right Extremism

FRG – Federal Republic of Germany

HLA – Higher-Level Mediated Action

HYPE – Hybridized Prefatory Extremism

LLA – Lower-Level Mediated Action

P/CVE – Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

SMT – Social Movement Theory

1 Introduction

Radicalization can be characterized as an emotional and personal transformation process that targets individuals' moral intuitions and is characterized by a disapproval of a hegemonic system and a propensity to engage in violent or illegal political action (Karas, 2025, pp. 272–273; Schulze et al., 2024, p. 280). Contemporary processes of radicalization into far-right extremism are increasingly shaped by digital, online communication environments that convey ideology through multiple communication modes – such as linguistic, auditory and visual – as well as aesthetic and culturally embedded forms of expression (Petersen & Johansen, 2025, pp. 1–9). Short form content platforms such as TikTok enable fast production and circulation of highly engaging content that creates communicative artifacts out of a combination of visual, auditory and linguistic elements (Hohner et al., 2024, p. 11; Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025, p. 92). As such, extremist actors can disseminate their ideology and embed it into cultural practices and entertaining formats, effectively blurring the boundaries between subcultural expression, political communication, entertainment and extremist ideology, making the detection and regulation of the latter more complex.

Germany is an interesting country case, as the country's history with National Socialism has viewed fascism as a threat to democracy since the end of the second World War. This, in turn, means that measures for preventing and countering younger forms of extremism like Islamist extremism have been informed by measures against fascism and far-right extremism, while other European countries have measures against the former inform the latter. This thesis is empirically situated within an emerging paradox: while right-wing extremist worldviews in Germany appear to be declining in traditional attitudinal surveys (Zick et al., 2025), forms of mobilization, visibility and aggressiveness seem to be increasing (Bundesministerium des Inneren (BMI), 2025; Mellea & Düker, 2024; Statista, 2026a). This discrepancy suggests that existing frameworks for detecting, preventing and conceptualizing extreme ideological expressions, especially in digital online environments lack in capacity to capture diffuse, ambiguous and culturally embedded communication strategies.

Building on the paradox of rising aggressiveness, visibility and mobilization while right-wing extremist worldviews are declining as well as the complexity of digital communication environments, this paper introduces the original concept of aesthetic camouflage, describing a multimodal communication strategy through which extreme far-right (EFR) actors ambiguate ideological signifiers within culturally normalized expressions to facilitate ideological expression between linguistic, visual and auditory modes of communication. This grants a selective readability across audiences while upholding plausible deniability within platform moderation frameworks. As such

aesthetic camouflage facilitates the mainstreaming of extremist ideas and builds the capacity for EFR ideology to be disseminated undetected and unmoderated – essentially hiding in plain sight.

Methodologically, the thesis employs a multimodal discourse analysis approach, grounded in social semiotics to examine meaning construction across different communicative modes in short-form video artifacts. Through the means of a five-step analytical framework the study identifies, codes and interprets individual semiotic resources before reconstructing them into higher-level mediated actions (HLA) that capture the logic of each artifact and discuss them in the discursive context of the purposive sample of 21 TikTok videos with EFR content.

Against this background, the guiding research questions of this thesis are: (1) *How are far-right extremist actors on TikTok aesthetically camouflaging their ideology?* (2) *How does aesthetic camouflage challenge Germany's federal prevention strategy for radicalization?*

The following sections provide contextual information regarding the setting of this study, some distinctions and definitions and the German policy strategy for prevention and countering extremism. Chapter 2 subsequently specifies the theoretical assumptions that ground the understanding of this study regarding radicalization dynamics, far-right extremism (FRE), their use of digital environments to mobilize individuals and mainstream their ideology. The chapter ends with a detailed description of aesthetic camouflage as an original analytical concept and theoretical contribution of the study. Chapter 3 then synthesizes current literature along the same outlines as the theoretical foundation: how the EFR has used the internet to mobilize, recruit and mainstream in recent years. Finally, TikTok is discussed more extensively regarding its cultural meaning, platform specific affordances and its use by EFR actors. Chapter 4 introduces Critical Realism as the grounding theory of science for this study and introduces multimodal discourse analysis as well as the analytical framework and finally a description of the dataset. Chapter 5 will walk through the analytical framework and present the results and analysis of the multimodal discourse analysis and end with the challenges for German policy strategy by the findings surrounding the guiding concept of aesthetic camouflage. The study concludes in a discussion and final remarks for further research.

1.1 German Context

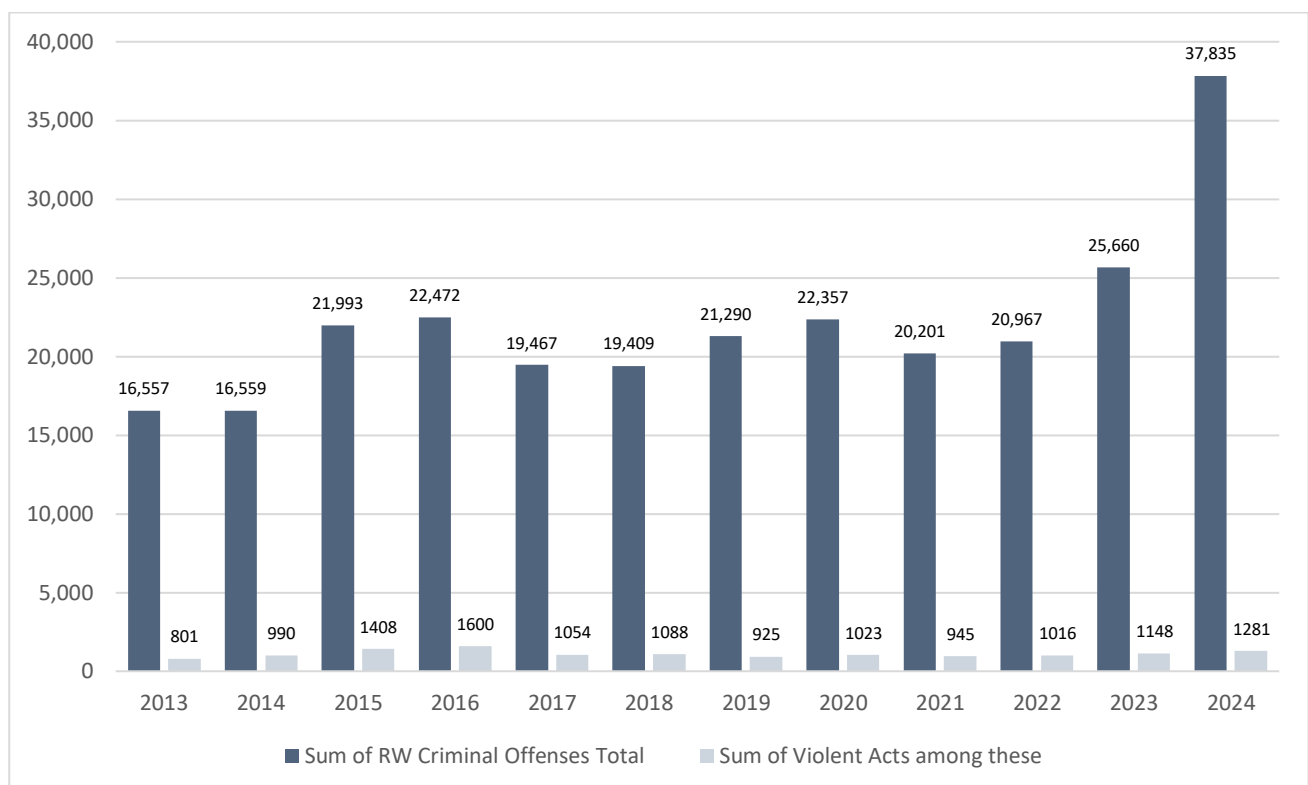
A recent study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, a foundation closely linked to the Social Democratic Party of Germany, indicated right-wing extremist attitudes are declining on a broad societal level. However, social media platforms like TikTok have seen a “mass migration” of far-right (FR) and FRE actors in Germany since the COVID-19 pandemic (Hohner et al., 2024, pp. 10–11). The annual “Report on the Protection of the Constitution” by the German Interior Ministry (BMI) further identifies a rising threat by FRE: right-wing extremist crimes increased by 47.4% to 37,835 in 2024

(2023: 25,660), including 1,281 violent offences and six attempted homicides (BMI, 2025), furthermore, right-wing extremist criminal offenses have been on the rise since 2013 (Statista, 2026a), see Fig. 1.

In 2024, EFR actors and neo-Nazi movements were responsible for organizing counter demonstrations to Christopher Street Day (CSD)¹ events in 33 German cities, averaging 134 participants, with the largest protest counting 700 attendees. In 2025 these numbers changed significantly. While the total number of protests increased to 47, the average attendance fell to 47 and the largest protest counted 450 protestors. While the number of attendees fell, there seems to be a change from more loosely organized youth groups leading the dynamic, to established EFR actors and organization taking over the mobilization and organization efforts (Düker et al., 2025, pp. 2–6; Mellea & Düker, 2024, pp. 1–4).

Youth organizations tied to the EFR have also gained traction through recruitment on Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok (Mellea & Düker, 2024), furthermore, there is a significant increase (over 100%) in the amount of young and even underage people who are suspect for EFR criminal offenses, as shown in Tab. 1 (Deutsche Bundesregierung, & Bundesministerium des Innern., 2025, p. 5).

Fig. 1 Right-Wing Criminal Offenses in Germany 2013-2024



¹ The CSD is a yearly protest and celebration by the LGBTQIA+ community to raise awareness and visibility as well as fight against discrimination and exclusion.

Source: Own depiction with data from Statista (2026a) & BMI (2025).

Tab. 1 Suspects of Far-Right Extremist Politically Motivated Crimes

Year	Age up to 13	Age 14-17	Age 18-20	Age 21-24	Total
2020	68	1.408	957	843	3276
2021	53	1.157	741	626	2577
2022	92	1.390	746	685	2913
2023	118	1.785	724	762	3389
2024	204	3.854	1.640	1.478	7176

Source: Own depiction with data from Deutsche Bundesregierung, & Bundesministerium des Innern (2025, p. 5).

1.2 The Right - Distinctions and Definitions

In the literature, terms like far-right, radical right, right wing extremists, populism and extreme right undergo a plethora of similar but differing definitions, often times used interchangeably, because of ideological overlap or as clear demarcations that show their subscriptions to certain ideals on the spectrum of illiberal, undemocratic positions (Barnett et al., 2025, p. 260; Heinze, 2022, p. 163; Marwick et al., 2022, p. 14). To ensure academic and linguistic exactness and to put the terms in context with each other, the terms populism, far-right and extreme-right are to be operationalized.

Populism typically involves a dichotomy of two heterogeneous groups; 'the people' at the center of their discourse, being left behind by political, economic or academic 'elites', that erased a "mythical golden past" (Nilan, 2025, p. 1) with clearer gender roles, less diversity and a defended nation-state (Barnett et al., 2025, p. 260; Heinze, 2022, p. 162).

The FR as such is closely linked to right wing populism. Barnett et al. (2025, p. 260), identifies seven characteristics of FR groups that include nationalism, racism, xenophobia, antidemocracy, authoritarianism, populism and antiestablishment rhetoric. Karas (2025, pp. 268–277) identifies a so called "new far-right", as it is currently undergoing an international resurgence. This movement is defined by their "post-organizational", transnational, tech-savvy, sub-cultural and heterogenous nature, making a delineation between FR and extreme right even harder, as a lot of the tactics, ideologies and ideas propagated in this context are close to an extremist worldview.

The focus of this work lies on the extreme right. While a term like extremism is a vague and unhelpful term if not operationalized. In the case of right-wing extremism, it can even obfuscate the relationship between a FR establishment and its political periphery, as mentioned in the paragraph above (Karas, 2025, p. 271). The extreme right is a contingent, constructed and fluid entity composed of greatly heterogeneous strands pertaining ideology, narratives and geography (Bolaños Somoano, 2022, Chapter 2). What they have in common are properties that include authoritarianism, exclusionary

nationalism, anti-democratic values, xenophobia, racism, a populist approach as well as a commitment to an “ideology of natural inequality” (Frankenberger et al., 2023, p. 279) that proposes a social order of asymmetries, exclusivity and patriarchal family ideals while also exhibiting severe out-group hostility (K. Brown et al., 2023, p. 166; Marwick et al., 2022, p. 14). The extreme right thus “rejects the principle of social equality, and ethnicizes, culturalizes and nationalizes social problems” (Frankenberger et al., 2023, p. 280) while seeking to abolish key ideas of modern western societies like democracy, human rights and pluralism. This is achieved by the use, justification or acceptance of violence as an end for their goals (Barnett et al., 2025, p. 261; Marwick et al., 2022, p. 14).

For this study, that wants to investigate online radicalization, the focus must lie on right-wing extremism or far-right extremism. As the previous chapter signified however, there is a vast ideological and academic overlap between approaches to research the spectrum of fringe right wing ideologies. As such, this paper proposes the term of Extreme Far-Right (EFR) and Far-Right Extremism (FRE). This includes especially Karas’ idea of the “New Far-Right”, as well as the extreme right as mentioned above.

1.3 Prevention and Counter-Radicalization in the German Context

Germany’s policy trajectory for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) differs considerably from other European countries, as the countries experience with National Socialism has viewed fascism as a threat to democracy since the end of the second World War, giving P/CVE a longer tradition that informed policies tackling newer forms like Islamist extremism, while other countries usually let the latter inform the former. At the same time, Germany is not a model state for countering right-wing extremism, as shown by the scandal surrounding the National Socialist Underground (NSU) in 2010².

The policies are argued to have developed organically, with the first national strategy being published in 2016, meaning that bottom-up approaches from the community level play a central role in the creation of initiatives and projects. This makes P/CVE in Germany based on evidence from the ground rather than political objectives, marked by strong non-government organizations involvement. Central pillars are pedagogical programs like extracurricular and youth-related activities, social work approaches that work with already problematic youth and in recent years also promoting democratic values more broadly as well as a disengagement and deradicalization program including family

² The group carried out several bombings, killing nine people and a police officer while the German federal intelligence agency was accused of sabotaging the investigation in order to protect their informants (Stevenson, 2026, p. 88).

counseling of those involved with extremists in their family (Stevenson, 2026, pp. 85–89). However, this framework remains rooted in the assumption that radicalization manifests in socially observable forms, identifiable individuals and recognizable ideological expressions.

The recent increase in influence of state actors in P/CVE policies grants the opportunity to critique their most recent policy strategy to countering extremism, to see if the state as a relatively new actor with great influence has adapted to the online communication strategies used by EFR actors on social media and especially TikTok. This paper thus conducts a targeted reading of the most recent German federal government's strategy paper for P/CVE (FRG, 2025). It is not analyzed as primary data but serves as a comparative framework to assess how current prevention logic's underlying assumptions about radicalization, visibility and intervention align with communicative strategies identified in the media analysis. Rather than evaluating policy effectiveness, the objective is to assess whether the current federal prevention strategy is conceptually equipped to address forms of extremist communication that are multimodal, aesthetically embedded, and characterized by ambiguity and selective readability.

The federal government's strategy frames radicalization partly as a deficit in media literacy and democratic competence while emphasizing media and political education as well as building up individual resilience against extremist content. Preventive measures are based on the assumption that extremist content is recognizable, making education and critical awareness central pillars (FRG, 2025, pp. 16; 35–38 & 48).

In this context online radicalization and extremist communication are seen as being explicitly communicated through identifiable narratives, ideology and propaganda, making the exposure, dissemination and amplification to such harmful content in digital environments the driving factor of radicalization (FRG, 2025, pp. 36–48)

In terms of intervention, the strategy emphasizes multi-actor collaboration, regulatory measures, and law enforcement approaches aimed at limiting the spread of extremist content. These measures assume that radicalization processes are empirically observable and measurable, and that extremist content can be identified and effectively constrained through governance and monitoring mechanisms (FRG, 2025, pp. 18; 37–38; 42).

2 Theoretical Foundation

To introduce the theoretical assumptions for this thesis, two grounding concepts are introduced first, the Extreme Far-Right Online Ecosystem and Hybridized Prefatory Extremism (HYPE). These theories function as the theoretical exoskeleton that informs this paper's assumptions about what

constitutes EFR online communication and how ideology is handled in these multimodal online spaces. Subsequently, radicalization theory is established along its variables, relationship to the internet, mitigation factors and mainstreaming as a process is introduced. Finally, the theoretical section ends with an explanation of an original contribution by this paper, the concept of aesthetic camouflage.

2.1 The Extreme Far-Right Online Ecosystem

The way EFR actors organize and use the internet can be understood through a framework of an online ecosystem. This concept, grounded in the biosciences allows researchers to “identify its component and characterize its constitutive process in a way that both opens up avenues for further work and organizes a research agenda” (Baele et al., 2023, p. 1600). Baele et al. (2023, p. 1601) define four key elements in an EFR online ecosystem. It is made up of Entities (individual domains, platforms or forums), Communities (that tie entities together with a complex relationship of interdependence between them) and Biotopes (that make up the Communities into sub-groups that “share[...] [an] ideological, thematic, or cultural sub-identity” (Baele et al., 2023, p. 1603). Together they make up the Network as the online ecosystem:

At the most macro level of analysis, all these entities, communities, and biotopes constitute together a vast and evolving overarching whole network: the far-right online ecosystem. Because of its dynamic character and the presence of several biotopes, this ecosystem is a composite and its boundaries and relationships with neighboring ecosystems (for example with the “manosphere”) are blurred. Some clusters can indeed belong both to the far-right ecosystem and a neighboring one (e.g. a racist (far-right ecosystem) and incel (manosphere ecosystem) community) (Baele et al., 2023, p. 1603).

In this ecosystem, there is an already realized possibility of global interconnectedness and transnational coordination on the basis of a shared root cause (Barnett et al., 2025, p. 260; bin Mohamad Hasbi et al., 2025, p. 106). As such the concept of a far-right online ecosystem lets researchers define the communications and workings of individual users as a connected system with affecting parts that constitute a social reality. In the context of a multimodal discourse analysis, the ecosystem theory allows for a discursive comparison inside the dataset of this paper, identifying recurring patterns and relationships.

Karas (2025, p. 280) further implied the role of topography as an “uneven terrain of websites, platforms, servers and apps that serve different purposes, host different kinds of media and interactions, and are more-or-less inward or outward facing” and landscape, recognizing the ecosystem as a “subjective, affective, embodied, aesthetic, material, performative, textual, symbolic

and visual landscape”. This approach highlights the complexity and multimodality of EFR online communication.

2.2 Hybridized Prefatory Extremism (HYPE)

Hybridization describes “a process in which the mixing of different ideologies, world views or communities leads to the creation of new extremist narratives and modus operandi among individuals, groups or communities” (Petersen & Johansen, 2025, p. 3). These “unstable ideologies” (Hetenyi, 2025, p. 211) are an amalgamation of disparate beliefs, making a delineation more complex or render it useless all together. At the same time hybridization occurs, not only on an ideological but also on a technological and aesthetic level, creating so called HYPE-spaces, social arenas online that may evolve into them promoting or directly leading to violent extremism. These spaces are aesthetically adaptable and able to appropriate mainstream or pop-culture, are participatory, counter-public or anti-mainstream and are dependable on platform affordances, making them a dynamic and highly fruitful area for EFR actors to radicalize individuals. The named characteristics evolve out of the interplay between the three domains of HYPE-Spaces: Actors, Practices and Content (Petersen & Johansen, 2025, pp. 1–9).

(1) Actors in these spaces are increasingly professionalizing and gradually moving into politics, often by mainstreaming fringe ideas through circulating them alongside moderate or regular content. While promoting fringe ideas, a lot of these actors cannot be reduced to fringe phenomena themselves, as they have a considerably large following. (2) Practices are coordinated digital campaigns against out-group individuals or groups. These involve harassment, spread of disinformation and conspiracies or sharing of ironically camouflaged extreme content. Information is appropriated and narratives are spread through “collaborative, cross-mediated, playful, and forensic practices” (Petersen & Johansen, 2025, p. 5). (3) Content, lastly, is the appropriation of culture, events or genres in the form of visual of material, mainly in memetic culture which is a key element of hybridization, presenting a meaning maze of heterogeneity and ambiguity that helps to identify the in-group and spread out-group hate (Petersen & Johansen, 2025, pp. 2–8).

As such, HYPE-spaces create participatory arenas that – through their aesthetic and rhetorical fluidity, moving in and out of extremist discourse to camouflage extremist with mundane content – “may introduce extremist expression to new audiences and allow diverse grievance-based communities to share methods of communication” (Petersen & Johansen, 2025, p. 8). As such, the HYPE concept is important for understanding aesthetic camouflage as a concept that evolves inside a participatory online ecosystem.

2.3 Radicalization

To adequately understand and embed radicalization into a theoretical framework, Social Movement Theory (SMT) offers a useful tool for explaining violent extremism and radicalization. McCarthy & Zald, (1977) define a social movement as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population, which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society” (pp. 1217-1218). Accordingly, related populations of social movements that are highly organized internally, are likely to emerge from organized forms of that movement. As such, radicalization is an emotional and profoundly personal transformation process that targets people’s moral intuitions (Karas, 2025, pp. 272–273). Radicalization is characterized by a disapproval of a hegemonic system and the propensity or willingness to engage in violent, illegal political action (Schulze et al., 2024, p. 280), while at the same time embracing hostile ideologies to realize the movements goals by “assign[ing] blame, propos[ing] remedies, methods, and tactics (prognostic framing), and provid[ing] motivating frames to persuade potential members to become involved” (Akram & Nasar, 2023, p. 280). The literature underlines the importance of seeing radicalization as a non-linear process of encirculation, rather than a linear one of risk, contagion and vulnerability (Knäble et al., 2025, p. 1; Moskalenko, 2023, p. 133). This section will this start with variables that can cause radicalization on three different levels. It then transitions into situating radicalization in an online environment, before ending with mitigation factors for radicalization.

2.3.1 Variables of Radicalization

To understand the origins of beliefs that lead to a radicalization to violent extremism, three levels of analysis can be identified. On the micro-level, individual factors play a role in radicalizing individuals or groups. At the center of this lies an appeal to an “affective economy” (Caiani, 2024, p. 6) used by EFR actors to catalyze fear, anger and resentment for mobilization issues. A heterogeneous emotional universe is seen as a driver of radicalization and leveraged by EFR actors to legitimize their beliefs, ideology and acts (Karas, 2025, p. 281). These emotions mobilize the fear of exclusion, a loss of culture or the loss of the ‘good old days’ (Abbas et al., 2021, p. 16; Marwick et al., 2022, p. 27; Moskalenko, 2023, p. 133). At the same time, positive emotions are included in radicalization processes, in the form of an offer of camaraderie and companionship answering to an individual’s sense of collective identity and belonging (Karas, 2025, p. 281).

The meso-level focuses on groups and social milieus that radicalize under coercion or provide outlets for grievances and collective identity. At the center stands the in-group/out-group-dichotomy typical for extremist and radical groups. Intragroup radicalization is characterized by a convergence from an in-group to a perceived outside threat. The in-group acts as a tightly knit social group that accepts

and socializes the individual in its sense for collective identity and acts as an outlet for its grievances (Abbas et al., 2021, pp. 5–24; Schulze et al., 2024, p. 190).

Finally, the macro-level highlights structural motivations for radicalization (Abbas et al., 2021, p. 5). From interest-conflicts between social groups or perceived threats against society – like increased divorce and abortion rates, instability of living and organized criminality – over ineffective, repressive or corrupt governments, policies, judicial systems, political leaders as well as times of poly-crisis all the way to socio economic factors like inequality or high poverty are possible structural motivations. It is important to note that threats like economic problems can be more perceived rather than actual and real threats on an objective level (Hetenyi, 2025, p. 211; Knäble et al., 2025, pp. 15–17; Marwick et al., 2022, p. 20).

These variables do not merely function as a descriptive concept but are relevant in the analysis, as they guide the interpretation of the multimodal features in the material. They ground the analysis in theory while still leaving the possibility for interpretation in the methodological framework of this thesis. They direct attention towards specific forms of meaning-making, such as emotional mobilization, in-/out-group construction and narratives of decline, without predetermining how they manifest within the multimodal structure of the analyzed TikTok posts.

2.3.2 The Internet and Radicalization

The internet and especially social media are crucial for radicalization and have revolutionized it at the same time. Communication is cheap, easy and can be organized through online networks that tap into the micro-level need for an individual's sense of inclusion in a community (Abbas et al., 2021, p. 6; Akram & Nasar, 2023, p. 279). Extremists are increasingly using social media spaces to broadcast their ideologies, as the internet is a catalyst for radicalization dynamics through social media's affordances that let a diverse group of people share and discuss their ideologies, views and beliefs (Akram & Nasar, 2023, p. 280; Schulze et al., 2024, p. 188).

They use the internet for (self-)radicalization, circumventing mainstream media, sharing information, instilling violent behavior, mainstreaming their narratives, recruiting new and mobilizing existing supporters as well as monetizing content to finance their efforts (Abbas et al., 2021, p. 7; Marwick et al., 2022, p. 33; Schulze et al., 2024, pp. 190–191). All the while social media went from being private companies to essentially fulfilling the role of public squares, which are not adequately regulated, monitored and policed. Furthermore laws and policing cannot keep up with the constant shift in utilization of social media platforms, in part because of the dynamic nature of the virtual extremist landscape but also because of discussions about fundamental rights like freedom of speech (Moskalenko, 2023, p. 140).

Social media affordances are situational and context-dependent properties – be they social, technological or contextual – of specific sites that enable or constrain specific uses for individuals on these platforms. Their relationality is their most important characteristic. According to Schulze et al. (2024, pp. 189–202), affordances are not inherent to platforms but emerge out of the interaction of individuals on and with the platform. As such, affordances are not features, as an affordance can emerge from different features on the platforms. Interactivity for example emerges out of features like commenting, liking and sharing. It stands at the core of all internet activity and thus, is a multi-level affordance that enables all other affordances and builds the groundwork for their emergence. Visibility or Scalability define the extent of an individuals or collectives reach of content. On the one hand, external visibility facilitates a wide and public reach by using digital means, while internal visibility on the other hand, refers to the social or personal presence of ideologically or interest based aligned communities. Anonymity can be seen as the central technological avenue for radicalization. It is divided into Technological Anonymity, meaning the absence of cues or signals in communication like facial expression or gestures; Social Anonymity, meaning the perception of (un-)identifiability of oneself and Personal Anonymity, meaning the actual (un-)identifiability of a person. Lastly, Collectivity refers to platforms enabling of building and maintaining communities (Schulze et al., 2024, pp. 189–202). Affordances are a part of the methodological skeleton of the multimodal analysis, as it helps to identify different modes.

2.3.3 Mitigation Factors for Radicalization

To adequately assess the potential for mitigation and prevention of EFR ideology and attitudes, an understanding of the above-mentioned variables on the different levels of radicalization are integral. Radicalization stems from socio-cultural, social and individual circumstances, grievances and inequalities. Furthermore, there cannot be a “one-size-fits-all” approach do different kinds or even similar types of extremism (Bolaños Somoano, 2022, Chapter 5; Hetenyi, 2025, pp. 211–212). To adequately counter radical and extremist worldviews, the policies and their makers must be alert and informed to adapt their tactics to an ever-changing, heterogeneous field of extremist ideology. On the individual level, it is important to take the (perceived) grievances seriously and be empathetic with the social and psychological factors that lead to the individual adopting extremist worldviews (Karas, 2025, p. 270).

Approaches to countering extremism online are manyfold and cannot be discussed extensively in the scope of this paper. However, a central role of countering extremism is played by those who compile, present and execute certain countermeasures. They must have an integral understanding of the applied methods and tactics used by extremists, especially in their communication on social media and of the underlying risk-factors that lead to radicalization in the first place. As this understanding allows the

initiatives to build resilience and develop as well as teach emotional capacities and skills to strengthen individuals and groups against radicalization (Akram & Nasar, 2023, pp. 290–291; Bolaños Somoano, 2022, Chapters 2 & 5; Hetenyi, 2025, p. 2017).

As such, this paper seeks to identify in what way multimodal online communication challenges existing prevention and de-radicalization strategies and if these strategies' epistemological and ontological presuppositions are reflected in extremists' approach to aesthetically camouflage their ideology through their multimodal online communication. This approach can be seen as a mainstreaming tactic by EFR actors. The following section will present mainstreaming and operationalize it.

2.4 Mainstreaming

First and foremost, mainstream and mainstreaming are widely used terms in academia, better or worse delineated and explained. Operationalizing these terms is of vital importance, if researchers want to paint a coherent picture of their approaches. The mainstream is not a fixed point on a political or economic spectrum. It must be understood as a contingent, fluid, constructed and dynamic entity. The (also contingent, fluid, constructed and dynamic) extreme and mainstream exist in relation to each other, creating a political space between them where they influence and define one another. The mainstream cannot be understood as inherently good, rational or moderate. Because of its fluidity and interaction with the extreme, mainstream ideas and politics are capable of taking extreme positions or actually pushing for extreme ideology (K. Brown et al., 2023, pp. 164–166).

Mainstreaming at its baseline can be defined as fringe actors, discourses or attitudes moving towards the center position of public or political opinion. This does not mean, the positions themselves change, but that the positions are being regarded as acceptable or legitimate in public, media and political contexts. Mainstreaming must be understood as a multi-directional process. While the EFR can be seen as a driving force in their own mainstreaming process, the mainstream itself must also be understood as an actor with agency that can contribute to the process of mainstreaming. Furthermore, focusing on the electorate or the public as the driving factor ignores elite agency from political actors. Lastly, minimization of discourse cannot be focused on electoral outcomes concerning the success or failure of FR parties, as it “ignores the effect of discourse itself as a site of significant power, with the capacity to articulate, reinforce and reconstruct hegemonic ways of conceiving societal phenomena” (K. Brown et al., 2023, pp. 168–170).

Furthermore, mainstreaming must be seen as a multi-step process, that involves content positioning approaches on the one hand, which are supposed to insert extreme ideas into a broader public. These include hijacking and appropriating discourses and hashtags, dog whistling³, calculated provocation as well as issue positioning in hyper partisan and mainstream media. On the other hand, susceptibility approaches are meant to specifically target more susceptible people and reel them into an extreme ideology through humorous communication, visual elements and aesthetically pleasing formats, targeted appeals to youth culture, democratically legitimized actors, group relations and victimization.

The FR and even the EFR have entered the mainstream on a political and cultural level. Politicians, commentators, influencers, journalists, movements and parties have gained remarkable traction in countries in the global north. The contemporary wave of FR politics is centered around normalization and mainstreaming of FR and EFR ideology⁴, mainly through online communication “as the interconnected nature of digital environments facilitates radical or extremist ideas” (Rothut, Schulze, Hohner, et al., 2024, p. 50) and lets them reach a wide audience (Barnett et al., 2025, p. 260; Heinze, 2022, pp. 163–164; Karas, 2025, p. 268). As such, the internet can be defined as main driver for mainstreaming, as extremist communication from fringe platforms easily spills over to large social media platforms (Rothut, Schulze, Rieger, et al., 2024). Through image-based platforms like TikTok, Instagram and Facebook EFR actors use visual, auditive and linguistic approaches, to “tap into the shared visual knowledge of the society they are rooted in” (Caiani, 2024, p. 5), they adopt a “subcultural cryptography, [...] for a camouflage of incoherence, irony and plausible deniability” (Karas, 2025, p. 277) based on humor, irony, coded language as well as stylistic presentation and use these platforms and tactics to broaden their audience (bin Mohamad Hasbi et al., 2025, p. 106), erode the boundaries between extreme and non-extreme ideology (Petersen & Johansen, 2025, p. 5) and

³ As a form of codification “dog whistling describes ingroup-specific codes intended to disguise the actual meaning of a message” (Rothut, Schulze, Rieger, et al., 2024, p. 53) to give an intra-scene identification, increase the legal and deplatforming security of involved actors and to increase the salience of extremist content by subverting its ideology due its subtle nature (Rothut, Schulze, Rieger, et al., 2024, p. 53).

⁴ Normalization and mainstreaming are often used synonymously. While there are overlaps between the two terms, it can be divided along the lines of their appearance in the same process. While mainstreaming is the ongoing process of fringe ideas entering into the boundaries of a broad, middle-class of values, normalization can be seen as the ongoing results of this process. Once norms have been changed or extremist ideas have entered a mainstream field, these ideas have become normalized (Rothut, Schulze, Hohner, et al., 2024, p. 50).

facilitate their mainstreaming (Marwick et al., 2022, p. 32). This directly translates into this paper's original and guiding concept of aesthetic camouflage.

2.5 Aesthetic Camouflage

As mentioned above, aesthetic camouflage is an original conceptual contribution, developed in the scope of this thesis. To my knowledge and according to my research, the concept has not been mentioned or applied as I have in this thesis. Aesthetic camouflage can be defined as a multimodal communication strategy where extremist actors use culturally normalized or platform-native forms of expression to embed ideological signifiers within them and ambiguate their ideological content as well as maintain plausible deniability. Selective readability across audiences through the multimodal composition of the content can be identified as the central mechanism. Rather than relying on explicit ideological articulation, meaning is mainly constructed by a combined use of visual, auditory, and linguistic elements such as stylistic conventions, humor, music, coded language, and symbolic references. These elements can be ambiguous and deniable in a broad interpretative context for out-groups to not immediately recognize it as extremist content while they remain legible to in-group members. Meaning emerges first and foremost through the combination of modes, while individual cues can carry meaning, they mostly stay ambiguous. Ideology is distributed across different modes. As such, aesthetic camouflage enables the circulation and normalization of extremist ideas through their alignment with mainstream cultural practices and communicative styles. Thus, aesthetic camouflage functions as a communicative strategy and can therefore be understood as an integral communicative strategy through which processes of mainstreaming are facilitated in multimodal digital environments.

3 Literature Review

To adequately address current research and research gaps that inform the motivation to this paper, the literature review will first focus on online radicalization and how EFR actors utilize the internet for ideological meaning and group formation. After this introduction, EFR online mobilization as a particular use of the internet is being analyzed, followed by a closer look at how the EFR uses the internet to mainstream their ideology. Lastly, a detailed account of TikTok is provided, as well as the lack of research on the platform concerning EFR actors' ideological use of the platform.

3.1 Extreme Far Right Internet Use and Online Radicalization

EFR groups have historically been adopting to the use of the internet since its earliest commercialization in the 80s. EFR actors have been using its affordances to pursue their myriads of

goals. The FRE message board Stormfront can be seen as the earliest example of an extremist movement using digital media in a strategic way (Baele et al., 2023, p. 1600. See also: Barnett et al., 2025, p. 280; Rothut, Schulze, Rieger, et al., 2024, p. 49; Schulze et al., 2024, p. 188). Today these strategic uses include the crucial dissemination of EFR ideas and exchange of resources and information to mobilize, organize and reach a mainstream audience. This last part is also realized through intentional outrage campaigns, where controversial utterances or posts are being published to generate public attention or mainstream-media coverage (Bolaños Somoano, 2022, Chapters 2–4; Frankenberger et al., 2023, p. 284).

Allchorn & Kondor (2026, pp. 27–31), identified key elements of EFR internet usage. According to the authors, “monologic sharing of content” (p. 27) is used by EFR influencers. They use a moderate front-stage rhetoric where ideological ideas are disseminated for a broader audience, while a more radical backstage rhetoric solidifies and extremizes worldviews and ideology. Networking, transnationality and the use of these resources for organized online campaigns to influence cross-national, real-world events are confirmed by the authors.

Davidson & Enos (2025, pp. 185–193) found out that populist parties in the EU experienced sustained advantages in online interaction on Twitter and Facebook. Their analysis reveals that engagement with FR populists rises with rising migration and falls with economic growth or stability in respective countries. They conclude that FR populists have substantial advantages on social media and benefit more from digitalization than other political ideologies.

According to Marwick et al. (2022, p. 31) online radicalization into EFR can be divided into three stages. First, in the Normalization Stage, internet culture and media that is native to the internet like memes or podcasting and video essays are used to familiarize users with extremist ideas, often in an ironic way, as to uphold a plausible deniability for the consumption or perpetuation of certain content. In the second stage of Acclimation, users are desensitized and habituated for racist, xenophobic, misogynist and/or conspiratorial content, by which a new baseline is created that moves acceptability further away from the center. Finally, Dehumanization of Others relates to the in/out-group dichotomy and paints entire groups of people as enemies with certain goals that need to be fought.

Mulholland et al. (2025, pp. 9–16) identified three concepts integral as drivers for radicalization in Australian EFR online discourse. The actors discussed unfairness grievances – procedural and distributive unfairness, immorality grievances and deprivation – as central concepts discussed. Secondly, perceived out-group threats drove the discourse, including a threat to culture and values, a “threat to the white race” (Mulholland et al., 2025, pp. 12–13), economic resources and physical safety. Lastly, through Moral Disengagement others are dehumanized and violence or hate is justified morally through the construction of a war narrative between the in- and out-group.

Hardy (2023, p. 7), showed in a thematic analysis of the EFR online forum Stormfront that the in/out-group discussions are heavily centered around whiteness as well as racial, religious and social markers. Furthermore, Törnberg & Törnberg (2024, pp. 4527–4529) identified a community formation in echo chambers on Stormfront, that link personal identity to shared symbols. Through constant reassurance, members develop an identity-protective cognition that avoids dissonance and resists threat to the group- and self-values.

Gaudette et al. (2022, pp. 1345–1347) also identified positive emotions like support and mentoring as reasons for violent FRE actors to use online forums in their radicalization process. Collins (2024, pp. 6–11) further identified positive emotions around in-group superiority and communicative processes on Gab, an online image-board with next to no moderation which is a popular site for radical and EFR communication. This virtual community centers around familial bonds, friendship, like minded positionality and a powerful in-group construction that promotes togetherness and solidarity.

Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud (2025, pp. 1613–1617) use the terminology of an online counter public to describe an individual that joins like-minded online communities after being cast-out and condemned by their social circle for not sharing views and values with them. Gagnon's (2023, pp. 14–22) interviews with users of a Canadian EFR Facebook group showed similar trends, like their alienation by mainstream media and their feeling of not being taken seriously leading them to seek out a like-minded community that shares their views and concerns, while also using the group as a means for seeking information and meaning.

What becomes apparent is the overlap between micro-, meso- and macro-level processes. Individual grievances or individual safety (micro-level) are facilitated, for example, by anti-government sentiments or symbolic threats to culture (macro-level) and lead to an immersion into EFR ideology or content, to feel as a part of an in-group that delineates itself from an out-group (meso-level).

As EFR actors were early adopters of online communication channels, the different platforms, groups, ideologies can be identified in line with the eco-system approach that sees the different movements as part of an integrated network that disseminates similar ideologies and provides a fruitful ground for Marwick's (2022, p. 31) three stages of online radicalization. Individuals seek outlets for their grievances and find them in openly accessible communities on mainstream platforms, where hateful content is normalized and packaged in a humorous or informational appearance. The interconnectedness of these communities then leads to individuals being directed to different, more fringe and radical platforms where they are acclimatized to hateful, xenophobic and racist content. In a final step, these echo-chambers then tip the scale for individuals to dehumanize the outgroup and commit or condone violent acts against it.

While Goede et al. (2022, pp. 266–268) found that young people mainly consume EFR content rather than sharing or creating it, younger audiences are particularly vulnerable to be recruited, radicalized or mobilized by EFR actors. Heinze (2025, pp. 110–120) further identifies the youth wing of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) as a driver of radicalization due its high relevance for recruiting and socializing young adults. In combination with the interaction of the on- and offline-world in the facilitation of violent extremism as shown by Gaudette et al. (2022, p. 1347), where online activities spill over into the real world or advertise real world events, another important theme of EFR online tactics come to the forefront: mobilization and recruitment. The next section will take a closer look at how EFR actors have used social media and online communication to mobilize and recruit individuals.

3.2 Mobilization and Recruitment Through Online Spaces

Brown et al. (2026, pp. 71–83) propose a framework that acknowledges not only micro-level causes for mobilization to extremist action, but also knowledge resources about acting capabilities and operational behavior. Evidence of operational capabilities and know-how relates to action mobilization. Furthermore, they showed that mobilized individuals are actively engaged in recruitment and information sharing, further underlining the importance of resource knowledge that is aimed at the individual's self-efficacy rather than a "collectivization of efficacy beliefs" (Brown et al., 2026, p. 83). On the meso-level, Castelli Gattinara et al. (2022, pp. 1028–1035), found support for similar claims in their analysis of FR protest mobilization in Europe. While the mobilization efforts to FR protests have increased from 2008-2018, their main driver are grievances linked to immigration, which is in line with SMT for the explanation of collective action. Also, in line with SMT, the authors found that if collective actors can build on resources (symbolic or organizational), protest mobilization is more likely to occur. This is particularly important for a multimodal context of radicalization, as symbolic resources like signs, clothing and codes play a central role for aesthetic camouflage.

The construction of a group or individual identity is a central aspect of EFR online communication strategies. Kisyova et al. (2022, pp. 48–52) analyzed feminine identity construction in EFR spaces and found that identity and belonging are achieved through lifestyle signaling, out-group construction and a creation of social bonds through these online communities. Samaras (2025, pp. 12–20) furthermore found that EFR movements construct identities and propagate their exclusionary ideology through emotionally charged, multimodal messaging to evoke fears and drive identity construction around a shared issue and finally recruit individuals into these online communities.

Moreover, platform design is shown to have an impact on mobilization processes. First, algorithmic amplification of content generates attention, promotes events and broadcasts messages to a broad audience. However Klein (2025, pp. 36–37) mentions that other variables like user-base, preferred content, connection features and the network structure influence a social media platforms efficacy for mobilization. Additionally, specific social media affordances change the way in which platforms are used for mobilization, as well as differing guidelines, policies and content moderation tactics.

Individuals are typically exposed to EFR content on mainstream platforms, where they engage with the content that provides opportunities for identity construction and grievance dealing. Through participation and interactivity this identity tends to be reinforced and functions as a legitimization and normalization tool to partake in offline and online extremist action. It is important to underline this process as non-linear, as steps can be skipped and mobilized individuals recursively mobilize by becoming recruiters and knowledge distributors. Thus, mobilization can emerge when emotionally charged identities and grievances are magnified through platform-specific affordances – for example algorithms, interaction modes, visibility – and symbolic or organizational resources get communicated. Symbolic resources are a central pillar of the multimodal extremist communication analyzed in this paper. While this section focused on offline mobilization/action, strategic mainstreaming is a form of online mobilization/action with a lower threshold to partake in. As such, the following section will take a closer look at how the EFR is using mainstreaming to solidify their ideology.

3.3 Mainstreaming the Extreme Far-Right

One way of the EFR mainstreaming their ideology is connected to their building of a specific narrative structure and dissemination of narratives tapping into cultural knowledge and feelings of decline prevalent in the societies they act in. Schilk (2025, pp. 2–17), diagnoses a current momentum for EFR ideology, discourse and positive election outcomes. Narratives are spread through the formation of narrative communities that follow a specific structure, starting with Diremption (denouncing modernity and diagnosing erosion of an integrated world), followed by Decadence (a tool for delegitimization, a supposed lack of morality in society, while at the same time denouncing an alleged corrupted elite) and ending in Apocalypse, seen at the end of a cycle, either calling for a resistance against an impending doom or using the collapse as a possibility for spiritual transformation, both motivated by “revolutionary conservatism that wants to disrupt in order to rebuild” (Schilk, 2025, p. 15).

A pertinent example of how memes are used and appropriated by EFR actors is “Pepe the Frog”. Created as a comic that comments on a “post-college zone of living by yourself with a bunch of dudes

and pulling pranks on one another” (Peters & Allan, 2022, p. 221). The depiction of the frog has since been weaponized through mediums like 4chan and Reddit, where EFR actors have used the frog to drive hateful agendas. Through this strategic deployment, the meme afforded a tactical functionality that helped boost a relation of co-presence and affiliation with far-right discourses, groups and message boards by mainstream actors that used the ambiguity of Pepe to appease all those using the meme in hateful or problematic instances while upholding plausible deniability, as to its elusive nature as only a depiction of a frog, also used in non-hateful ways. Both the mainstream and political use of the meme helps delineate between an in- and out-group, between people who get the joke and those who are marginalized, trivialized and excluded (Peters & Allan, 2022, pp. 221–227).

Symbolic appropriation is not limited however to visual symbols but can also include cultural or even auditory elements to be used as vehicles for hateful and extreme ideology. As Salhi (2025, pp. 7–17) shows in two distinct cases surrounding the AfD in Germany, where the political party used EFR appropriations and symbols to gain traction preceding the European elections in 2024. Firstly, a video surfaced in which party goers were singing along to the song “L’Amour Tojours” by Gigi D’Agostino. The participants added a racist chant for the refrain, garnering mass media attention and turning the song into a “symbolic resource of collective consciousness against immigration” (Salhi, 2025, p. 7), referencing a slogan the Nazis used in the 20th century (Deutschland den Deutschen) and effectively rendering it sayable or referenceable by the humming or vocalizing of the melody of a popular song, upholding plausible deniability for its utterance (Salhi, 2025, p. 7).

The second instance of symbolic appropriation was an EFR counter campaign against the Queer Pride Month, rebranding it as a nationalist ‘Stolzmonat’ (pride month) and accompanied by coordinated online campaigns that target the LGBTQIA+ community by disseminating hateful and extreme content through social media posts. The main symbolic appropriation is the use of the Queer Pride flag into a variation that uses different color tones of the German national flag, used for profile pictures and memes to show participation (see Fig. 3). While not all ‘participants’ can be branded as FRE actors, it showcases how mainstreamed FR actors like the AfD use symbols originating from extreme and hateful ideology that polarized and denigrates minorities to further their own electoral success. Both examples make evident that established political actors play a role in the mainstreaming of EFR ideology by appropriating symbols and taking over discursive arenas online by pushing boundaries and banalize extreme and hateful ideology (Salhi, 2025, pp. 7–17).

Fig. 2 Germanized Pride Flag used by Björn Höcke⁵



Source: Screenshot from @BjoernHoecke (2024)

Around anti-gender mobilization in Germany, Volk (2025, pp. 69–75) identified two different aspects of mainstreaming. First, the author found out that fringe actors of the extreme right were able to form a protest alliance with FR actors like the AfD. While mainstream actors did clearly delineate from forming a protest alliance with the AfD, there was a discursive coalition between them, mainly centering around antagonistic moralization between a moral, children protecting in-group and an immoral, endangering children out-group.

Women have become increasingly important in mainstreaming EFR ideology, performing as influencers and ideologues regarding a perceived threat to western societies. They shape the ideological arena of the EFR for other women in a role of “organic intellectuals” (Kisyova et al., 2022, p. 40). Through shared grievances they create a case for joining their cause by adhering to a sense of white preservation and pride that needs to protect its sense of community and identity. Through this EFR women soften white supremacist rhetoric to mainstream notions of racial superiority, women’s subordination and fears and grievances against an out-group (Kisyova et al., 2022, pp. 37–63).

Unveiling different patterns of EFR mainstreaming shows a strategic and multimodal effort to embed extreme and hateful ideology into broader societal discourse by making it appear culturally resonant, ambiguous and accessible. Central to this process is the construction of narrative frameworks that diagnose a perceived societal decline through themes of loss, decadence and impending collapse. These narratives translate extremist ideology into familiar cultural storylines, allowing actors to frame grievances and inequalities as part of a larger, almost inevitable trajectory, while simultaneously legitimizing calls for resistance or transformation. Their cyclical structure enables constant adaptation, as failed predictions of collapse do not invalidate the narrative but instead reinforce its underlying logic and flexibility.

⁵ Chair of State Branch of the AfD in Thüringen.

To facilitate mainstreaming, EFR actors appropriate elements of popular, youth and internet culture, embedding ideological messages within humor, memes, symbols and music. This strategy does not simply mask extremist content but produces strategic ambiguity, allowing messages to function on multiple levels: as in-group signals for those familiar with their meaning and as seemingly harmless or ironic content for broader audiences. In this way, harmful ideas are not only obscured but also normalized and trivialized, lowering the threshold for engagement and participation. The multimodal nature of this communication – visual, auditory and textual – further enhances its reach and adaptability across different platforms and audiences.

At the same time, mainstreaming is reinforced through the interaction between fringe and established political actors, who adopt, adapt or echo elements of extremist discourse and symbolism within more legitimate contexts. This interaction expands the visibility and acceptability of such ideas, while maintaining a degree of distance that preserves plausible deniability. Taken together, mainstreaming emerges as a process in which extremist ideology is translated into culturally embedded, ambiguous and easily consumable forms of communication that enable low-threshold participation, normalize exclusionary worldviews and expand their reach beyond explicitly extremist spaces.

3.4 TikTok and the Far Right

On a global scale, TikTok is the fastest growing social media platform, among children and young adults. While available data on user demographic mostly includes only people above the age of 18, data from the US suggests that 32,5% of users are aged 10-19 and 29,5% aged 20-29 (McCashin & Murphy, 2023, p. 280), with data on Germany only including Generation Z as the youngest age group, who make up 55% of users (Statista, 2026c), with around 70% of people aged 16-29 using the app in 2024 (Statista, 2026b). The app allows users to create and consume mainly short form but also longer videos, using filters, music overlay, remix options and many more, enabling the creation of multimodal, mimicked and memetic content. The presented content is algorithmically driven and thus tailored to the individual user's preferences or interaction. It's distinct technical structures and classic affordances like hashtags, text overlays and captions make it into a unique online network that drives memetic features through imitation and accelerates it's interactivity (Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025, p. 92; McCashin & Murphy, 2023, p. 281).

Through interactivity and participatory cultures on TikTok, it appeals to a young audience through multimodal, emotionally engaging, algorithmically amplified content (Ozduzen et al., 2023, p. 836). The platform is suited for polarizing political content as the algorithmic locking mechanism prioritizes previously viewed content and favors trending new content displays (Hohner et al., 2024, p. 11). These features, combined with a lax and patchy content moderation for ideological and hateful

content make it a fruitful ground for radicalization and extremism (Winter & Crawford, 2023, p. 129). As such TikTok has become a “crucial platform to understand the mainstreaming of far right ideas and ideologies, especially due to its popularity amongst young adults, adolescents and children” (Ozduzen et al., 2023, p. 836), where nationalist, white supremacist, racist or antisemitic messages are presented for an ‘enjoyable’ and ephemeral consumption (Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025, p. 92; Sakki, 2025, p. 166).

Taken together, the literature positions TikTok as a central platform in contemporary digital communication, characterized by its algorithmically driven content distribution, strong appeal to young audiences, and highly multimodal and participatory affordances. These characteristics make TikTok particularly relevant to the dissemination of political and ideological content that is emotionally engaging and easily reproducible. Existing research demonstrates that extremist and far-right actors have recognized and utilized these affordances to disseminate ideological narratives, mobilize supporters, and integrate into mainstream digital cultures. Empirical studies further show that such content often operates through entertainment, humor, and aestheticized formats that obscure explicit ideological messaging while maintaining engagement, particularly among younger audiences.

However, the current body of research remains fragmented in two central ways. First, while TikTok is increasingly acknowledged as a site of radicalization and mainstreaming, systematic analyses of construction of extremist ideology through the platform’s multimodal affordances remain limited. Existing studies focus on platform dynamics, audience effects, or political actors such as party representatives, creating a research gap regarding non-institutional extremist actors and their communicative strategies. Second, although the masking, normalization, and aestheticization of extremist content are mentioned, they are rarely conceptualized or operationalized as a coherent multimodal strategy. This gap is significant given the inherent multimodal communicative environment of TikTok. As such, understanding how extremist ideas are embedded, obscured, and made legible across these modes requires an analytical framework a conceptual approaches that move beyond single-mode interpretations. TikTok is, compared to its cultural significance, severely understudied in terms of how extremist actors use the platform to spread their ideology, recruit, radicalize or mobilize individuals for extremist action, political influence or its use during elections.

As to EFR mobilization on TikTok, Hohner et al. (2024, pp. 10–24) identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a starting point for mass integration of FRE actors to German TikTok. A variety of sub-groups emerged on the platform, creating internal and external engagement that binds existing followers on the one hand and helps to mainstream and reach audiences that were out of reach before. Additionally, Widholm et al. (2024, pp. 7–9) analyzed user engagement preceding the 2022 Swedish

election and found that right wing political parties received more political praise on TikTok, while left parties received significantly more criticism.

Finally, multimodality on TikTok is discussed in the context of right wing politicians using TikTok's multimodal opportunities to persuade users of the platform for their ideology. Jaakkola & Sakki (2025, pp. 97–109) studied Sebastian Tynkkynen's (politician of the EFR Finns Party) use of the platform to craft an in-group identity. He uses digital elements to entertain and create emotions while enhancing his messages by using music and underline his arguments by text. Visually he uses engaging, memetic features to balance his role as a serious but entertaining content creator and politician. Within this multimodal approach he frames an out-group as 'them', blaming it for societal grievances and uses a layered multimodal approach to mock the out-group. At the same time, he creates an 'us' by constructing and celebrating an in-group through visual, auditory and linguistic elements that evoke positive feelings towards the created in-group, creating a moral division that allocates blame to an out-group.

Sakki (2025, pp. 160–163) unveiled similar findings about the leader of the Finns Party, Riikka Purra, who victimizes her party as innocent victims of mainstream media and other parties by using TikTok's multimodal affordances. She mocks political opponents through incorporating textual elements with emojis while using setting as a visual marker of colloquialization through informal and relatable settings. Using a simplified rhetoric with textual elements added to a video, where she highlights certain words by using bigger fonts she pursues the othering of an out-group through dichotomization, simplified rhetoric, explicit language, simplification, juxtapositions and direct addressing of her audience.

This study focuses on the multimodal construction of extremist communication on TikTok beyond institutional political actors. It introduces the concept of aesthetic camouflage to capture how extremist ideology is embedded within platform-native forms of expression and rendered selectively interpretable across audiences. By applying a multimodal discourse analytical framework, the study aims to uncover how chains of semiotic resources combined into higher-level mediated actions that facilitate the normalization and mainstreaming of extremist ideas within everyday digital content. The following chapter will outline the scientific philosophy and methodology underlying this thesis

4 Epistemology, Ontology, Methodology

First, this chapter introduces critical realism as the epistemological and ontological groundwork. Following that, multimodal discourse analysis is introduced and explained. Subsequently, the analytical framework is presented as the main tool for analyzing the collected data. For an applied

example of this framework, see Appendix 1. Lastly, data description and ethical considerations are presented.

4.1 Critical Realism

This paper adopts a critical realist theory of science to ground its understanding of being and knowledge. Under a critical realist lens, ontology and epistemology are divided along the line of a real world and an observable one. Accordingly, on an ontological level, social reality has mechanisms, structures and forces that are intransitive – existing and acting independently of one’s awareness of them – conceptual entities. On an epistemological level, the knowledge about these underlying mechanisms is socially produced and changeable. Social reality is understood as stratified into three levels: the empirical (directly observable), the actual (observable or not-observable patterns) and the real (underlying mechanisms). By applying this layered perspective, the analysis can move beyond surface descriptions to identify deeper conceptual or structural mechanisms that may limit the capacity of current frameworks to respond to new, digitally mediated forms of radicalization (Bhaskar, 2016, pp. 2–26).

Applied to this study, the empirical domain consists of the observable multimodal content of TikTok posts, including visual, auditory, and linguistic elements. The actual domain is addressed through the identification of recurring patterns and configurations across these posts, such as repeated aesthetic strategies, symbolic references, and communicative styles. The real domain is approached through the reconstruction of underlying communicative mechanisms that generate these patterns. In this context, aesthetic camouflage is conceptualized as such a mechanism, structuring how extremist meaning is embedded, distributed, and rendered selectively readable within multimodal environments.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis provides the methodological bridge between these domains. By systematically analyzing how meaning is constructed through the interaction of modes, it enables an interpretation that moves beyond surface-level description towards the identification of patterned meaning-making practices. This allows the study to infer the underlying mechanisms through which extremist content is normalized and circulated in digitally mediated environments, while remaining consistent with the epistemological assumption that such mechanisms can only be accessed indirectly through their observable manifestations.

4.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Social semiotics can be seen at the edifice of multimodal discourse analysis as it is being used in contemporary academia (Xuan & Song, 2025, p. 53). Halliday (1978) sees language as a social

semiotic system through which reality is represented and constructed. As such, language – a system of signs derived from a social process and informed by the context of its application – becomes a tool for meaning-making and shaping a social reality that poses a semiotic construct, interpretable by semiotic terms (Halliday, 1978, pp. 1-14). He identifies the ideational⁶, interpersonal⁷ and textual⁸ metafunctions as the “basis of the organization of the entire linguistic system” (Halliday, 1978, p. 47).

Building on a theory of language that analyzes meaning and understanding, Kress & Van Leeuwen expand critical discourse analysis (CDA) to incorporate visual modes of communication. Their “Visual Grammar” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020) is seen as a group’s resource, their implicit and explicit knowledge about it as well as its usage by that group. Language becomes one of a plethora of modes or ‘textual threads’ that form a connected cultural resource, a socially and historically shaped representation – the concept of multimodality. Meaning is created by the interplay of different modes, it is shaped by social and economic structures as well as a subjective motivation and interest of a given sign-maker (Kress, 2009, 2023; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Norris, 2004b; Van Leeuwen, 2015). Different modes produce different signs – the core unit of social semiotics and a conjunction of form (signifier) and meaning (signified) produced from “socially shaped cultural modal resources” (Kress, 2023, p. 144) and the sign-makers motivations and interests (Kress, 2009, p. 14, 2023, p. 144; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020, pp. 6–8).

Furthermore, the social semiotics approach is applied to the sonic mode of communication outside of spoken language. This translates to the analysis being concerned, not with a mere adjective description of what specific sounds convey but exploring the repertoire of meaning potential in used sonic resources and their specific use or combination to communicate certain feelings or create meaning. The origin of this meaning is either one of provenance – a “cultural accumulation of associations” (Machin, 2011, p. 154) – or experimental – associations with sound stemming from the physical world. Affordances range from pitch, tempo and rhythm over tension and sound quality all the way to used instruments as well as style (Machin, 2011, pp. 152–158).

Power distributions are essential for understanding communicational environments. The Critical Imperative infused social semiotic with dimensions of power and solidarity. The power dynamics surrounding communication shifted with the emergence of new media from a vertical to more

⁶ “Construe[s] human experience by representing the world around and inside us in terms of processes, participants, and circumstances” (Xuan & Song, 2025, p. 54)

⁷ Concerning social relationships and interaction (Xuan & Song, 2025, p. 55)

⁸ “Organizes the message itself, enabling it to cohere internally and with its context” (Xuan & Song, 2025, p. 56)

horizontal balance, changing forms of knowledge production, principles of text-making composition and achieving a social and semiotic blurring, reshaping old frames and boundaries into a dynamic, unpredictable and multimodal digital social reality of text-making, where texts are constantly recontextualized and interacted with, while corporate and institutional power is wielded in rather than behind discourse and social activism offers opportunities for resistance (Jones, 2023, pp. 428–434; Kress, 2009, pp. 21–23; Xuan & Song, 2025, pp. 54–55).

TikTok offers a unique possibility to create multimodal content and share it with a potentially huge and mostly young audience. Users tend to gather around “various discursive objects”(Jones, 2023, p. 427) in looser aggregates, rather than stable networks of connections like other social media sites (Sakki, 2025, pp. 154–155). Beyond that, TikTok is essentially a platform for multimodal communication, as content can contain music, sounds, spoken and written word, editing and visuals. So, while multimodal discourse analysis is particularly suitable to study TikTok content, it is also particularly suitable to study extremist communication, as ideological meaning is often expressed across a multitude of modes like visual or numerical symbolism, aesthetics, music and narrative framing (see HYPE and FR online ecosystem). On the one hand this method allows to identify aesthetic camouflage by EFR content-creators while also identifying aspects that are integral to discussing if German prevention policy is adapted to a multimodal approach to radicalization, as these radicalization processes manifest through communication practices that can be empirically accessed through multimodal discourse analysis.

4.3 Analytical Framework

To frame this theoretical approach to MDA towards a practical framework for analysis, this study proposes a five-step approach to engage with the data. The steps are prefaced by a pre-analytical phase and a basic inventory analysis following Pauwel’s (2020, pp. 564-566) multimodal framework for analyzing online material culture. The former phase aims to retain first impressions of the data and content that is being analyzed. To ensure reflexivity within this study, the pre-analytical phase situates the researcher in their initial feelings towards the content. The latter phase is concerned with basic demographic information about the artifact, like numeric value of likes, views, saves and comments as well as date of post and download.

First, in Modal Segmentation, the data is structured along the present semiotics modes in the artifact (in this case, a single TikTok post). Such modes are visual, linguistic/verbal, spatial or auditory. Within these modes different semiotics resources or features can be identified such as visual imagery, spoken or written language, music and sound, spatial configuration, gestures, platform affordances like editing or hashtags, color pallet and many more. They are treated as semiotic resources in the

multimodal artifact of a TikTok post (Jewitt, 2017, p. 16; Norris, 2004a, pp. 11–72; Pauwels et al., 2020, pp. 568–575).

In step two, Modal Feature Coding, the semiotic resources are described along their design elements. Kress and Van Leeuwens (2020) grammar of visual design provides an empirically sound approach to the visual site, including resources such as salience, framing, gaze, composition or setting. On a linguistic level, discourse analysis and social semiotics allow for resources such as metaphors, coded language, numeric or linguistic symbolism or identity labels, while auditory examples may include emotional tone, music rhythm and tempo, music genre etc. (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020, pp. 118–181; Machin & Mayr, 2023, Chapter 3; Xuan & Song, 2025, pp. 56–57)

Third, Functional Coding aims to move from description to functionality, interpreting what the different features imply for meaning making. This function is tightly connected to Halliday's (1978) metafunctions and their translation onto the visual by Kress & Van Leeuwen (2020). The construction of meaning thus, is realized through different semiotic features. Norris (2004a, p. 13) focuses on the interpretation of actions within the different modes and how these actions produce meaning in themselves. These are named lower-level actions (LLA). These LLAs are identified as different signifiers in the artifact, following Pauwel's (2020, p. 568-575) intramodal analysis, salient signifiers are: verbal/written signifiers, design and layout signifiers, sonic signifiers and visual signifiers (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020, pp. 55–182; Xuan & Song, 2025, pp. 56–58). It is of grave importance to interlude a distinction between this and the following step. While step three already makes interpretations based on the modes, it's aim is to showcase how that meaning changes when the modes are coded together in step four, where meaning is finally produced through intermodal interaction.

Step four, Intermodal Interaction Coding, focuses on the interaction of semiotic modes through the concept of higher-level mediated actions (HLA). Norris (2020, pp. 33-37) conceptualizes HLAs as the coming together of multiple chains of LLAs, which together produce coherent communicative actions performed by social actors. LLAs can include gestures, gaze shifts, spoken utterances, editing choices, musical cues, or other multimodal elements that occur within the artifact. Rather than analyzing individual LLAs in isolation, the analysis focuses on how chains of LLAs across different modes combine to construct higher-level mediated actions. In the context of short-form video communication, such as TikTok posts, HLAs may include actions such as identity performance or ideological signaling. These actions emerge through the coordinated use of visual, linguistic, and auditory resources. Following Norris' (2020) concept of modal density and modal configuration, this step therefore examines how different modes contribute to the production of HLAs and how meaning emerges from their interaction. As multimodal discourse research emphasizes, meaning is rarely produced by a single mode but rather through the integration of multiple semiotic resources within

multimodal ensembles. Intermodal Interaction Coding therefore reconstructs how the chains of LLAs across modes combine into HLAs that structure the communicative action of the TikTok post. As such, HLAs are where the ideology becomes visible and where mainstreaming happens. While some single modes might show clear ideological demarcations, their interplay is what grounds them in their ideology and where it becomes visible (Kress, 2023, p. 141; Norris, 2020, pp. 33–37; Van Leeuwen, 2015, p. 446).

Step five, Discursive Pattern Analysis, synthesizes the previously identified higher-level mediated actions across the dataset to identify recurring multimodal patterns. While step four focuses on the reconstruction of HLAs within individual artifacts, this stage moves the analysis to a comparative level by examining how similar chains of lower-level mediated actions are repeatedly combined across different TikTok posts. Through this process, broader communicative practices and discursive strategies become visible. Particular attention is paid to recurring aesthetic configurations, symbolic references, identity signaling and narrative framings that contribute to the normalization or mainstreaming of extremist ideas. In line with multimodal discourse research, these patterns are not understood as isolated features but as stable multimodal configurations through which ideological meaning is repeatedly constructed and reinforced within digital communication environments. The identification of such patterns allows the study to move beyond the analysis of individual artifacts and instead highlight broader discursive mechanisms that structure the multimodal communication strategies under investigation.

4.4 Data

The dataset for this study consists of 21 TikTok videos collected between 10th – 23rd of March 2026. The selection of videos followed a purposive sampling strategy aimed at identifying content that is relevant to EFR communication. Sampling did not rely on explicit ideological markers, but focused on content that exhibited ambiguous, coded, or culturally embedded signifiers associated with EFR discourse. Videos were identified through a combination of platform navigation techniques, including hashtag searches, algorithmically suggested content and account-based exploration. This approach reflects the assumption that extremist communication on TikTok often operates indirectly rather than by overt ideological articulation. Inclusion criteria required that videos are publicly accessible, contain multimodal elements and exhibit at least one potential indicator of EFR related discourse, whether explicit or implicit. Content that was clearly unrelated to political or ideological communication was excluded. No restrictions were placed on language. Each video was archived in its original form, including visual content, audio tracks, captions, hashtags, and visible engagement metrics at the time of collection. These elements were treated as integral components of the

multimodal artifact, as meaning on TikTok emerges through the interaction of these features rather than through isolated modes.

The final dataset represents a heterogeneous sample of TikTok content that reflects the platform's multimodal affordances and its algorithmically curated content environment. As such, the dataset is not statistically representative but analytically suited to explore how extremist communication may be embedded, obscured, and circulated within everyday platform-native forms of expression.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

In the scope of this project, ethically sensitive material involving extremist narratives and symbols, public social media content and potential exposure to minors is expected to be engaged with. This therefore requires careful attention to ethical principles. First confidentiality and privacy must be upheld. Although TikTok content is publicly accessible, the study will make no attempts at identifying individual users and will reproduce no personal data. Screenshots or descriptions will be anonymized so harmful content cannot be re-circulated. Second, the research maintains respect for intellectual property and avoids the reproduction of videos or images under copyright without proper justification, in the case of the shown artifacts this justification lies in the problematic and extreme nature of the artifacts themselves. It will rely on analytical description when possible. Third, the study must maintain responsibility, given the sensitive nature of extremist material. The analysis focuses on ideological mechanism rather than amplifying extremist messaging. It cares to not normalize or sensationalize hateful, extremist and radical content. Fourth, dual-use risks are considered; insights about recruitment or narrative strategies must be contextualized so they are not misused by third party actors. The dissemination of this study's findings will prioritize public safety, academic responsibility, and the prevention aims central to the research. Lastly, the study is aware of the risks for the author, supervisor and examiners, as their names are connected to a publicly accessible document that critically assesses FRE communication strategies. Public availability may create visibility toward FRE actors and expose those connected to the research to unwanted attention, hostile scrutiny or harassment.

5 Analysis

The Analysis is split into three different parts. First, an overview over the modal features is provided. It lays bare that, while this paper focuses on intermodal meaning construction, that individual modes and sometimes single objects carry meaning in themselves. The main part of the analysis constitutes the Intermodal Interaction Coding and Discursive Pattern Analysis from the analytical framework. Sorted by different HLA's, the analysis moves along the interpretation of intermodal and discursive

meaning making within and between the TikTok artifacts. Lastly, the challenges that arise from the findings regarding German prevention policy are analyzed.

5.1 Modal Features

It is important to note beforehand, that while linguistic, visual and auditory modes can carry meaning on their own, this meaning emerges more fully through the relational interplay of semiotic resources across modes, where elements reinforce, disambiguate, and contextualize one another. This chapter thus, describes the different elements used in the three modes, while a more comprehensive interpretation of their combined meaning-making is developed in the subsequent analysis of intermodal interaction, in line with the analytical logic of the five-step framework.

5.1.1 Visual Mode

Gestures are a recurring aesthetic throughout the body of data. They serve as Embodied Signifiers of EFR ideology, using the White-Power hand sign and a hinted-at Hitler-Salute, while clenched fists in one instance convey an aggressive or martial connotation. This is also signified by the repeated use of tube scarfs that cover the faces of subjects depicted in the videos, which can be associated with anonymity.

Throughout the dataset, different Aesthetic Environments recur. Firstly, landscapes, videos of nature and natural imagery in combination with historical European landmarks or traditional mountain villages and buildings, associated with European heritage. They are often shown with other identity markers like white, blond children, white men and women in traditional or luxurious clothing. Furthermore, war themes come up multiple times throughout the data set, depicted through objects like drawings of militaristic gear, soldiers and knights or real-life footage of German soldiers during the second World War.

The main aspect of visual signifiers is constituted by symbolic artifacts and identity markers, made up of objects and clothes that signal a specific aesthetic used in FRE circles. These objects include iterations of the national flag of the German Empire (1892-1919) and the German Reich (1933-1935), including the “Reichskriegsflagge” (1903-1919)⁹. As all flags depicted in Fig. 4 are not forbidden to

⁹ After the NSDAP rose to power in 1933, they added the Iron Cross to the national flag, after ultimately changing it to the Swastika-Flag after Hindenburg’s death in 1935. The “Reichskriegsflagge” was the official Flag of the War- and Trade-Navy of the German Empire and kept being used after fall of the monarchy (Amadeo Antonio Stiftung, 2021, pp. 2–5).

show, they serve as important identity markers throughout the FRE scene and in the analyzed TikTok videos, be it as flags, on clothes or as a color palette.

Fig. 3 Flags of the German Empire and German Reich



Left to right: “Reichsflagge”, “Reichsflagge with Iron Cross”, “Reichskriegsflagge”

Source: Own depiction taken from Amadeo Antonio Stiftung, 2021, pp. 3–5.

Beyond that, iconography like the Iron Cross, an eagle and the national flag of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) are used as identity signals throughout the TikTok videos and appear in almost everyone, be in physical form like flags, depicted on clothing or as emoticons in the caption of the video or as text overlay.

Regarding clothes and appearance, the videos show great homogeneity, especially when it comes to worn brands. Popular brands like Adidas, Lonsdale, Alpha Industries and Fred Perry are used to covertly signify a specific aesthetic the creators associate with FRE culture, while niche brands like Thor Steinar¹⁰ are used for overt identity signaling. Thor Steinar uses Nordic runes and appropriates Nazi aesthetic and symbolism into its clothes, while rooting its aesthetic and brand signaling in and to a youth culture that focuses on a rebel figure (Gaugele & Grippo, 2025).

Platform-Aesthetic Techniques like editing, post-production choices, as well as camera angle and movement are mostly non-specific. They serve practical purposes like showcasing a landscape or an outfit by panning over it and zooming into specific brand logos to highlight them as artifacts of identity marking. A recurring trend is the use of frog-perspective camera angles serving the purpose of depicting certain objects in a grand way.

5.1.2 Linguistic Mode

Linguistic elements often take the form of indirect expressions that carry ideological meaning. They indirectly reference certain conspiracy theories or specific movements and slogans through numeric codes, euphemisms, abbreviations and the use of emoticons. Like 271 or the Juice bottle emoticon, both recognized by the ADL as carrying antisemitic codes in online contexts, the first referencing the conspiracy theory that 271.000 instead of over 6 million Jewish people died in the Holocaust, while

¹⁰ Thor Steinar was established in 2002 and is closely connected to FRE circles, establishing themselves as the “pinnacle of the far right’s penetration into the fragmented fashion landscape” (Gaugele & Grippo, 2025).

the emoticon is used to refer to Jewish people in online contexts where antisemitic hate is propagated, as to avoid being moderated (ADL, 2026).

On the other hand, creators also use overt ideological messages and direct addresses which appear to directly address audiences and may encourage engagement or alignment with positions. These include specific terms and typefaces being employed that are associated with stylistic conventions often linked to traditionalist or nationalist aesthetics. These direct addresses are characterized by simplification, crating binary logic and using emotional language, short slogans and emoticons.

Throughout the dataset the linguistic mode contributes to the construction of an in-/out-group dichotomy by constructing enemies, foreigners and outsiders as not European and not white while terminology like “us” and “them” is used to suggest delineations between outsiders and insiders. Certain groups are be framed as threatening or inferior while in-group coherence is highlighted and celebrated.

Across the dataset, different platform-specific features like text overlays, hashtags, captions, emojis and spoken word categorize content while also contributing to tone, emotional framing and signaling of identity and group affiliation.

5.1.3 Auditory Mode

Auditory and musical elements are primarily characterized by their degree of familiarity, meaning how widely recognizable or culturally embedded a given track is. Throughout the dataset both popular music as well as niche/subcultural music genres are used. These range stylistically from orchestral and instrumental compositions to electronic, industrial, folk, and rap music, each carrying distinct aesthetic and associative qualities.

When lyrics are present, they often do not carry specific ideological meaning that is connected to FRE ideology on their own, with a few exceptions using ambiguous pronunciation and wording to convey ideological or humorous affiliation. In several instances, meaning is not conveyed through lyrics alone but emerges in relation to visual and linguistic elements.

A recurring aspect is symbolic references using specific tracks and audio fragments that have been appropriated and recontextualized as by FRE actors as ideologically loaded material. One example is the repeated use of Gigi D’Agostino’s song “L’Amour Tojours”, which appropriation by EFR actors made it a reference to the Nazi slogan “Germany to the Germans”, by singing the word “Germany to the Germans, foreigners out!” during the chords of the refrain. While not inherently ideological, the song has been circulated in certain contexts with additional connotations that extend beyond its original meaning, effectively repurposing it into a EFR dog whistle (Mesa, 2024).

5.2 Higher-Level-Mediated Actions

Out of the intermodal relationships inside individual artifacts, the framework allowed for the synthesis of seven HLA's that form four recurring patterns across the dataset. The following section will go through the four overarching patterns and describe the applicable HLAs accordingly.

5.2.1 Identity Construction

In-/Out-Group Delineation

In T-1, Identity construction functions through a delineation between an in- and out-group, where a slideshow structures a sequential viewing of the artifacts. The first two slides establish an out-group through minimal modal signifiers “Albanian/Turkish”. The third slide breaks this monotony and introduces multimodal density to visually, linguistically and symbolically construct an in-group identity. The caption “He is German” is accompanied by the usage of positively connotated emoticons, the show of the white power sign, specific brand clothing and a black tube scarf that covers the creators face. This creates a hierarchical in-/out-group dichotomy, with modal density giving gravity to the in-group while its absence for the out-group is minimally marked, while the aggressiveness of the music and the use of a masking agent as well as the use of a white supremacist hand-sign suggests an association with aggressiveness and hatred against the out-group.

Fig. 4 Young Woman Showing White Power Hand-Sign



Source: Screenshot from T-1 (edited for anonymity)

This delineation is further connected to themes of nature and traditionalism in T-3. As a text-overlay, the word “traditionalism” is presented as a main theme of the video and a German flag emoticon is

used in the caption, while a deep, male voice is referring to Europe as “our” continent, with the sonic signifier changing to the chords of the refrain from *L’Amour Tojours*. The video depicts a blond, white child walking on a street towards a small village of wooden houses with mountains and blue sky as the backdrop.

Traditionalism is presented as the main theme, by its prominent depiction in the top middle part of the screen, while the landscape, village, look of the child and the German flag emoticon frame the setting as the German countryside. The mention of Europe as “our” continent creates an in-group that is defined by the look of the boy and the scenery, while the switch from spoken word to the melody of a racist dog whistle implies the out-group as foreigners that should leave Germany and are not part of the traditionalism depicted.

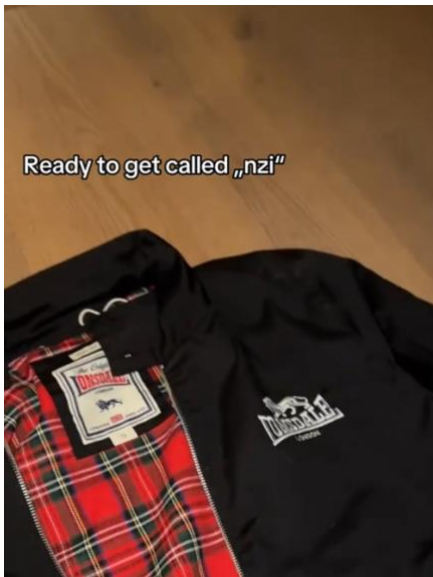
Multimodality and in-group knowledge become a prerequisite for an informed understanding of the artifact. The context of the dog whistle constructs the out-group as an invader into the traditional, multimodal configuration of the in-group. Here, aesthetic camouflage is exemplified, as the artifact proposes a nostalgic, traditional, nature-friendly and patriotic lifestyle, and connects it with an according aesthetic, without leaving overt ideological markers.

Aesthetic In-Group Construction

Clothing style and specific brands are depicted to aesthetically signal a coherence of content with FRE ideology. T-8 advertises a specific outfit as a positive and coherent outfit to wear. The usage of Thor Steinar as a brand and in the hashtags, as well as the creator’s username being in Fraktur typeface suggests an ideological closeness to FRE, while the outfit is also seen as part of an identity within FRE ideology. The industrial, fast and aggressive beat suggest a positive, aggressive and potentially violent connection between ideology, identity and aesthetics.

T-11 uses a similar approach, although the music switches to a more grand and imposing sound, while no hashtags are used and the text-overlay directly connects the depicted/advertised outfit to FRE ideology, by stating “Ready to get called a nazi” by wearing the outfit. The multimodal configuration presents it as a desirable outcome, with the style to achieve this being shown in the video by panning over a clothing ensemble. The intentional zoom-ins identify the brands that can achieve the insinuated goal of being called a nazi. The specific clothing aesthetic is communicated and in connection with the German flag emoticon the link between the aesthetic and the ideology is strengthened. The artifact aesthetically appropriates youth culture and current trends in how neo-Nazis dress. This exemplifies the aesthetic camouflage, as mainstream brands are combined with a fringe brand like Thor Steinar, creating an aesthetic that hinges on broadly used clothing.

Fig. 5 Clothing-Item to Signal Identity



Source: Screenshot from T-11

Counter-Cultural Construction

T-4 makes apparent how multimodal interaction is further used to create an identity around FRE as a counter-cultural youth movement. The video shows a group of protestors that are holding flags of the FRG, the German Empire and the German Reich. All participants are dressed in non-descript dark clothing, with multiple people wearing tube scarfs and balaclavas. A sweater stands out on the bottom of the video, it is black, white and red while depicting two men fighting surrounded by a laurel wreath. All these visual elements allow for interpretation of the depicted group as EFR on its own. Through the following multimodal communications however, this ideological signifying evolves into a more layered and complex construction of identity.

The crowd is heard chanting “Freedom, Youth, Revolution” in an aggressive tone, with multiple participants pushing their clenched fists in to the sky in unison with the chant. The hashtags reference remigration¹¹, while the caption and text overlay reference a “German youth” that has to “advance”. The song playing in the background has the following lyrics (translated by author): “It escalates, we are easterners, are from here, no matter what happens, it escalates”. The caption and text overlay are similar and convey the construction of the shown crowd as the referenced "German Youth" while also calling for action with the imperative it should move "voran" (forward).

¹¹ A term used by Nazi-Germany and recently by European EFR-actors like Martin Sellner, leader of the EFR Identitarian Movement (Identitäre Bewegung) in Austria. In the original idea, it is a call for the deportation of millions of non-white people from Europe (Shamim, 2025).

The aesthetic construction revolves around black attire, red, black and white iconographic symbolism, anonymity, uniformity, aggressiveness and calls to action. Brought together by the chant, this multimodal configuration conveys an in-group demarcation with a common goal for revolution. While the chant itself does not convey the ideology, the caption, text overlay and used visual elements as well as clothing and the song work together to create an identity around an EFR counter-cultural youth movement, which aesthetic coherence functions as a form of visual normalization, where extremist identity is embedded within recognizable youth-cultural styles, thereby reducing ideological visibility and aesthetically camouflaging the ideology via a counter-cultural youth movement.

The song used in T-4 extends its potential for meaning making into a different HLA that is not part of an identity construction anymore, but involves ideological signaling through coded language, imagery or sound. This illustrates how individual semiotic resources can operate across multiple HLAs depending on their configuration.

5.2.2 Masked Ideological Signaling

Ambiguous Ideological Signaling

While the part of the song used in T-4 has local patriotic ideas, it does not reference racist or FRE ideas or ideology. "Es eskaliert" (It escalates) however is pronounced with a slight emphasis on the "Es" and "es". Phonetically the letter "S" by itself is written "es" which makes it sound like the singer is saying "SSkaliert", referencing the Schutz-Staffel (SS), Hitlers special military unit, responsible for a multitude of war crimes in Nazi-Germany.

Without interpreting the intention of the creator of the song, it demonstrates how music can be used to effectively cloak an outright FRE ideology to uphold plausible deniability and stay ambiguous, in line with the concept of aesthetic camouflage. In its multimodal context, the song becomes an ideological signal, as it reinforces the FRE symbols, chants and hashtags in the artifact, adding to its meaning-making potential.

The artifact T-6 uses a popular German dance song and a popular German sportswear brand that is listened to and worn by a mainstream audience as the main modes of the video. The artifact shows four pairs of feet wearing Adidas Samba shoes, arranged in a way so they depict a Swastika on the ground.

The artifact keeps its ambiguity, mainly through the barren use of other ideological visual signifiers. Similarly, the sonic and linguistic mode indicate no ideological reference. This ambiguity is amplified by the song, as it has no obvious markers, text or insinuation of EFR ideology. The ADL however

confirms the term "The sun will rise again" as a dog whistle, that is often used in combination with Nazi iconography to reference the re-establishment of a national socialist state (ADL, 2026). The song cuts off after the line "And now the light is gone", possibly reflecting the insinuation of EFR actors that today's society has lost the light (sun) which they want to see re-emerge in the form of a national socialist state or ideology.

The song and the clothing aesthetic however grant a mainstream and aesthetic camouflage making the content highly ambiguous, while the minimal intermodal interactions highlight the connection between the song and the depicted Swastika, underlining the possible reference to the dog whistle.

Infantilization of Ideology

T-5 effectively infantilizes EFR ideology by aesthetically diffusing a mainstream Christmas sweater design with militaristic themes and references to war songs. The artifact shows a young woman wearing a sweater in a Christmas theme, depicting snowflakes, bells and pine trees but also a tank, the iron cross and the words "Ob's stürmt oder schneit" (Whether it storms or snows). She can be seen, holding up the 'peace' hand-sign. Linguistically, the used hashtags frame the content as historical, while the text overlay "WW2 drip 'German flag emoticon'" lends a positive connotation to German clothing style in the context of the second World War (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 Young Woman in Christmas Sweater



Source: Screenshot from T-5 (edited for anonymity)

The text on the sweater references the "Panzerlied" (Tank song) "Ob's stürmt oder schneit", created by first lieutenant Kurt Wiehler of the Wehrmacht in 1933, based on the melody from an antisemitic

SS-song "Die eiserne Schar" (Frommann, 1999, p. 17). While neither the song, nor the iron cross or the tank are forbidden and do not contain outright antisemitic, racist or EFR ideological content their connection with the positive connotation for the second World War in the text overlay and the origin of the song indicates an EFR ideology in the multimodal architecture.

The general Christmas design of the sweater blended with the trivialization and support for pro-war ideology and Germany during the second World War is a diffusion that aesthetically camouflages extremist ideology within a mainstream Christmas design, further infantilized by the peace-sign and slightly stuck out tongue that directly contradict the war themes on the sweater.

Ideological Signaling through Coded Communication

Acronyms are used in T-13 in connection with other modes to create a knowing in-group. Multiple acronyms and emoticons are used that insinuate ideological signaling of an EFR attitude. The out-group does "not [...] understand[...]: 141, 1161, 271". Their ideological meaning is underlined through the use of a juice-bottle emoji in the hashtags, a FRE dog whistle used to circumvent content moderation on social media when referencing jews, while 1161 stands for "Anti Anti-Fascist Action", 141 stands for Anti-Deforestation Action and 271 references the conspiracy theory that only 271.000 Jewish people were killed by the Nazi-regime during the Holocaust (ADL, 2026). While the visual mode does not signify a connection of EFR ideology, the picturesque landscape situates the acronym 141 within an ideological frame, the use of up-beat, popular music ambiguates the artifact and aesthetically camouflages it, while keeping the multimodal configuration as an ideological marker.

While T-19's sonic signifier was not available at the time of downloading the artifact, the interplay of visual and linguistic mode are still relevant in creating an aesthetically camouflaged FRE ideology. The hashtags #agatha and #271 are reinforced on the visual level, referencing the above-mentioned conspiracy theory (271) and Agatha, a different conspiracy theory about a mythological kingdom, tightly linked to Hyperborea, a staple of nazi esotericism. It is a kingdom populated only by the 'Aryan race' and was referenced in meme videos amassing over 20 million views on TikTok in 2023 (GPAHE, 2025). Furthermore the artifact depicts a blond haired, blue eyed, white skinned young man wearing a brown shirt and black tie, closely resembling the uniform of such organizations as the "Hitlerjugend" and "Sturmabteilung" (SA), also called "Braunhemden" (Brownshirts) (Lepage, 2016, p. 162). Fig. 7 shows the aesthetic congruence between the artifact and the historical look, suggesting a modernized version. The symbolism of the above-mentioned objects, linguistic signifiers and clothing, act together to construct a heavily coded, EFR and antisemitic artifact. While no outright nazi symbolism is used, the chiffre 271, Agatha and the depiction of an 'Aryan' wearing the attire that is associated with the NS-regime, suggests to a knowing 'in-group' the ideological congruence

with neo-Nazism, the NS-regime, antisemitism and FRE, while at the same time ensuring plausible deniability.

Fig. 7 Artifact T-19 & Original Picture of Members of the “Hitlerjugend”



Source: Left: Screenshot from T-19 (2026). Right: Screenshot from Wikimedia Foundation (2024)¹².

T-12 depicts a scene where a male voice narrates over the shot of a penguin colony, referring to a single penguin that abandons his colony to move towards a mountain in the distance. A second video overlays the first one, showing a man in an SS uniform playing the piano, while a slowed down organ version of the already mentioned *L'Amour Tojours* is playing. This song, including the insinuation that the soldier is playing the song provides an ideological frame to the artifact. As the song came out in the 1990s, the dog whistle is multimodally intertwined with the SS soldier, depicting him as an ally to the ideological framing of the artifact. Through this, a direct connection is drawn between the acts of the penguin and the viewer. The multimodal layering indicates the motivation for a counter-cultural attitude, in which the viewer (the penguin) moves away from society. With the context given by the EFR ideological framing, a deeply ambiguous and coded appeal to EFR counter-cultural attitude is created. The interplay of music as well as layered visual modes and the linguistic signifier of spoken

¹² This picture is licensed free to use under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany license ([Link](#)). Attribution: Bundesarchiv, Bild 119-5592-14A / CC-BY-SA 3.0. No changes were made to the original.

word works together to create an aesthetically camouflaged communication that upholds plausible deniability.

Fig. 8 SS-Soldier over Arctic Landscape



Source: Screenshot from T-12 (edited for anonymity).

5.2.3 Emotional Activation

T-12 again transitions into a different set of HLA's, as the narrated story of the artifact is used as a direct address to the viewer and indicates an allegory for the need for resistance to a dominant culture. Through the established ideological frame of the artifact (dog whistle and SS-soldier), the counter-cultural penguin (or addressed viewer) is depicted in a heroic way. A grand organ sound as well as the emotional and reverential tone of the speaker suggest a feeling of motivation and emotionality, effectively combining visual, linguistic and auditory modes of communication to camouflage an emotional appeal to FRE cultural resistance.

Furthermore, T-14 emotionally appeals to the viewer by combining historical shots from German soldiers during the second World War with and imposing underlying music while a speaker talks about the actions depicted. The voice suggests either an original or an imitation of a German propaganda radio speaker, describing the happenings of a current fight. The usage of the word "our" indicates an ideological congruence between the multimodal configuration and FRE ideology. All modes combined indicate an emotional appeal to sympathize or identify with the depicted German soldiers. The only time Soviet soldiers are mentioned, their faces are not shown and they are filmed as prisoners, the camera looking down at them, stripping them of the same courtesy given to their German counterparts.

5.2.4 Aestheticization of Ideology

Simultaneously, T-14 transitions into HLAs that aestheticize EFR ideology positively. The aesthetic and actions of Germany during the second World War are depicted as positive. Through the disclaimer in the caption the content is disguised as educational, while the artifact is ideologically framed. The different camera angles, combined with the ecstatic voice and positive connotation of the spoken word and the framing of the soldiers as part of "us" by the speaker hints at the ideological coherence between FRE and the multimodal arrangement. The artifact gives no classifications of the content or any other information that would suggest educational content. At the same time, plausible deniability is upheld through the framing as educational and no use of any overt EFR symbolism. The content is thus used to spread a positively framed aesthetic of Germany during the second world war.

War themes are picked up again by T-18, where a young woman is sitting in front of a German flag, holding up drawings, suggesting her as the creator of them. Some examples from Fig. 9 include (from left to right) a drawing of a first World War memorial for the 6th Thuringian Infantry Regiment Nr. 95, a medieval knight kneeling on a drawn sword, a drawing of a soldier and a higher-ranking military official and a painting of a stag in a forest. The artworks suggest themes of war glorification, honor, nature-connectedness as well as pride. Multimodally, they interact with the German flag and the Fred Perry T-shirt worn by the creator, which frame the artifact ideologically to suggest congruence with FRE. The hashtags and the pink Hello Kitty pants however aesthetically camouflage the positive aestheticization.

Fig. 9 Different Drawings from Artifact T-18



Source: Screenshots from T-18 (edited for anonymity)

The painting of the stag indicates an appropriation of nature by FRE ideology, effectively politicizing it. T-17 uses nature as its main theme, using fast paced transitions between nature-shots. The artifact is ideologically framed by a young woman with a black tube scarf and the text overlay “Deutsches

Reich” (German Reich) that is depicted in Fraktur typeface. The hashtags further connect that ideology to nature protection action, while the caption specifically mentions the black forest as “German Wealth*”. The asterisk suggests that a mistake further up is being corrected, granting plausible deniability for the reference to the official name of the German Nation State between 1871-1945 in the text overlay. The multimodal arrangement seems to merge FRE ideology with nature protection, aesthetically camouflaging overt FRE ideas with nature-connectedness and an appeal to young audiences through the fast-paced editing.

Fig. 10 Young Woman in Front of Landscape



Source: Screenshot from T-17 (edited for anonymity).

5.3 Policy Challenges

As shown in the introduction, the policy framework of the FRG reflects a model of radicalization that is grounded in the visibility, recognizability, and discursive articulation of extremist ideology. The findings of this study challenge this model by showing how EFR communication on TikTok functions through different mechanisms. The multimodal meaning construction through the interaction of visual, auditory and linguistic features communicates ideology and extreme content in an ambiguous way relying more on implicit rather than explicit communication. Across the dataset, four patterns were identified: identity construction, masked ideological signaling, emotional activation and the aestheticization of ideology.

First, multimodal configurations create an in-group identity and coherence while excluding a constructed out-group. This is achieved through visual aesthetics, cultural references and stylistic conventions rather than clearly identifiable ideological statements. It focuses on identity construction

around ambiguous ideological markers. Second, ideological signaling is masked through coded language, usage of dog whistles and ambiguity distributed across a multimodal array of communication. This enables plausible deniability for the dissemination and appropriation of hateful content while keeping its legibility for knowing, in-group audiences. Third, emotional activation is integral as affective cues like music, tone and imagery are used to create feelings of belonging, nostalgia and antagonism. Lastly, the aestheticization of ideology through visually appealing, culturally familiar and platform specific content and expressions that speak to young audiences normalizes and trivializes a hateful ideology.

The findings point to a radicalization process that does not focus on explicit ideological communication but rather a gradual process of familiarization, affective engagement and the mainstreaming and normalization of ideological elements that are ambiguated by their multimodal configuration. This mechanism is conceptualized as aesthetic camouflage. This contrast between the policy framework and the empirical findings reveal several fundamental mismatches.

Starting with the assumption that radicalization is mitigatable through recognition and subsequent rejection of extremist or hateful content is challenged by the ambiguity of the communication tactics. While individual elements can carry ideological meaning, the findings also demonstrate that this meaning is rarely explicit but is created out of the multimodal interaction and sometimes even interaction with contextual cues that require a specific in-depth knowledge of EFR ideological culture. The individual cues like music, imagery or linguistic features often stay ambiguous when viewed in isolation, resulting in extremist communication operating below the threshold of immediate recognition, effectively limiting approaches centering on media literacy and content identification. Policy assumes that extremist content must be recognizable to be effective, whereas the findings show that its effectiveness often depends on not being immediately recognizable.

The presupposition that extremist ideology is communicated through identifiable narratives and discursive content is challenged by a similar logic. The embedding of ideology in aesthetic forms like clothing styles, visual compositions, musical choices, hand signs and platform specific practices challenges the notion of identifiable narratives, as the ideological meaning is constructed in a broader multimodal configuration. This makes ideology performed and experienced rather than stated and explicitly communicated. The policy assumes that ideology is primarily discursive and explicit, whereas the findings show that it is often aesthetic, implicit, and embodied in style.

Third, the framework sees online radicalization as a process that is driven by exposure to extremist content, amplified through a digital environment. A direct relationship between encountering extremist material and moving towards radicalization is implied. This is complicated by the finding that exposure is not a binary encounter with identifiable extremist content. The exposure to culturally

familiar, entertaining or aesthetically pleasing content introduces ideology gradually and often remains (partially) ambiguous. The Christmas sweater in artifact T-5 for example incorporates militaristic imagery and references to war songs into a playful presentation of a broadly experienced cultural reality. It cannot be seen as a clear encounter with extremist content, as none of the modes contain overt hateful or extremist ideology. The policy assumes direct exposure to identifiable extremist content, whereas the findings show a process of incremental normalization through ambiguous and familiar forms.

Fourth, the strategy implies regulation of content being palpable through identifying and removing hateful and extremist content, based on recognizable symbols, keywords and ideological markers. However, as shown in the analysis, extremist communication on TikTok effectively circumvents these mechanisms by distributing the meaning across a multimodal array of communication, often using ambiguous and blurred symbols that avoid content moderation by avoiding explicitly prohibited or hateful elements. Signals are encoded through indirect references, phonetic ambiguities or combinations of non-problematic elements. Content moderation targeting isolated elements may fail to detect emergent meaning from multimodal configurations. Policy assumes that extremist content can be identified through discrete markers, whereas the findings show that meaning is distributed and emerges relationally across modes.

Lastly, radicalization is conceptualized as a cognitive process that involves formation of beliefs, discursive influence and ideological persuasion, focusing preventive measures on education, critical thinking and rejection of extremist ideas. However, the findings suggest that affective and emotional dynamics play an integral role in the ideological communication of extremist ideas. This suggests that radicalization operates not only through what individuals think, but through what they feel and identify with. The policy assumes a primarily cognitive process of radicalization, whereas the findings demonstrate the importance of affective engagement and emotional alignment.

Synthesizing these mismatches points to a difference between policy assumptions and the empirical realities of this study. While the policy framework is based on visibility, explicitness, and cognitive recognition, the results of the analysis show that radicalization also operates through ambiguity, aesthetic embedding, gradual normalization, multimodal distribution, and affective engagement. This divergence suggests the current policy strategy approach by the FRG may overlook key mechanisms of extremist communication that are normalized in digital environments, particularly on TikTok.

This indicates a need for broader conceptualization of radicalization, incorporating multimodal communication practices, platform specific affordances and the role of aesthetics and emotions. The integration of extremist ideology into cultural forms and the ambiguity and plausible deniability of such content functions as a strategic feature rather than a limitation of extremist communication.

While the analyzed strategy paper constitutes a policy outline strategy and not specific approaches, it is important to mention, that the mismatches shown in this chapter should inform a more accurate construction of the threat posed by multimodal extremist communication. The strategy has adequate approaches but falls short in terms of approaching a highly complex issue not deeply enough.

From a critical realist perspective, these findings can be understood as revealing a deeper layer of generative mechanisms underlying observable communication practices. While the policy framework primarily engages with the empirical level—focusing on observable content and measurable indicators—the analysis identifies recurring patterns of multimodal interaction that point to underlying mechanisms of meaning-making. The concept of aesthetic camouflage captures such a mechanism, as it explains how ideological content can remain obscured while still being effectively communicated.

This suggests that the limitations of current policy approaches are not merely practical, but ontological and epistemological. By focusing on what is immediately visible and explicitly articulated, policy risks overlooking the underlying structures and mechanisms through which radicalization operates in contemporary digital environments.

6 Conclusion

Radicalization, like many processes and actions in contemporary culture, increasingly unfolds in digitally mediated online environments, where individuals can participate in, interact with, create and disseminate ideological messaging. This messaging is often not explicit but replaced by a multimodal, aestheticized, platform-specific communication that hinges on ambiguity, ideological cloaking, selective readability and plausible deniability. This creates analytical and political challenges in countering and preventing extreme, hateful and radical ideology and sentiments.

This study examined how FRE actors on TikTok use multimodal communication strategies to embed their ideology in culturally familiar and entertaining forms of communication. It sets out to answer how FRE actors are aesthetically camouflaging their ideology on the platform and in what way these communicative practices challenge Germany's federal strategy for countering and preventing radicalization.

The analysis shows that, while ideological meaning can reside in individual and isolated signs, it often stays ambiguous when the linguistic, visual and auditory elements are viewed separately. Through the multimodal configuration and the coordinated interaction of the three modes within a single communicative artifact, greater specificity emerges and contextualizes ambiguous objects, codes, music etcetera. Regarding the first research question, this study found several higher-level

mediated actions distributed across four recurring patterns that emerge from an intermodal analysis of individual TikTok artifacts and show how aesthetic camouflage works to ambiguate and communicate FRE ideology.

A first recurring pattern is Identity Construction. Throughout the dataset, artifacts repeatedly constructed and pushed an in-group identity around visual references, youth- and sub-cultural aesthetics, specific clothing styles, historically loaded symbols, nature and representations of European heritage. White, able-bodied and young subjects serve as an embodiment of the in-group ideal and act as a reference for belonging. All the while linguistic elements like references to “our” continent (Europe) and coded identity labels contribute to symbolic boundaries and delineations towards an out-group. Out-group construction functions using symbolic musical use of racist dog whistles as well as linguistic references, clearly demarcating out-group belonging based on nationality, including indirect forms of national, ethnic or racial exclusion. Identity is not communicated through explicit political arguments or stands but rather through aesthetic and affective forms of belonging to a counter-cultural youth movement.

A second recurring pattern is Masked Ideological Signaling. Here, ideological references preserved ambiguity but remained legible to in-group audiences while being distributed across visual, linguistic and auditory modes of communication. Ideological signals were ambiguated using dog whistles, coded numerical references and recontextualized popular music. The layered multimodal configurations created ideological meaning without overtly articulating or visualizing it. Ideology was infantilized through the appropriation of non-ideological cultural symbols being reconstructed with themes of war and historically loaded references to Germany during the second world war. Plausible deniability did not only arise out of the ambiguity of individual signs, but also through the dispersion of ideological content across multimodal configurations, where meaning often emerged or got specified when auditory, linguistic and visual elements were interpreted in relation to one another.

A third recurring pattern is Emotional Activation. Affective mobilization is constituted as a central element of extremist communication. Using heroic and epic narrations, grand, aggressive or reverential soundscapes, emotionally charged words as well as visual and linguistic references to struggle, resistance or conspiratorial thinking emotional appeals were constructed and contributed to identification, motivation and symbolic participation. Rather than overtly communicating doctrinal ideological content, artifacts produced affective orientations aimed at belonging, admiration, opposition and resistance.

Finally, the data reveals a recurring Aestheticization and Normalization of Ideology. Recognizable and culturally normalized communicative forms such as popular music, fashion, drawings and platform native editing techniques embed extremist meaning in an aesthetic environment that reduces

explicit ideological visibility and lowers barriers for engagement. Extremist, ideological communication does not appear as separate from mainstream platform or social culture but operates through their appropriation.

Emerging from these findings, this study proposed the original analytical concept of aesthetic camouflage. It is a conceptual description of a multimodal communication strategy used by FRE actors to embed their ideological signifiers within culturally recognizable and normalized forms of expression to ambiguate their ideology. Through this, aesthetic camouflage preserves ambiguity for out-group audiences and platform moderation approaches while retaining its legibility and identification potential for in-group audiences. It functions through selective readability across different audiences. Instead of the reliance on explicit ideological articulation, meaning is distributed through linguistic, visual and auditory modes whose coordinated interaction and configuration produce ideological demarcations.

The contribution of aesthetic camouflage to the study of contemporary radicalization processes is twofold. First, analytical attention is shifted from isolated extremist symbols and explicit ideological communication towards multimodal configurations of meaning-making and ideological construction. Second, it shows how mainstreaming does not occur despite ambiguity but rather through ambiguity itself. The emotional accessibility, platform compatibility and cultural familiarity of aesthetic camouflage raise recognition thresholds and let extremist ideas circulate within everyday communicative processes and outside of typical recognition and moderation attempts on platforms.

Regarding the second research question concerning the implications of the findings of this study for Germany's federal prevention strategy against extremism, the close, interpretative reading of the policy document identified several underlying assumptions about radicalization. Radicalization is largely treated as a process shaped by knowledge deficits, exposure to extremist content, group based online dynamics and recognizable ideological narratives. Civic education, media literacy, regulation and multi-actor cooperation are mentioned as preventive responses.

This study's findings suggest several mismatches between the policy assumptions and the communicative practices around aesthetic camouflage observed in the analyzed TikTok artifacts. The strategy presupposes that extremist ideology is communicated and disseminated through recognizable narratives, explicit ideological statements, identifiable symbols or detectable, rejectable, regulatable and moderatable discursive content. The findings complicate these assumptions by showing that FRE communication on TikTok often does not rely on overt ideological signaling, but instead distributed meaning across multimodal configurations where visual, auditory and linguistic elements gain their ideological specificity in their intermodal relation to each other. Clothing styles, musical fragments, coded language, gestures and aesthetic environments remain ambiguous in isolation and while they

gain specificity through their interaction, ideological messaging is still marked by plausible deniability.

As such, exposure to extremist content cannot always be seen as a direct encounter with identifiable content, but rather as a gradual process of familiarization, normalization and affective engagement through culturally familiar and aesthetically appealing forms that are rooted in micro-, meso- and macro-level variables like grievances, need for belonging and identity as well as social cohesion. Lastly, the assumption for regulation and moderation of extremist content as a preventive strategy runs into the same problems. Through aesthetically camouflaging the ideology, actors evade such moderation and regulation attempts, while still being able to communicate their beliefs. From a critical realist perspective, the current German federal prevention strategy for extremism risks of remaining at the empirical level of observable content and explicit markers and not fully incorporating the real level of underlying mechanisms that multimodal meaning-making as well as radicalization and extremist communication have in contemporary online environments.

While this does not invalidate existing prevention approaches for extremism, it suggests the requirement for conceptual expansion towards multimodal, platform-specific and culturally embedded understanding of radicalization.

This study's limitations are regarding its basing on a purposive and relatively small dataset. Thus, the study does not claim representativeness. Moreover, the analysis constructs multimodal meaning making potential rather than actual audience perception. It cannot assess how different interpretations and responses by consumers and users unfold. Lastly, there is limitations to an approach that tries to reveal patterns in content which are meant to be hidden by the creators of said content. The study can therefore be understood as an exploratory contribution identifying analytical patterns rather than casual effects.

Future research could investigate in what way specific prevention programs are responding to patterns of aesthetic camouflage by FRE actors. Also, audience reception of ambiguous extremist content can be studied. Longitudinal studies could further examine how multimodal extremist communication changes over time or how aesthetic camouflage adapts to different platforms. Lastly, quantitative investigations of circulation, dissemination and interaction of and with aesthetically camouflaged ideological content can attempt representative results.

7 Literature

- Abbas, T., Müller, T., Sedgwick, M., Thorleiffson, C., Mythen, G., Vaughn, L., Astley, J., & Walklate, S. (2021). *Determining multi-level led causes and testing intervention design to reduce radicalisation, extremism and political violence in north- western Europe through social inclusion*. Leiden University. <https://www.driveproject.eu/>
- ADL, A.-D. L. (2026). *Coded Hate: Extremists Weaponize Seemingly Innocuous Content to Promote Bigotry*. <https://www.adl.org/resources/article/coded-hate-extremists-weaponize-seemingly-innocuous-content-promote-bigotry>
- Akram, M., & Nasar, A. (2023). A Bibliometric Analysis of Radicalization through Social Media. *Ege Akademik Bakis (Ege Academic Review)*, 279–296. <https://doi.org/10.21121/eab.1166627>
- Allchorn, W., & Kondor, K. (2026). Policing of the Far-Right Online: The Cases of the UK and Hungary. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 49(1), 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2195063>
- Amadeo Antonio Stiftung. (2021). *Stellungnahme zur Schriftlichen Anhörung des Innen- und Rechtsausschusses des Schleswig-Holsteinischen Landtags zu den Anträgen*. Amadeo Antonio Stiftung. <https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-01-22-Stellungnahme-Reichsflaggen-Amadeu-Antonio-Stiftung-Quent.pdf>
- Baele, S. J., Brace, L., & Coan, T. G. (2023). Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem: An Analytical Framework and Research Agenda. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46(9), 1599–1623. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1862895>
- Barnett, D. E., Bliuc, A.-M., & Cristea, M. (2025). Far-right narratives of online groups: A systematic review of recent cross-disciplinary research. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 31(3), 259–274. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000781>
- Bhaskar, R. (2016). *Enlightened common sense: The philosophy of critical realism*. Routledge.

- bin Mohamad Hasbi, A. H., Ismail, N., & Basha, S. (2025). Key Trends in Digital Extremism 2024: The Resilience and Expansion of Jihadist and Far-Right Movements. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 17(1), 100–111.
- Bolaños Somoano, I. (2022). The right-leaning be memeing: Extremist uses of Internet memes and insights for CVE design. *First Monday*, 27(5). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i5.12601>
- Brown, K., Mondon, A., & Winter, A. (2023). The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: Towards a heuristic framework. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 28(2), 162–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2021.1949829>
- Brown, O., Smith, L. G. E., Davidson, B. I., Racek, D., & Joinson, A. (2026). Online Signals of Extremist Mobilization. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 52(1), 70–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672241266866>
- Bundesministerium des Inneren (BMI). (2025). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2024*. <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/themen/sicherheit/BMI25029-vsb2024.html>
- Caiani, M. (2024). Visual Analysis and the Contentious Politics of the Radical Right. *Sociology Compass*, 18(9), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13267>
- Castelli Gattinara, P., Froio, C., & Pirro, A. L. P. (2022). Far-right protest mobilisation in Europe: Grievances, opportunities and resources. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(4), 1019–1041. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12484>
- Collins, J. (2024). More Than Meets the Reply: Examining Emotional Belonging in Far-Right Social Media Space. *Social Media + Society*, 10(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241274665>
- Davidson, T. R., & Enos, J. (2025). Engaging Populism? The Popularity of European Populist Political Parties on Facebook and Twitter, 2010–2020. *Political Communication*, 42(1), 171–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2369118>

- Deutsche Bundesregierung, & Bundesministerium des Innern. (2025). *Drucksache 21/1990: Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Marlene Schönberger, Schahina Gambir, Marcel Emmerich, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN: Jung und rechtsextrem – Zur Zunahme rechtsextremer Einstellungen und Gewaltbereitschaft unter Jugendlichen und jungen Erwachsenen*. Deutsche Bundesregierung, & Bundesministerium des Innern. <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/21/019/2101990.pdf>
- Figenschou, T. U., & Thorbjørnsrud, K. (2025). Interpretive communities of resistance: Emerging counterpublics of immigration alarmism on social media. *New Media & Society*, 27(3), 1607–1624. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231198790>
- Frankenberger, R., Baur, R., Rieger-Ladich, M., Schmid, J., Stauber, B., Thiel, A., & Thomas, T. (2023). Researching far right extremism—A transdisciplinary, lifeworld, and political culture perspective. *Zeitschrift Für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 17(3), 275–295. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-023-00580-w>
- FRG, F. R. of G. (2025). *Working together to promote democracy and fight extremism: The Federal Government's strategy for a strong and resilient democracy and an open and diverse society*. The Federal Government. <https://www.publikationen-bundesregierung.de/pp-en/search-for-publications/democracy-extremism-2354102>
- Frommann, E. (1999). *Die Lieder der NS-Zeit: Untersuchungen zur nationalsozialistischen Liedpropaganda von den Anfängen bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. PapyRossa.
- Gagnon, A. (2023). Far-right virtual communities: Exploring users and uses of far-right pages on social media. *Journal of Alternative & Community Media*, 7(2), 117–135. https://doi.org/10.1386/jacm_00108_1
- Gaudette, T., Scrivens, R., & Venkatesh, V. (2022). The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism: Insights from Former Right-Wing Extremists. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34(7), 1339–1356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1784147>

- Gaugele, E., & Grippo, A. (2025). From Rebel, to Hipster and Normcore. On Mainstreaming and the Far-Right Politics of Fashion and Styles. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-025-09526-4>
- Goede, L.-R., Schröder, C. P., Lehmann, L., & Bliesener, T. (2022). Online Activities and Extremist Attitudes in Adolescence: An Empirical Analysis with a Gender Differentiation. *Monatsschrift Für Kriminologie Und Strafrechtsreform*, 105(4), 257–274. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mks-2022-0021>
- GPAHE. (2025, December 8). What is Agartha? Esoteric Nazism Spreading on Meta Platforms, Followers Harassing Teachers. *Global Project Against Hate and Extremism*. <https://globalextrémism.org/post/what-is-agartha/>
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. E. Arnold.
- Hardy, J. (2023). Thematic analysis of in-group and out-group debates in an online right-wing extremist community. *Research & Politics*, 10(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680231152424>
- Heinze, A.-S. (2022). Zwischen Etablierung und Mainstreaming: Zum Stand der Forschung zu Populismus und Rechtsradikalismus. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 16(1), 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-022-00517-9>
- Heinze, A.-S. (2025). Drivers of radicalisation? The development and role of the far-right youth organisation ‘Young Alternative’ in Germany. *International Political Science Review*, 46(1), 108–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231221961>
- Hetenyi, B. (2025). Right-wing extremism, counter-extremism legislation, and human rights considerations in the UK. *Journal of Global Faultlines*, 12(2), 210–220. <https://doi.org/10.13169/jglobfaul.12.2.0007>

- Hohner, J., Kakavand, A. E., & Rothut, S. (2024). Analyzing radical visuals at scale: How far-right groups mobilize on TikTok. *Journal of Digital Social Research*, 6(1), 10–30. <https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v6i1.200>
- Jaakkola, J., & Sakki, I. (2025). Multimodal persuasion in right-wing populist TikTok discourse: Crafting a sense of ‘us.’ In I. Sakki, *Qualitative Approaches to the Social Psychology of Populism: Unmasking Populist Appeal* (1st ed., pp. 92–115). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003492276>
- Jewitt, C. (2017). An Introduction to Multimodality. In C. Jewitt (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis* (Second edition, first published in paperback, pp. 14–27). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Jones, R. H. (2023). Social Media and Discourse Analysis. In J. P. Gee & M. Handford, *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 427–440). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003035244>
- Karas, T. (2025). Cultural criminology, counter-extremism and the contemporary far right. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 21(3), 267–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590241279413>
- Kisyova, M.-E., Veilleux-Lepage, Y., & Newby, V. (2022). Conversations with other (alt-right) women: How do alt-right female influencers narrate a far-right identity? *Journal for Deradicalization*, (31), 35–72.
- Klein, O. (2025). Mobilising the Mob: The Multifaceted Role of Social Media in the January 6th US Capitol Attack. *Javnost - The Public*, 32(1), 33–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2025.2469028>
- Knäble, J., Breiling, L., Brodführer, A., Sadowski, F., Heil, L., & Rettenberger, M. (2025). A scoping review of risk and protective factors for right-wing extremist violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 85, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2025.102098>

- Kress, G. (2009). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203970034>
- Kress, G. (2023). Multimodal Discourse Analysis. In J. P. Gee & M. Handford, *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 139–155). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003035244>
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099857>
- Lepage, J.-D. G. G. (2016). *Hitler's stormtroopers: The SA, the Nazis' Brownshirts, 1922-1945*. Frontline Books.
- Machin, D. (2011). Towards a Social Semiotic Approach of the Analysis of Emotion in Sound and Music. *Public Journal of Semiotics*, 3(2), 152–174. <https://doi.org/10.37693/pjos.2011.3.8835>
- Machin, D., & Mayr, A. (2023). *How to do critical discourse analysis: A multimodal introduction* (Second edition). SAGE.
- Marwick, A., Clancy, B., & Furl, K. (2022). Far-Right Online Radicalization: A Review of the Literature. *The Bulletin of Technology & Public Life*. <https://doi.org/10.21428/bfcb0bff.e9492a11>
- McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(6), 1212–1241.
- McCashin, D., & Murphy, C. M. (2023). Using TikTok for public and youth mental health – A systematic review and content analysis. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 28(1), 279–306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045221106608>
- Mellea, J., & Düker, J. (2024). *A New Generation of Neo-Nazis: Mobilizations Against German Pride Events in 2024 by Online Far-Right Youth Movements*. CeMAS. https://cemas.io/en/publications/new-generation-of-neo-nazis-mobilizing-against-pride-events/cemas_-_2024-12_-_research_paper_-_new_generation_of_neonazis.en.pdf

- Mesa, J. (2024, June 4). *The 25-year-old techno song finding new life as anthem of far right*. Newsweek. <https://www.newsweek.com/germany-far-right-anthem-gigi-dagostino-lamour-toujours-sylt-1907745>
- Moskalenko, S. (2023). The Evolution of Hybrid Radicalization: From Small Group to Mass Phenomenon. In N. Stockhammer, *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Terrorism* (pp. 132–142). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003326373>
- Mulholland, T., Murphy, K., Hardy, K., & Porter, L. (2025). Understanding right wing extremism in Australia: Testing an integrated unfairness grievance and outgroup threat framework. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 20(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2023.2287435>
- Nilan, P. (2025). Researching Young People and Far-Right Populism. *Social Sciences*, 14(5), 270. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14050270>
- Norris, S. (2004a). *Analyzing multimodal interaction: A methodological framework*. Routledge.
- Norris, S. (2004b). Multimodal Discourse Analysis: A Conceptual Framework. In R. Scollon & P. Levine, *Discourse and Technology: Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (pp. 101–115).
- Norris, S. (2020). *Multimodal Theory and Methodology: For the Analysis of (Inter)action and Identity* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429351600>
- Ozduzen, O., Ferenczi, N., & Holmes, I. (2023). ‘Let us teach our children’: Online racism and everyday far-right ideologies on TikTok. *Visual Studies*, 38(5), 834–850. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2023.2274890>
- Pauwels, L., Mannay, D., & Pauwels, L. (2020). A Multimodal Model for Exploring the Material Culture of Digital Networked Platforms and their Practices. In *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (pp. 552–573). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526417015>

- Peters, C., & Allan, S. (2022). Weaponizing Memes: The Journalistic Mediation of Visual Politicization. *Digital Journalism*, 10(2), 217–229.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1903958>
- Petersen, L. N., & Johansen, M. B. (2025). Spaces of Hybridized Prefatory Extremism (HYPE) on Social Media. *Social Media + Society*, 11(2), 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051251340145>
- Rohe, K. (1987). Politische Kultur und der kulturelle Aspekt von politischer Wirklichkeit. In D. Berg-Schlosser & J. Schissler (Eds.), *Politische Kultur in Deutschland* (Vol. 18/1987, pp. 39–48). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-88718-4_3
- Rohe, K. (1994). Politische Kultur: Zum Verständnis eines theoretischen Konzepts. In O. Niedermayer & K. Von Beyme (Eds.), *Politische Kultur in Ost- und Westdeutschland* (pp. 1–21). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-663-11085-9_1
- Rothut, S., Schulze, H., Hohner, J., & Rieger, D. (2024). Ambassadors of ideology: A conceptualization and computational investigation of far-right influencers, their networking structures, and communication practices. *New Media & Society*, 26(12), 7120–7147.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231164409>
- Rothut, S., Schulze, H., Rieger, D., & Naderer, B. (2024). Mainstreaming as a meta-process: A systematic review and conceptual model of factors contributing to the mainstreaming of radical and extremist positions. *Communication Theory*, 34(2), 49–59.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtae001>
- Sakki, I. (2025). Unveiling populist tactics on TikTok: A multimodal critical discursive psychology approach. In M. Becker, M. Scheiber, & U. Jensen, *Imagery of Hate Online* (pp. 153–172). Open Book Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0447.07>
- Salhi, M. (2025). Surprises, symbols, and mainstreaming: Symbolic politics in AfD’s European elections campaign. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 1–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.24202.sal>

- Samaras, G. (2025). The digital ethnonation: Multimodal extreme-right propaganda and national identity on YouTube. *Mediterranean Politics*, 1–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2025.2545670>
- Schilk, F. (2025). The Metapolitics of Crises: How the New Right Weaponises Narratives to Mainstream Far-Right Ideology. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, n.a.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-025-09519-3>
- Schulze, H., Greipl, S., Hohner, J., & Rieger, D. (2024). Social Media and Radicalization: An Affordance Approach for Cross-Platform Comparison. *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 72(2), 187–212. <https://doi.org/10.5771/1615-634X-2024-2-187>
- Shamim, S. (2025). *What is remigration, the far-right fringe idea going mainstream?* Al Jazeera.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/26/what-is-remigration-the-far-right-fringe-idea-going-mainstream>
- Statista. (2026a). *Right-wing extremist criminal offenses & acts of violence Germany 2023*. Statista.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/932776/right-wing-extremist-criminal-offences-and-acts-of-violence-germany/>
- Statista. (2026b). *TikTok: Reichweite nach Altersgruppen 2024*. Statista.
<https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1318937/umfrage/nutzung-von-tiktok-nach-altersgruppen-in-deutschland/>
- Statista. (2026c). *TikTok users Germany 2024, by age group*. Statista.
https://www.statista.com/statistics/1337425/tiktok-users-age-group-germany/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Stevenson, R. K. B. (2026). Filling in the blind spot? Problematisations of ‘right-wing extremism’ in German federal-level P/CVE policy. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 19(1), 85–111.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2025.2609379>

- Törnberg, P., & Törnberg, A. (2024). Inside a White Power echo chamber: Why fringe digital spaces are polarizing politics. *New Media & Society*, 26(8), 4511–4533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221122915>
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2015). Multimodality. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (1st ed.). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194>
- Volk, S. (2025). Rallying ‘round the drag: Anti-gender mobilization and the mainstreaming of the far right. *European Societies*, 27(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1162/euso_a_00009
- Widholm, A., Ekman, M., & Larsson, A. O. (2024). A Right-Wing Wave on TikTok? Ideological Orientations, Platform Features, and User Engagement During the Early 2022 Election Campaign in Sweden. *Social Media + Society*, 10(3), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241269266>
- Wikimedia Foundation. (2024). *Bundesarchiv Bild 119-5592-14A, Gruppe von HJ-Jungen*. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_119-5592-14A,_Gruppe_von_HJ-Jungen.jpg
- Winter, C., & Crawford, B. (2023). The Virtualisation of Terror: Violent Extremism on the Internet Today. In N. Stockhammer, *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Terrorism* (pp. 124–131). Routledge. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003326373](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003326373)
- Xuan, J., & Song, Q. (2025). From Language to the Semiosphere: A Systematic Review of the Social Semiotic Approach to Multimodal Discourse Analysis. *International Academic Frontiers*, 5(1), 52–64.
- Zick, A., Küpper, B., Mokros, N., & Eden, M. (2025). *DIE ANGESPANNTE MITTE: RECHTSEXTREME UND DEMOKRATIEGEFÄHRDENDE EINSTELLUNGEN IN DEUTSCHLAND 2024/25*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://www.fes.de/mitte-studie/news-seite#c445981>

Appendix

1 Example Coding Sheet

Data Information	Basic Information	Artifact ID	T-12	Intramodal Coding
		Date of Post	19. Jan 26	
		Date of Download	16. Mar 26	
	Numeric	Views	317.400	
		Likes	38.500	
		Comments	302	
		Saves	5.655	
		Shares	5.422	
Classification	Topic		Emotional Appeal and coded Communication	
	Genre		Trend	
	Account		Private	
Linguistic Mode Verbal/Written Signifier	Add-Ons	Caption	Smiley with dollar signs as eyes and dollar sign on a green, outstretched tongue	
		Hashtags	#penguin #mountain #fyp #fyppp	
		Text Overlay	"But one of them caught our eye, the one in the center. He would neither go towards the feeding grounds at the edge of the ice, nor return to the colony. Shortly afterwards we saw him heading straight towards the mountains, some 70 km away. Doctor Ainslie explained that even if he caught him and brought him back to the colony he would immediately head right back for the mountains"	The penguin is used as an object to convey his choice of abandoning his colony as something that a human should do. The colony is depicted as something the penguin would not go back to, even when forced to he would move back to the mountain, away from his colony.
		Typography	Standard with serifs	
	In Video	Verbal Communication	Deep, male voice narrating	Conveys an emotional depth, the speakers innotation is laden with emotion and a sense of awe.

Auditory Mode Sonic Signifier		Spoken Word	See Text Overlay	See Text Overlay
		Sung Lyrics	n/a	
		Music	"L'amour Toujours (Organ version)" Gigi D'Agostino	The original song was appropriated by FRE after a video of partying people surfaced that were chanting "Deutschland den Deutschen, Ausländer raus" (Germany to the Germans, Foreigners out) to the refrain. FRE Dogwhistle.
		Vocal Sounds	n/a	
		Non-Vocal Sounds	n/a	
Spatial Mode Layout/Design Signifier		Amount of Artifacts	1	
		Platform Affordance Layout	Video with music overlay	
		Media Type	Video	
Visual Mode Visual Signifier		Gestures	n/a	
		Color Scheme	Black and white	
		Camera Movement	Static, slightly panning	
		Camera Angle	straight	
		Editing Choices	sharp cuts between longer shots	
		Post-Production Choices	second video lays over the main one with high transparency	While the videos are not connected by their content, through the overlay a direct connection is made between them.
		Objects	Main Video: Penguin surrounded by ice. Secondary Video: Man playing a piano.	
		Appearance/Clothing	The man from the secondary video is wearing a SS uniform.	Demarcation and signaling of the ideology.
		Foreground	Video of the penguins standing and walking.	

		Background	Secondary Video and the mountains as backdrop from the main video.
		Emoticons	

Intermodal Coding	Relevant HLAs	Dogwhistling through coded communication	The depiction of an SS soldier playing a piano, in connection with the song that is being played in the video insinuates the soldier playing the song. As the song came out in the 1990s, the creator purposefully connects the dogwhistle with the SS soldier, depicting him as the one who wants "Germany the Germans, Foreigners out", thus being displayed as an ally to the ideological framing of the artifact.
		Emotional Appeal to resistance action	The Story that is being told by the narrator of the video is used as a direct address and allegory for the need for resistance to a dominant culture. With the identification of a dogwhistle and the SS uniform, that ideology can be identified as FRE, thus emotionally appealing to the listener/viewer. The one who counters the culture by moving fully away from it, is depicted almost as a hero (grand organ sounds, emotional, reverential tone in speaker). It is meant to evoke a feeling of motivation.