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'Let us teach our children': Online racism and everyday far-right ideologies on TikTok

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This paper identifies perceptions of injustice, grievance, and alienation as online drivers of radicalisation by concentrating on contemporary visual radicalisation patterns. It focuses on far-right agents of radicalisation in the UK with a particular analysis of visual and ephemeral drivers of radicalisation on social media platforms. We analysed widespread TikTok hashtags which embody mainstream right-wing ideologies. Using these hashtags, we selected four popular videos (> 30k views) for visual thematic analysis of their compositional content and comment-sphere to explore everyday representations and discourses of far-right ideologies. Our findings highlight mundane online expressions on TikTok that collectively reinforce notions of a shared idealised identity built on nostalgic reinterpretations of an imperial past, which contribute to the mainstreaming of far-right ideas and ideologies.

INTRODUCTION

Visual images are inherently political and are key sites for the negotiation, consolidation, and naturalisation of major cultural narratives and social norms underpinning collective identities of radicalised groups. Radicalised individuals and groups produce and/or use different types of images to depict perceived injustices and grievances and share them online in hyper-visible, ephemeral, easy-to-consume and anonymised formats. To this day, the increasing presence of extremist users and groups on TikTok has not been widely studied by academic research (Weimann and Masri 2020). Recently, Zeng and Abidin (2021) called for an examination of the social and political significance of the vernacular communication through TikTok videos across various subcultures and trends. Responding to this call and the knowledge gap in this area, this paper examines the contemporary social media landscape that promotes the derogation of outgroups, polarisation, and radicalisation on a global scale by focusing on TikTok far-right 'subcultures' in the UK.

In this paper, we provide an overview of the contemporary far-right landscape in the UK by conducting an in-depth analysis of TikTok videos fed by and further inform this landscape, with a view to understand the mundane social media affordances and online content that bolster the mainstreaming of far-right ideas and ideologies in the post-Brexit era. Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo (2021, 885) summarise the renewed far-right discourses as racist and anti-immigration, anti-semitic and Islamophobic, anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+, anti-leftist, anti-establishment and reactionary and ethno-and ultranationalist. Recent research on online far-right publics showed that novel ways of direct communication on social media platforms amongst dedicated users and bystanders scattered over various geographical spaces increased the propensity for far-right activism (see Pauwels and Schils 2016; Wahlström, Törnberg, and Ekbrand 2021). This paper argues that the overall focus by the official discourse on Jihadist violence in the UK underestimates the severity and growth of far-right extremism and presents it as a tiny 'subculture'. While some of the organised far-right groups in the UK such as For Britain effectively use legacy social media platforms like Facebook or YouTube, most of these groups migrated

to less regulated platforms such as Gab or Telegram. Unlike Gab or similar platforms and the official profiles of far-right groups, TikTok is a mainstream platform where a lot of everyday far-right content reaches wider audiences, particularly younger audiences.

Existing research on media and extremism reveals the ways extremist users produce and disseminate political content on legacy social media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook amidst an overabundance of visual content on social media platforms by portraying their preferred political narratives curated for the needs and political tastes of perceived like-minded users through social media affordances and algorithms (see Owen, Noble, and Speed 2017; Soriano and Gaw 2022). Previous research identified the roles the platform affordances and wider corporate logic of social media platforms play in amplifying the circulation of implicitly or explicitly violent images that reveal contentious visual narratives (see Neumayer and Rossi 2018; Ozduzen and McGarry 2020). In addition to affordances and algorithms, previous research examined the visual similarity between different types of images shared online, such as memes, videos or GIFs, to understand what images go viral within online far-right networks (see Ling et al. 2021; Crawford et al. 2021). Recent scholarship also looked at the intertextual dialogue between popular culture and subcultural media objects in targeting an alienated audience/user base (see Castle and Parsons 2019; Kirke 2015). For instance, previous research on far-right memes examined how humorous ambiguity in popular formats such as memes afforded the opportunity for the humour label under which the text travels to function as a means of being explicit and open about radical messages and violent intent, whilst being able to write it off as 'just a joke' (Askanius 2021). This paper shows the ways in which easy-to-consume popular formats in newer platforms such as TikTok videos facilitated the circulation and wider reach of more enjoyable extremist images and videos and some of this content has been written off and/or passed as 'just a joke', including the comment-sphere of these images. Recently, the phrase 'freedom of speech' has been frequently used to defend the right to voice contentious and/or extremist opinions, especially racist and/or sexist online communication, which Lim (2017) calls 'freedom to hate'. In the proliferation of 'freedom to hate' online, Benjamin (2020) points out that technological fixes have reinforced and even deepened racial bias, rather than challenging or overcoming the cycles of inequity.

Existing research on visual far-right communication studied the visual communication of specific far-right political parties or organised groups such as Danish People's Party, the British National Party or far-right organisations in Sweden to show how these groups use 'visual pieces of culture' to create everydayness and public visibility between the extreme right web and the commercial Internet, whilst constructing a wider online group as well as trusted in-group's values and traditions in opposition to culturally distinct 'others' (see Awad, Doerr, and Nissen 2022; Ekman 2014; Engström 2014). Our aim in this paper is to understand the roles images themselves as well as social media affordances (e.g. comment section), communicative tools (e.g. popular hashtags) and/or reaction cues (e.g. likes) pertinent to image-based platforms play in indirectly triggering far-right radicalisation by enabling the causes to become tangible, easy-to-use, consumable, and shareable for their sympathisers and onlookers and hence helping the visual narratives hit the mainstream. Although the visual argumentation and narratives by far-right users cross national boundaries, which is enhanced by the infrastructures of these platforms, this paper aims to lay out the racist group formation vis-a-vis perceived distinct 'others' using specific cultural and historical codes, values and practices presented by everyday actors of British far-right, rather than more established political parties or organisations.

As such, the paper first studies the macro-political context where right-wing ideologies related to ethnic and racial minorities, immigrants, refugees, and Muslims are spread and legitimised through media discourse on a wider scale in the UK. We argue that there is a parallel discourse on the dominant public sphere and social media platforms, which also functions to legitimise and mainstream this narrative. We identify TikTok as a discursive space (Ogola 2015), which runs parallel to the discourse in the mainstream public sphere in the UK. We thus focus on the spread of right-wing ideas and ideology on TikTok as 'political communication using TikTok is much more interactive in comparison to other social media platforms' (Medina Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich 2020). We analyse the prominence of group identities and emerging boundaries that highlight shared values, beliefs, and norms of what constitutes an 'authentic' British identity and culture. To do so, we not only analyse the representation in videos, but we also study the interaction between users and the circulation contexts where the image enters users' social worlds (Hall 1980; 1997; Rose 2016). Building on this background, we first introduce our conceptualisation of TikTok radicalisation, followed by the far-right political landscape in the UK. The paper then proceeds with the methodology section which then feeds into our analysis of the representation and circulation contexts of four recent TikTok videos that illustrate far-right ideas and ideology.

TikTok and Radicalisation

TikTok is the fastest-growing video-sharing platform on a global scale, recording the most downloads of any app in 2022 and 2023, surpassing Instagram (Wells, Koh, and Rodrigez 2022), with over one billion users (Sweney 2022). TikTok grants social media users the opportunity to create and share short videos of between 3 and 60 seconds with added music and audio-visual effects (Kennedy 2020). The number of TikTok users has exceeded 13 million in the UK (Strugar 2023), with British users opening TikTok on average 13 times and spending on average 66 min daily on the app (Stokel-Walker 2020). Evidence shows that 18-to-24s in Britain spent as much time on TikTok as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp combined by 2022 (Sweney 2022), with approximately 16% of three – and four-year-olds viewing content on TikTok, which rises to 29% amongst five – to seven-year-olds (Waterson 2022).

TikTok arguably embraces a 'user and creator first' strategy (Burgess and Green 2018). It currently prioritises the quantity and spread of user-generated content over a more strict moderation of content and consideration of online ethical issues. TikTok also affords opportunities for easy cross-platform sharing options where users can easily incorporate content from other platforms. Furthermore, its 'For You' feed is unique to each personal user and provides recommendations based on their interests and history calculated by past engagement with videos, hashtags, and trends.

The boost of interactivity and participatory cultures on TikTok is an important factor in its appeal and prevalence amongst younger individuals as users can follow other like-minded users, watch short videos, and share their everyday lives, including their political views and identities. The market structures of visual social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok create and rest on an 'influencer economy', implying that these platforms depend on the creative content uploaded by their users to attract more circulation of content and make profit (see Cunningham and Craig 2019; Kaye et al. 2022). This also meant influencers and activists discovered new ways of political communication on these platforms. For instance, Zeng and Abidin (2021) identified a particular activism pertinent to TikTok entitled 'lip-sync activism', which is a form of platform-enabled advocacy (following lip-sync culture on TikTok), helping users to tell personal narratives.

Built on the influencer economy of TikTok, far-right everyday activism relying on the interactive and enjoyable affordances of TikTok has proliferated on the platform, mainly expressing racist and sexist personal narratives. Different from right-wing parties or far-right organisations' professional and designated media accounts, which convey a more 'serious' image, TikTok videos present a more widespread, 'enjoyable', and ephemeral consumption of nationalist, racist, and white supremacist messages due to its short 'snackable' video format (Montenegro 2021), easy-to-use audio-visual and comment functions, and decreased content moderation relative to legacy platforms. TikTok has thus 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, and the app's convenient and accessible image-based design.

Far-right Political Landscape in the UK

The mainstreaming of far-right ideas and discourse is not exclusive to the Internet or Internet era. In the UK, it largely stems from the historical power structures of the 'British Empire', which persist today (Niven 2015). Following the formal dissolution of the colonial regime, the power relationships of colonialism have prevailed, such as the structure of global markets, the enforcement power of the military and police, and symbolic political institutions (Cooper and Stoler 1997). Rather than a direct territorial control and overt presence in a given territory, colonialism operates more as an economic and cultural dominance where exploitation takes place by 'remote control' in the post-colonial era (Spivak 1991), such as through cyber-surveillance or discursive control. The last decades in Britain saw an increase in the anti-immigration and racist policies perpetuating othering, scapegoating and dehumanising immigrants, refugees, and racial and ethnic minorities.

Since the 1970s, the dominant ideology shaping British politics, social life, and economy has been Thatcherite neoliberalism. Margaret Thatcher along with the wider Conservative Party (1834) forged a governing strategy across the fault lines of neoliberalism, traditional British Toryism, and anti-Europeanism (Peck 2013). Neoliberalism as an ideology and policy model dominated the UK's political sphere in the subsequent New Labour governments[1] (Hay 1999). The firm neoliberal rule from Thatcher's period onwards and the New Labour governments' coalition with the US for military interventions in the Middle East created new grievances, whilst consolidating existing divisions within society. Furthermore, since the 9/11 attacks in the USA and 7/7 attacks in London, the Muslim youth in Britain has been framed as a threatening, untrustworthy, and dangerous group in public imagination and discourse (Lynch 2013).

A recent key event which revealed societal divisions, polarisation, and improved support for right-wing ideas and ideology in the UK, including Euroseptic and anti-immigrant attitudes, was the Brexit vote – the European Union (EU) membership public referendum[2] (Corbett 2016). The Conservative Party, which has been in power since 2010, contextualised the vote as an opportunity to regain wealth from the EU, which would then be used in public spending on health, housing, and education (Vote Leave n.d.). Virdee and McGeever (2020) identify two main visions underlying the narrative of the Conservative Party's Brexit campaign: (1) a deep nostalgia for the British imperial project resting on the legacy of colonialism; (2) a desire to retreat from a globalising world that is no longer recognisably 'British'.

Following the Brexit referendum (2016), the Conservative Party government increased its fear-based rhetoric through security measures, terror and strict immigration laws (Brown 2019). This is exemplified by the Windrush scandal, where members of Black Caribbean British communities were wrongly detained, stripped of their legal rights, and deported (Rawlinson 2018). The government's discriminatory approach to Black communities was also visible in its response to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Rather than acknowledging histories of racial injustice, the government aimed to protect war memorials and statues of people with histories of colonisation and slave-ownership (Osler and Stokke 2020). The government has also recently banned critical race theory in schools and axed international research funds. Furthermore, recent immigration and asylum policies such as the New Nationality and Borders Bill undertaken by the Conservative Party's home secretary Priti Patel, which aims to change asylum law to criminalise people who seek asylum on the basis of their mode of travel, erodes the right to seek asylum in the UK (Mayblin 2022).

In this context, far-right groups have gained power, visibility, and indirect endorsement in recent years. The UK is positioned third amongst Western countries in far-right attacks between 2002 and 2019 (Global Terrorism Index 2020). The highest number of far-right demonstrations in Britain in a generation took place in 2018 (Commission for Countering Extremism 2019). Despite frequent and increasing attacks and marches organised by far-right groups, these events are less likely to be covered by mainstream media relative to Jihadist groups (Briggs and Goodwin 2012). Furthermore, reported hate crimes increased by 123% between 2012 and 2017/2018, which marks the highest rise in racially motivated crimes (Home Office 2018). While the target communities and events shift over time, such as the increase in hate crimes by 21% towards East Asian and South-East Asian people during the COVID-19 pandemic (Commission for Countering Extremism 2020), the anti-immigrant and racist public sphere continues to fertilise wider far-right ideas and ideologies.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on Hall's (1980; 1997) cultural circulation model to study mediated patterns of othering, scapegoating, marginalisation, and dehumanisation by far-right users on TikTok in Britain. Based on Hall's cultural circulation model, Rose (2016) suggests that to fully analyse visuals, researchers should take into consideration the site of production of the image, the site of the image itself, the site of the circulation and the site of audiencing. Previous research on social and political expression and interaction on TikTok looked mainly at the site of image itself, in other words, the representation of the video, whilst contextualising the creator of the videos (see Hurley 2022; Zeng and Abidin 2021). In order to fully capitalise on TikTok's rich data, previous research on Instagram (see Highfield and Leaver 2015; Laestadius, Wahl and Cho 2016) suggested that researchers should make use of its visual imagery in combination with its textual elements like captions, hashtags, and comments. The increasing popularity of TikTok, together with its rich visual data, unique format, customs, and conventions, calls for new and innovative methodologies combining visual and textual analysis (Highfield and Leaver 2015). The machinery of social media platforms consists of machinery of writers, the writing and feedback loop they inhabit and the hyper-productivity of the machine including the desires shepherded by relentless invitations to discourse and reaction, which leads to, among other things, an explosion of nationalist, supremacist and racist writing (Titley, Nikunen, and Pantti 2021). To study far-right racism and its proliferation in everyday communication on TikTok, we thus not only focus on the representation (the site of the image), but also on the audience interaction with the image, to study how images enter into the social world of users and how these images are consumed by audiences.

The most common and valuable strategy for manually locating data on Instagram (and TikTok) is to conduct a search of hashtags commonly used by the group or groups being studied (see Hand 2016; Highfield and Leaver 2015). Due to the large amounts of short videos on TikTok, researchers may need to narrow down their selection of posts according to some geo-temporal criteria, such as images posted within a particular month, or images linked to a particular location or culture (Hand 2016). To work around a large corpus of

data on TikTok, we first determined hashtags co-opted to represent far-right ideologies on the platform, particularly around race, ethnicity, and immigration in Britain. Following this phase, we looked at the numbers of posts and views on these hashtags. We then identified example TikTok videos illustrating the online racist ecosystem in the UK (see Figure 1).

To make sense of visual radicalisation patterns and the ways in which radicalised images reach their audiences and onlookers, we initially searched for videos using the 'defendbritain' and 'generationidentity' hashtags as these hashtags were both associated with far-right movements in the UK. However, as these hashtags have been banned by TikTok, we decided to use phrases that evoked a similar sense of radical patriotism, for example 'rulebritannia'. This led us to @user1 and we were able to mine this user's content for more specific hashtags related to anti-immigration, imperialist ideologies, and racism in the British TikTok-sphere, such as 'Falklands', 'rulebritannia', 'britishempire', 'unitetheright', 'patriotism', and 'nationalism'. From here, we selected popular hashtags that provided us with relevant results, excluding tags like 'ww2', and 'princephilip' due to the lack of 'directly' right-wing content in these hashtags (Table 1).

During our data collection, we realised that at times TikTok users used these hashtags together. We selected only video-makers who had posted multiple videos around these shared themes and hashtags. By manually looking at the individual profiles of the TikTok users posting on these hashtags, we ensured that the video-makers shared a persistent far-right visual discourse in their videos. This implied that the videos were less likely to be a product of following a trend of the day, and rather they were part of a consistent and systemic ecosystem of right-wing, white-supremacist, and racist ideologies. Finally, we considered the number of viewers for each video to ensure a selection of far-right TikTok videos with relatively high views (at least over 30 K, with three of the four selected videos having over 50 K views).

In selecting the videos, we used TikTok's Discover page, which prioritises content based on popularity. The first and second videos were uploaded by the same user (@User1) with the hashtag #rulebritannia. The third video was posted by @User2 and was entitled 'respect your veterans as they fought for your freedom'. The fourth video uploaded was 'untitled' by @User3. The fifth popular video was entitled 'I won't be silenced' uploaded by @User4. Studying directly identifiable viral media objects, however, poses risks around privacy and surveillance (Nissenbaum 2009; Serafinelli and Cox 2019). To protect the privacy of users and their content,

we anonymised usernames, blurred these usernames on the screenshots and changed the title of videos without losing the meaning. These steps helped us to 'fabricate' the data, as researchers are obliged to protect privacy in mediated research contexts (Markham 2012). This helped individual posts not to be directly identified and found through a simple search on search engines or on TikTok itself.

After selecting prominent TikTok videos in the British social media ecosystem, we used multimodal discourse analysis, which extends conventional discourse studies in intertwining the study of language with other resources, such as videos, websites, three-dimensional objects, and events (O'Halloran 2011, 120). In multimodal discourse analysis, resources are viewed to be socially shaped over time to become meaning-making resources that articulate the social, individual, and affective meanings demanded by the requirements of different communities. All communicational acts are shaped by the norms and rules pertinent to sign-making and are influenced by the motivations and interests of people in a specific social context. The multimodal nature of TikTok combines text, images, colour, and other graphical material to create discursive contexts, where hidden ideologies and power dynamics can be uncovered by examining assumptions and absences in images, sound, social media affordances – such as likes – and textual content – such as written audience reactions – (see Machin and Mayr 2012; quoted in Moran and Lee 2013). We discursively analysed the most popular videos at the intersection of the prominent far-right hashtags we have identified.

FINDINGS

Video 1: 'Legal Immigrants Make This Country Great' User1

The first popular short video disseminating far-right ideologies on TikTok was shared by User1. The video had over 32 K views, 4000 likes, and over 400 comments (30 May 2022). We located this video because it used the hashtags 'rulebritannia' and #britannia. The wider reach of diverse hashtags (e.g. #GB, #greatbritain, #britain, #fyp࿐ [For You Page], and #👑) bolstered the visibility and reach of the video.

The caption of the video has a clear anti-refugee message as it says 'Legal immigrants are what make this country great'. With this caption, the creator differentiate legal and illegal immigrants and designates them as the deserving and undeserving immigrants. In addition to the immediately visible caption, the music makes the video enjoyable to consume, which is a remix of the

TABLE 1.   TikTok patterns of far-right ideologies in the UK

Hashtags	Number of views
cottagecore	5.9 billion
rulebritannia	15.7 million
britishandproud	2.8 million
dover	25 million
englishchannel	455.6k
defendeurope	111.8k
defendbritain	0 - banned hashtag
generationidentity	0 - banned hashtag
britishpatriot	8687
makebritaingreatagain	105.7k
whitecliffs	197.2 k
godsowncountry	126.7 million
crusaders	15.6 million
brexit	272.1 million
princephillip	538.3 million
ww2	2.3 billion
falklands	9.2 million
britishempire	28.2 million
westerncivilization	160.4k

popular song 'Crazy' by Gnarls Barkley, where the first line of the song 'I remember when' is on a loop. Audio, referred to as sounds on the platform when used like this, is a large part of the TikTok experience, with users making content around popular snippets of songs and other types of audio (Kantar 2023). While this part of the song is on repeat, the creator of the video is seen in the centre of the frame responding to the question 'Why do you support brexit & stricter borders'. This question appears at the top of the screen above the face of the creator, occupying the most central place within the frame.

To 'answer' this question, the video uses news coverage of Muslims allegedly committing crimes in Britain, for example by featuring a news story from Sky News. When using short archival footage of salient news stories

allegedly on 'Muslims', the creator juxtaposes an image of their own house. This allows the user to reveal their own message and identity in an intimate manner with juxtaposed images of themselves, seemingly 'more established' news stories, and the remix of the song Crazy, repeating the part 'I remember when' (see Figure 1). The user thus mixes different types of popular and subcultural media objects in their videos to appeal better to their audiences and onlookers. Remixing forms a crucial aspect of contemporary digital cultures, which implies the (re)production of different forms of media by ordinary Internet users, including users that do not have formal media training (Sobande 2019). In this video, the digital remix culture provides an easier and enjoyable consumption of Islamophobia and refugee-phobia using textual and visual affordances of TikTok.

As a response to the initial question raised by the creator early on in the video, we see news coverage of terrorist attacks carried out by Jihadist groups in Britain, such as the London Bridge attack. The video inserts a clip of an inflatable dinghy filled with people to refer to immigrants that attempt to cross the channel between England and France (see Figure 2), followed by a scene from the 2005 London bombings (7/7 bombings). This was followed by the images of an injured person being helped to his feet during the 7/7 bombing, and a final image of the victims of the Manchester Arena bombing. Looking at the two juxtaposed clips and considering the caption of the video, the visual and textual narrative clearly links refugees, asylum seekers, and lax border security to Jihadist extremism. A further clip on the short video showcases a demonstration organised by a banned extremist Islamist group, Muslims Against Crusades. The protestors are seen to wear clothing traditionally (and stereotypically) associated with Muslims and shout 'British police go to hell'. Although
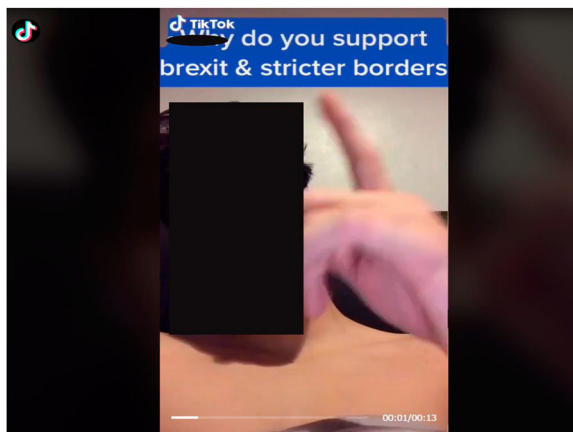

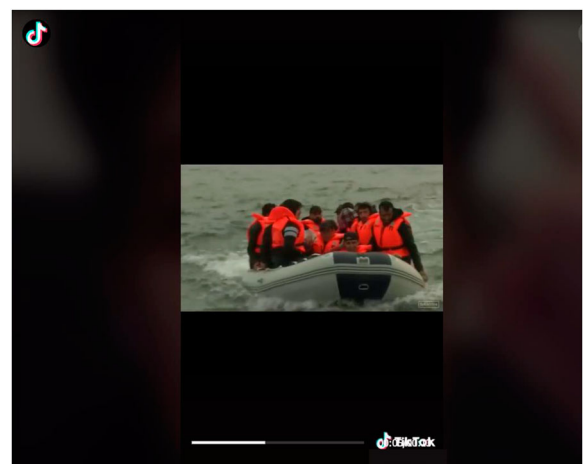FIGURE 1.   Screenshot of the introduction of the video 1.

FIGURE 2.   Screenshot of the introduction of the middle part of the video 1.

there are no links between these instances and Brexit or 'stricter borders', the video's visual narrative identifies Muslims as a dangerous outgroup and dehumanises this social group. This narrative presented in the short video runs parallel to the presentation of Islam and Muslims in mainstream newspapers in the UK, where the theme most associated with Islam is terrorism (Centre for Media Monitoring 2018). The video features a covert assumption that Muslims are not British and thus should not reside in the UK. This marks a visual communication of Britishness that is exclusively white and Christian, creating a race and human hierarchy emerging from long-standing modes of thinking about the world due to colonial domination and its attendant racism (Mayblin 2017). Mirzoeff (2023) identifies the visual as a relation of force, which produces white sight as a hierarchy, at once racialising and patriarchal.

To understand the legacy of 'white sight' and how this particular racist image reached its audiences, we then turned to the comment-sphere of TikTok videos. Rose (2016) proposes that the meaning of an image manifests at three different levels; one of them is the site where the image is seen, which includes how the image is circulated, how the image may be interpreted and by whom, and the potential effects of the images. The video's comment-sphere showcases an overt continuation of far-right themes presented by the video itself. The top comment reads 'import the 3rd world become the third world', which implies the imagined invasion of Muslims and refugees in the UK. The second most popular comment reads 'Europe for europeans!' with the Swedish and British flag emojis. Emojis are ubiquitous digital images used in text messages, chats, emails, social media posts, which are historical, social, and cultural objects and have significant social, cultural, and economic value (Stark and Crawford 2015). The fact that the Swedish and British flag emojis have been
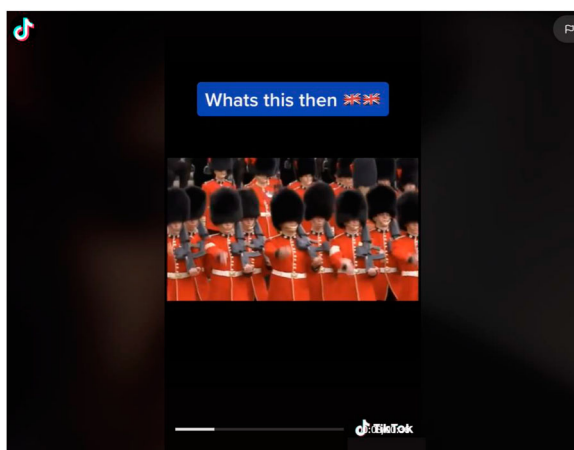
employed on the comment helps convey an exclusive and patrimonial ideology. The emojis of Western nations' flags convey a nationalist message whilst making it more appealing and easier for global users to consume and identify with the video and its creator. The comment 'what is meant by Europeans?' is liked by the creator themselves. Given the overall message of the video, we can assume that in this perspective Europeanness means non-Muslim and white. Another comment liked by the creator reads 'Tommy Robinson for MP', which shows the open support of the commenters and the creator of the video for far-right politicians and organisations.

Video 2: 'Our Culture is Loving and it Embraces Other Cultures' by User1

The second video, entitled 'Our culture is loving and it embraces other cultures' has over 131 K views, over 17.5 K likes and over 2000 comments (30 May 2022). We selected the video as the creator used the hashtags 'rulebritannia' and #britannia whilst mentioning 'true british culture', as these were keywords we were searching for. The video also used other hashtags that speak to and/or bolster British national identity: #british #culture #true, #GB, #britannia, and #greatbritain. Similar to the first video, this video also used #🇬🇧 and #fyp꒰ as its hashtags.

In the opening of the video, the creator draws the viewers' attention to an inserted text on the image that says 'I've been hearing white britons [*sic*] have no culture'. The text then changes to 'Whats [*sic*] this then [UK flag emoji] [UK flag emoji]' when archival footage is shown in juxtaposition to the statement. The imagery chosen draws on symbolic representations of British culture (e.g. Sean Connery as James Bond, a teapot and teacup), reimagined (e.g. a battle between the 17th-20th centuries) and historic (e.g. a Spitfire war plane) representations of military power, and symbolic (e.g. the coronation of Queen Elizabeth) and historic (e.g. a map of the British empire and its colonies) representations of the monarchy and empire.

Prevalent themes from the archival footage on the video tap into notions of a collective white British identity. These collective identities shared with groups – social identities – provide humans with a sense of belonging, meaning, and social support (Haslam 2009; Tajfel 1974). Social identity can thus be perceived as an existential statement of belonging (Abrams 1992). Individuals are motivated to maintain and protect their social identity when it is threatened because much of an individual's identity is derived from membership to social groups

FIGURE 3.   Screenshot from the introduction of video 2.

(Tajfel and Turner 1986). The video thus makes salient a collective social identity that is prioritised. The set-up of the video – with the creator sharing the perceived problem of white British group identity not having its own culture invites the viewers to make their own inferences by posing the statement 'Whats [*sic*] this then' (see Figure 3). This engages the viewer in co-creating with the creator an imagined white British identity. The lack of a question mark in the text frames the response in a confrontational tone so as to deride the viewer in agreeing with the original statement that white Britons do not have a culture. Taken together with the visual imagery showcasing military footage and themes, this video represents a reaction to perceived symbolic threat to white British culture, for example, through the erasure of cultural values and norms (Stephan, Ybarra, and Bachman 1999).

The video also functions to increase self-esteem at the collective level (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992). It co-builds the conceptualisation of white British culture embedded in a nostalgic reinterpretation of historical events, particularly those linked with war and military expansion. The reliance on archival and fictional footage of the British military emphasises the historical power of the UK and encourages its adoption into contemporary identity. The combination of the interactive ask-and-answer format and the footage used evokes notions of pride in an imagined British identity that has allegedly existed and remained unchanged all the way back to the eleventh century through the portrayal of fictional mediaeval battles. Additionally, the incorporation of everyday imagery such as food (drinking tea), politics (10 Downing Street), and sports (cricket and football) also firmly takes ownership of these cultural, political, and spatial domains to imply that they are fundamental features of white British culture only. This is further bolstered using Christian imagery (e.g. cathedral) to link it exclusively to an imagined white Christian British culture. The video thus identifies whiteness and Christianity as the main descriptors of British culture, thereby erasing multiculturalism and freedom of identity.

Another interrelated theme of the video is whitewashing the impact of British colonialism and positioning it as a positive influence. This is achieved indirectly through the portrayal of military footage and is overtly addressed through two images; the first is the world map of the British empire (see Figure 4). The map is used for reinforcing white British identity as colonisers – effectively reflecting the belief that inherent group hierarchies not only exist, but that they should continue to exist (Pratto 1994). This depiction aims to elicit national pride and recoup a

'lost' identity of white British culture. To further alleviate any potential guilt from the perspective of the coloniser, a juxtaposed image is presented with a quote from Gandhi. Gandhi, an anti-colonialist lawyer, who led the nonviolent resistance to free India from under British rule, has been co-opted as affirmative of the benefits of colonisation and is used as a member of the oppressed group to act as a representative. The image of Gandhi is paired with the quote 'I find that the British Empire guarantees my freedom and governs me least of all' (see Figure 5), implying Gandhi's support for British colonialism. This aims to restructure perspectives about colonialism by identifying them as beneficial for colonies and their populations. However, this quote originates from a document available for public download entitled 'If you live in freedom, thank the British Empire' written by HW Crocker for Prager University.[3] This image has thus originated from a 'lecture' video, created by Prager University, which shows the transnational spread of right-wing ideas attempting to justify Western oppression as positive historical achievements.

Turning to the comments of the video to have an understanding of the video's audiencing, the overall discourse reflects a collective sense of identity based on 'we/us' rather than 'I/me' pronouns. This may be motivated by concerns about the collective welfare of the ingroup – in this case, the perceived threat of a distinct culture (Brewer and Gardner 1996). The comment with the highest ratings directly positions the ingroup (white Christian British group) versus a generic outgroup: 'they really say we don't have culture and say it in our language'. This comment also takes ownership of English as the language of a specific ingroup: white Britons. The second highest rated comment also draws the distinction between the ingroup and an overarching outgroup; it goes further to stereotype this outgroup as a method of recouping self-image (Fein and Spencer 1997): 'castles, deserts we have so much more as well. Because it's not a spicy dish or a colourful dress it doesn't count apparently'. This comment reflects not only an orientalist outlook but also the homogenisation of outgroups (Allen and Wilder 1979), by attributing the characteristics of 'spicy food' and 'colourful dress' as defining aspects of other cultures. The comment also positions the ingroup (white British) as being distinct and unique. Reactive differentiation of the ingroup from outgroups is motivated by maintaining a positive social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1975; Turner 1975). This is a tactic employed by high identifiers of an ingroup, such as those who may consume and comment on these videos (Jetten, Spears, and Postmes 2004). Other comments on the video identify additional descriptors of an imagined

FIGURE 4.   Screenshot from the middle of video 2.

white British culture and co-create an allegedly threatened shared identity, using the comment function of TikTok.

Video 3: Untitled by User3

The third video we sampled is posted by @User3 with one of the far-right hashtags that we had identified namely the #britishempire along with other hashtags signifying British national identity: #british, #britain, and #uk. Similar to other videos, this video also uses #fyp [For You Page] to generate a wider reach. The video had 74.5 K views, 7743 likes, and 1416 comments (5 June 2021). Between the selection and analysis of the video and completion of this paper (30 May 2022), the account was made private and videos were no longer accessible publicly; we have therefore omitted screenshots from the video. As it is the case with the wider far-right media ecology on TikTok, this video also uses intertextuality to become appealing to its audiences, which implies appropriating or alluding to prior linguistic and visual texts to elicit a frame for understanding the situations within the current text (Hart 2017, 9). This TikTok video uses the chorus of the song 'Praise the Lord (Da Shine)' by ASAP Rocky with lyrics printed over images that depict British battles and territorial expansion. A close look at the creator's profile shows that the user champions colonialism by exploiting music made by black artists, whilst promoting an anti-black view. The creator displaying the headline 'Bring back the Empire GB' at the top of the frame for the duration of the video. The video thus disseminates the feelings of nostalgia for a time when Britain ruled the global stage. The video presents an anti-multi-cultural, anti-diversity, and anti-

equality view but its style benefits from the tropes and gains of multiculturalism, diversity, and equality to create an ideological space where racism and white supremacy are justified (Atton 2004, 89).

The video opens with an image of the British Isles with England shaded red. As the first lyric 'create' appears on screen, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Ireland also turn red, which symbolises the conquest of these nations. As we hear the next three lyrics 'explore', 'expand' and 'conquer', the viewers see a map of Northern America. This part also starts with a small area shaded red that grows to engulf the entire Eastern USA and the East of Canada. The imagery changes again, and we see a painting of the naval battle of Trafalgar with Lord Nelson's portrait superimposed. The lyrics 'I came, I saw' appear on screen with a screen capture detailing the casualties on both sides, emphasising the subsequent English victory. As the lyrics repeat, viewers see a similar imagery of the battle of Waterloo on screen. The discourse here is similar, depicting an imagined strong Britain with a colonial mentality based on the view 'I came, I saw, I conquered'.

The next image is in line with the colonial theme, which is Queen Victoria's portrait, associated with the expansion of the British empire. The associated lyric reads 'I praise the Lord' before changing to 'then break the law' as a painting of the burning of the White House with a crying American and ecstatic redcoat appear on screen, signalling that the British military dominance is persistent and desired. The video then returns to the theme of conquest by mirroring the lyrics of the song – 'I take what's mine then take some more'. The viewers are simultaneously presented with a map of India and
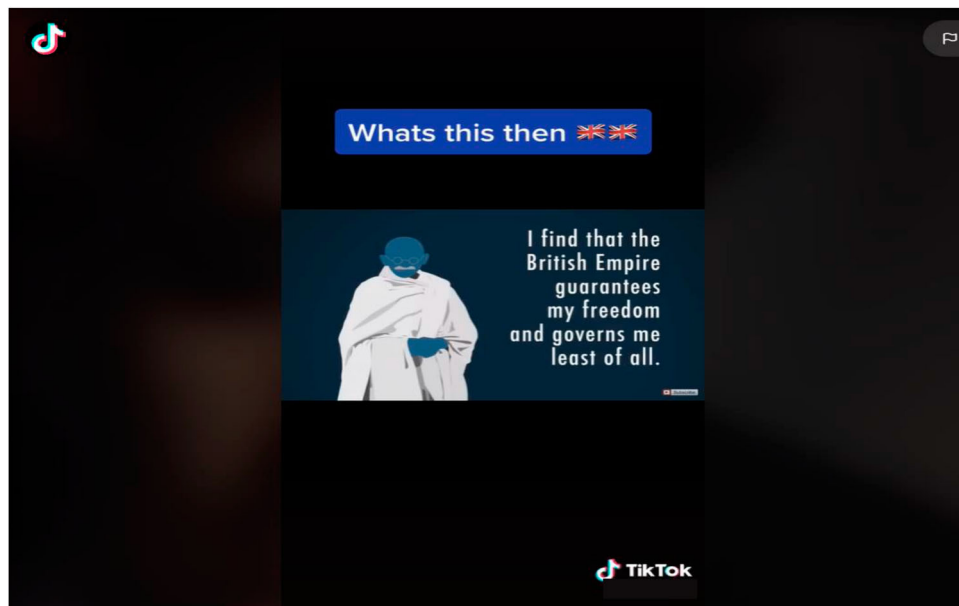
FIGURE 5.   Screenshot from the final part of video 2

Pakistan, which turns red to signify British invasion. The creator unabashedly glorifies British colonialism in the form of invasion and subjugation of non-Western countries. The lyrics together with the imagery leave the impression of a direct rebuttal to requests for reparations, as though the creator says, 'Yes we took your land, and we are proud'. This attitude echoes the disdain the far-right has for apologising and acknowledging the harms carried out by colonialism.

The lyrics 'it rains it pours' are shown over imagery, which is reminiscent of Victorian Britain, for example heavy industry and the houses of parliament. Industrial decline and the loss of traditionally working-class jobs is a common point of contention for those who are recruited by the far-right in the UK, which directly connects to how the creator of this video nostalgically references a time when working-class jobs were plentiful. The part of the lyrics 'I came I saw' is repeated once more when viewers see maps of the British empire, showing trading routes and British global domination. The 'I praise the Lord' part of the non-diegetic song is combined with the imagery of Queen Victoria, consolidating her representation as a colonial heroine for the creator and potentially the wider far-right groups. There is more reference to battles won by British forces (The Crimean War, the First Opium War), before the continent of Africa is shown within the frame. As with the other maps used, we see the expansion of British territory over time as 'I take what's mine then take some more' plays in this part of the video. Other European powers are shown on the map as well, as Africa is carved up between them. The video comes to an end as a picture of a man in traditional colonial dress straddling Africa

appears, followed by a clip of Churchill superimposed next to marching troops. All of the videos analysed recount how immigration is depicted as a direct threat to established concepts of nation, national and social identity, and their constitutive social and political hierarchies (Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2018).

Interestingly, and different from other similar videos on the British TikTok-sphere, the top comments are sarcastic towards the British Empire's power today. For example, the most liked comment is 'Ya but your all soft now' followed by 'And then you lose it all 😂', both of which make fun of the current more multicultural and less racist Britain when compared to colonial times. Some of the other highly liked comments are also in line with the video's themes, including a pro-Brexit and colonial stance, for example a comment that says 'CANZUK', the acronym for a proposed post-Brexit alliance of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. CANZUK fits neatly with the ideas of colonialism, as it takes the four most anglicised English-speaking countries of the commonwealth and unites them, whilst the other 49 nations are excluded.

Video 4: 'I Won't be Silenced' by User4

The fourth video was created by @User4, which is entitled 'I won't be silenced' and had over 202k views, 24k likes, and over 1900 comments (30 May 2022). The hashtags used to post the video were at the intersection of some of the far-right hashtags such as #unitetheright and #patriotism, other right-wing hashtags including #conservativehypehous, #toryhypehouse, #nationalist,

and #conservative, hashtags related to British national identity such as #greatbritain and #britain and a more neutral hashtag #politics. This demonstrates a perceived overlap of group identities by the TikToker, which is supported with the video's audio. The audio is an extract from Michael Portillo's (then UK defence secretary of the Conservative government) 1995 speech at the Conservative Party Conference. This speech was characterised by an anti-European, anti-EU, and militaristic stance through its claim that the UK would not allow its defence forces to be controlled by the EU. This speech did not receive support outside the conference and was derided for its jingoism (Katwala 2001). The audio extract focuses on the reaffirmation of the UK as a military power to reclaim its history:

> 'Throughout our long history, Britain has been slow to quarrel. But when we fight, we fight to win. I say the freedom for which they spilled their blood, the democracy for which they suffered, the sovereignty for which they died, is not the property for this generation to surrender. Let us, let us teach our children the history of this remarkable country. I don't mean the wishy-washy sociological flim-flam that passes for history in our schools today. I don't mean the politically correct debunking anti-patriotic nonsense of modern textbooks. I mean the real history of heroes, and bravery'.

The text 'I posted this last time why not again?' is overlaid at the top, implying that this video has been reposted; taken together with the 'version 2' in the name of the user, which suggests that this account is a second version, potentially because it was previously removed by TikTok. The video portrays both historical and fictional film footage of the British military forces across time in their different iterations, interspersed with footage of Michael Portillo and his speech. There are two instances of contemporary footage which depict the March for Europe and Stop Brexit protests, taking place following the 2016 Brexit Referendum. The footage was chosen to emphasise the EU flags. The clips from these two footage are shown in conjunction with the audio 'is not the property for this generation to surrender', directly linking support for the EU to perceptions of weakness and betrayal of the UK. Furthermore, it emphasises that support for the EU is a deviation from ingroup norms and expectations that deserves social punishment (Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens 1988). Highlighting those who deviate from the prescriptions of the ingroup by exerting social punishment through shame, ingroup members can maintain and protect the ingroup and 'get rid of the bad ones' (Yzerbyt, Castano,

Leyens and Paladino 2000, 267). Individuals who are high identifiers with the ingroup may be motivated even further to target deviant ingroup members (Hutchison 2008) (Figure 6).

By revisiting Michael Portillo's 1995 perspective as the UK Defence secretary on the position of the UK to Europe and other perceived threats, this video demonstrates that these are perceived by the creator as embedded norms of what it means to be British. Three overarching themes emerge from this video. First, there is the reclamation of the UK as a powerful nation capable of defeating threats. The reliance on footage of battles portrays the UK as a defender and also as a colonial invader – together these convey the promise that should the UK enter any conflict, it will emerge as a victor. The context of the passage (which places the UK in opposition to Europe) and the EU imagery used in the video convey that the UK would emerge as a victor at the end of the protracted dissolution of the UK-EU relationship. This serves to remake the UK identity in the post-Brexit period as a nation to be reckoned with. This first theme is thus focused on conceptualising the UK and its identity in an intergroup context.

The second theme turns to identity in the context of the ingroup (the UK), and specifically, the sanctioning of deviant members. By positioning the quote 'is not the property for this generation to surrender' over footage of supporters of the UK to remain in the EU, this conveys that supporting 'to remain in the EU' transgresses from the injunctive norms of the UK identity. Thus, those who support the UK remaining in the EU – and those who have attended protests and marches in support of this cause – are judged as deviating from the shared social identity (Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens 1988). Ingroup members who transgress against ingroup norms and expectations are punished more harshly than deviating outgroup members because they pose a threat to the shared identity and members' wellbeing (Gollwitzer and Keller 2010; Marques and Yzerbyt 1988). Indeed, perceived threat to a group's social image is associated with higher intentions to punish in-group deviants, in part due to feelings of shame and embarrassment (Chekroun and Nugier 2011). In this case, the use of the word 'surrender' emphasises that those supporting the UK remaining in the EU betray not only the UK, but also their shared group identity. This quote can be perceived as intending to inflict shame and embarrassment on the viewer, and in turn, to function as a tool of social control on those who transgress against this norm.
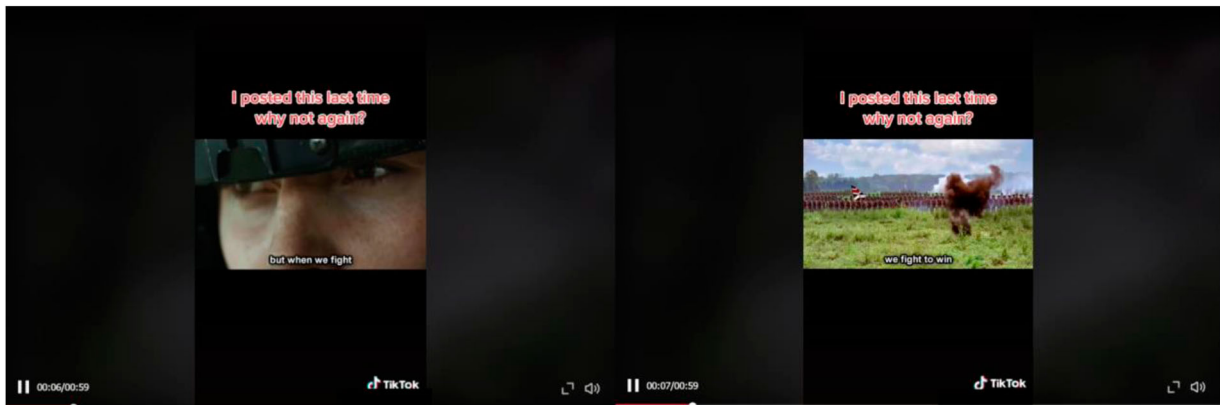
FIGURE 6.   Two screenshots merged from the initial part of video 4.

Relatedly, the final theme that emerges from this video bridges the past with contemporary British identity by setting out the reconstruction of historical narrative. By relying on footage during the British Empire, it covertly rewrites perceptions of the UK as a colonial power in a positive frame. This is also reflected in the quote suggesting that the current interpretations of history are wrong because they are oriented by the contemporary 'wishy-washy sociological flim-flam' ideologies, which are 'politically correct' but are ultimately 'nonsense' (see Figure 7). This also places academic and factual perspectives ('sociological') as opposed to truth – in this case, a 'true' history that has been intentionally hidden. This contemporary approach is perceived as threatening due to the reference that it is sanctioned by the government as part of a school curriculum, and that it is indoctrinating future generations away from the true British identity and history. This is further exemplified using 'anti-patriotic nonsense' as a descriptor of the

contemporary approach in contrast to the military imagery used throughout the video as a method of evoking nostalgia. Thus, the video invites the viewer to take part in uncovering this true history. Collectively, these themes reconstruct what it means to be 'British' (Figure 8).

The highest and third highest-rated comments reflect the transnational aims of far-right ideology by emphasising the allyship of the UK: 'Respect from you're [*sic*] cousins US [handshake emoji] GB' and 'Rule Britannia and all her allies'; the latter comment employs the phrase from a British patriotic song and poem from 1740 that has been associated with the British military, and more specifically, its Navy. The second highest-rated comment reflects some of the shared nationalist sentiments by emphasising British identity: 'British and proud! GB [heart] GB'. Taken together, these comments emphasise a collective identity that is linked to the

FIGURE 7.   Overlay of Portillo's speech with anti-Brexit protests in the video.
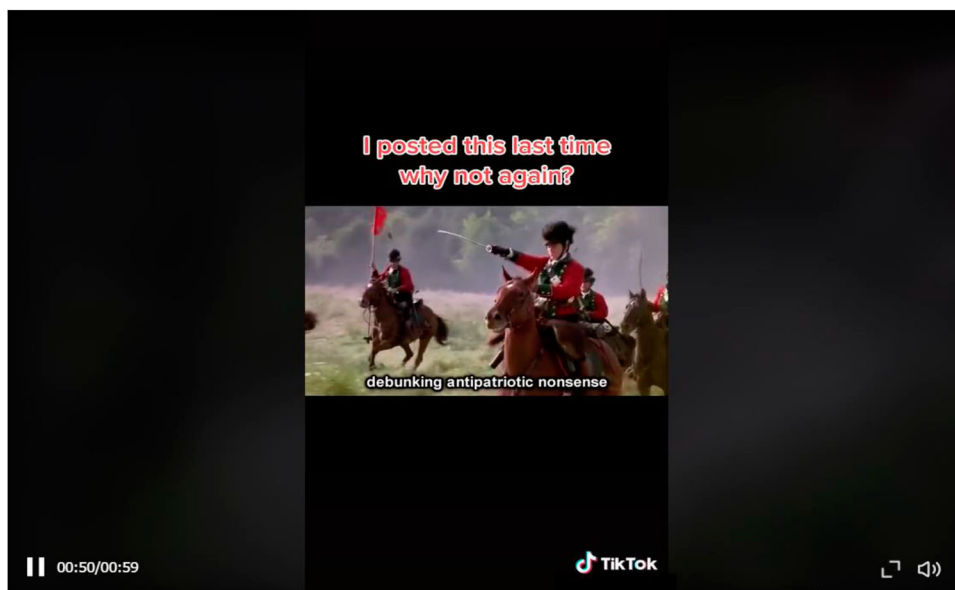
FIGURE 8.   Screenshot of the final part of video 4.

military power of the UK, whilst highlighting the shared identity and aims of the British as well as global far-right.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper addressed the ways individuals and groups disseminate racist and far-right ideologies using social media platforms whilst identifying the popularity and mainstream reach of right-wing political discourse. More specifically, this paper pointed out that in the wider rise of right-wing and white supremacist ideology on a global scale and in the UK in particular, political communication on TikTok has served to bolster a shared discursive world of colonialism, nativism, and white supremacy amongst users, and especially children, adolescents, and young adults. Although other TikTok users also highlight institutionalised Islamophobia and racial stereotypes on their channels where these users attempt to challenge racism, hate speech and crimes, we argued that the spread and visibility of white supremacist and colonialist posts that use affordances and functions specific to TikTok are much more systemic and are fed by the mainstream right-wing political sphere.

We thus argue that the mainstreaming of right-wing ideology on TikTok is a symptom and symbol of wider mainstream patterns and represents widespread systemic racist discourse within the British public sphere. We relate the current TikTok ecosystem of xenophobic, misogynist, homophobic, transphobic, antisemitic, and white nationalist-supremacist ideas, ideologies, and political action to the abundance of such discourses in the Conservative Party's overall anti-immigrant and racism-denying policy-making. The

paper thus puts mediated forms of far-right radicalisation processes into historical context in its investigation of the contemporary British social and political context.

Our findings highlight the accessibility, ephemerality, multi-platform sharing options, comment-sphere, intertextuality, hashtags and emojis used on popular TikTok videos endorsing far-right ideologies, which bolster their wider spread, reach and popularity. As a platform, TikTok reports that it removes hateful posts by looking into the use of coded language and symbols on the videos and the comments. Although overt neo-Nazi content was taken down by TikTok, the platform was only recently planning to expand the ban 'to remove neighbouring ideologies, such as white nationalism, white genocide theory, and statements that have their origin in these ideologies, and movements such as Identitarianism and male supremacy' (TikTok Newsroom 2020). The paper shows that in allowing the formation of a ubiquitous, visible and open access content of 'colonial racism', TikTok's creative and interactive design enables an easier expression and wider reach for far-right radicalisation. We found out that far-right TikTok videos rested on a visual narrative where an idealised white British culture was situated in a nostalgic reinterpretation of historical events, particularly those linked with war and military expansion.

We also argue that the popularity of these anti-immigration and neo-colonial videos on TikTok is thus likely evidence that white supremacist and colonialist views are still prevalent across British younger generations. The Brexit vote, anti-immigration agendas,

and other forms of isolationism and racism have commonly been attributed to older generations (Hobolt 2016; Finlay et al. 2019). However, recent findings show that targets of prejudice may have shifted in British younger generations, with higher acceptance of LGBTQA + and racial minority social groups compared to older generations, but there are similar levels of prejudice for immigrant social groups in the 18–34 age group, compared to older generations (Janmaat and Keating 2019). Furthermore, when comparing attitudes of the current (18-34) younger cohort to their age counterparts between 1981–1998 (in other words, comparing the attitudes of 18–34-year-olds *in* the 1980-1990s), it was found that there was less tolerance for migrants in the contemporary younger generation (Janmaat and Keating 2019). The right-wing authoritarianism in the cohort which came of age under the New Labour government between 1997-2010, reveals the resounding impact of Thatcherism and the Conservative government on 'Thatcher's grandchildren' (Grasso et al. 2019).

Overall, this paper showed the ways image-based platforms such as TikTok provide users with the opportunity to create 'snackable' short videos, which provide 'enjoyable', 'fun' and tech-savvy alternatives that could pass as 'just jokes' or fun to watch videos with the use of popular media artefacts such as pop music, in comparison to more 'serious' media contents created by the Conservative government or far-right organisations. Although TikTok or social media platforms are not solely responsible for the mainstreaming of these ideas and ideologies, the paper shows that along with the increasingly hostile political mainstream in the UK, TikTok and other image-based platforms enable the circulation of easy-to-consume and easy-to-look at types of extremist content, where users also interact with each other in comment spaces and using other easy-to-use affordances.

NOTES

[1] New Labour is a period of the Labour Party from 1997 onwards, maintaining its support in the 2001 and 2005 elections.

[2] The Brexit vote took place on the 23rd of June 2016 to leave the EU. The UK then withdrew from the EU on the 31st of January 2020.

[3] Prager University is an American non-profit media company without an academic accreditation. It creates content supporting and spreading right-wing views (Bernstein 2018).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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