

‘Communism made me do it’: Disruptive right-wing publics as a polarising force in TikTok comments

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Abstract

TikTok is currently one of the most topical social media platforms in modern democracies due to its ability to reach large, young audiences and the concerns over outside influences and the algorithmic nature of feeds. In Finland, the parliamentary elections of 2023 marked an increase in interest for the platform. At the same time, polarisation is also a trending subject in European social media and society, with TikTok being discussed as one of the drivers of this division. This study investigates whether TikTok comments reveal polarisation through the formation of disruptive right-wing publics alongside publics acting against disruptions during election campaigns. The dataset of the study consists of TikTok videos with their comments from the Finnish parliamentary parties that were present on TikTok before the 2023 parliamentary elections. The comments are analysed through a framework designed to uncover right-wing discursive patterns, with the goal of identifying disruptive right-wing publics that form in the comment sections of TikTok videos. This study also seeks to uncover the precise language used by commenters and thus identify what constitutes different blocs through vocabulary choices. The results indicate that a large disruptive public consisting mainly of right-wing commenters was present on TikTok. The language used by these publics was clearly leaning towards a confrontational position, thus polarising the comment sections. The study also revealed that there did not seem to be a singular right-wing disruptive public, but rather one that was driven by the nationalistic Finns Party, as evidenced by the language present on other right-wing parties' comment sections. On a broader scale the results indicate that disruptive publics have effects on both polarisation and discussion quality on TikTok, and that comment-based discussions are relevant spaces of identity work on a video-first platform.

Keywords: disruptive publics; publics; social media; TikTok; elections, polarization

1. Introduction

Social media has seen its share of communication theories adapted into a highly networked context. One of the foundational theories that has been widely discussed in the context of social media platforms is public theory, which has conceptually branched towards many different directions over the years. One of these directions is the existence of counterpublics: public clusters that seek to undermine hegemonies through counterpublic activities and communication (Warner 2002). The presence of counterpublics in social media is a phenomenon that has been observed to an extent, especially in political right-wing groups that have often appropriated the concept, even from a position of power (Jackson & Kreiss 2023). The right-wing appropriation of counterpublic methods as a strategy may also be seen as an indicator of polarisation, as evident from the divisive language often foundational in these appropriated counterpublics, which are in this paper described with the term “disruptive publics”.

This study seeks to uncover the discursive choices and tactics utilized by right-wing actors on the social media platform TikTok, while striving to grasp the extent of which these disruptive publics are present in the comment sections of the popular platform. Additionally, an aim of the study is investigating whether positional polarisation is present through disruptive publics. To analyse this, the study positions itself into the context of Finnish parliamentary elections of 2023, during which TikTok was used extensively during the campaigning period (Strandberg et al. 2024). As right-wing disruptive publics are the main focus of the study, the division between left and right requires clarification; “right-wing” and “left-wing” have many definitions and connotations in the field of political communication. This study adapts a definition deeply rooted in the surrounding political culture: the rudimentary yet effective split of Finnish parties on the left-right spectrum. Going into the parliamentary elections, the left-wing-led government faced much scrutiny from the right-leaning opposition. It should also be noted that political TikTok has yet to be widely studied in the Finnish context, while existing literature on TikTok comments and discussions is scarce, almost to the point of non-existence. The research gap created by the lack of TikTok-comment-focused studies and the intermingling of disruptive publics and polarisation on a short video -based platform makes the study a relevant outlook into the current state of political communication.

As a platform, TikTok has a large role in contemporary politics: politicians have taken TikTok’s possibilities into account as tools for campaigning and image construction (Mendoza, 2022; Moir, 2023), thus creating a vital need to study the platform from the angle of political communication. TikTok studies have, however, largely ignored the comment sections that form a place for users to interact both with the content but also with each other. The comment sections are a place for creating shared meanings and thus fertile ground for disruptive rhetoric, which this study aims to delve into through analysing the precise language used by commenters.

First, the article focuses on creating an overview of TikTok as a space in which political parties and actors are present, followed by an examination of disruptive publics both as a concept and their formation through discursive choices. Afterwards, the methods of analysis and the collected dataset are introduced, along with an outlook on the Finnish political situation in the context of the study. The results of the analysis are presented in-depth, followed by conclusions, limitations and questions for future studies.

2. TikTok as an arena for political publics

Being present on different platforms and competent in using digital routes to reach voters is an ever-growing part of any politicians’ profession (Isotalus, 2017). The emergence of visual-based social media services has created a need for politicians who know how to navigate spaces characterised by viewer comparisons and presentations of perfection (McCrory et al., 2022) and who have an ever-growing awareness of algorithms and their effect on content dissemination (Hokkanen, 2022).

TikTok's effect on social media is related to the politainment phenomenon (Cervi et al., 2023) and the notion that politics have become a more integral part of pop culture (Battista, 2023). This has also been noted in the study's chosen Finnish context, in which the most watched news shared on TikTok with the hashtag 'politics' consisted of highly popularized subjects (Sihvonen & Manninen, 2024). The entertainment angle of politics is a trend in social media, and TikTok inspires content creators to join political content with memetic properties and humour. This is especially evident when analysing politically inflammatory subjects (e.g. Brown et al., 2022). Affectivity becomes the centre of discussion when analysing public discussion on social media (Zhou et al., 2023), and TikTok is no different in this regard.

Political discussions on TikTok take advantage of the many benefits provided by the platform (Quick & Maddox, 2024), while politicians use TikTok to channel both relatable identities and openness to influence audiences (Grantham et al., 2025). This combination of persuasion tactics and advantages along with the large user base makes TikTok a valuable tool for politicians and an important subject of research. However, comments on TikTok have not been extensively studied, with existing research focusing mostly on, for example, current conflicts (González-Esteban et al., 2024). Comments represent more traditional and text-oriented social media, which could explain the lack of studies concerning the subject. However, interactions and reactive commenting are important aspects of any platform, whether it be visual- or text-based. Therefore, the comments received by TikTok videos reveal how conventional ways of interaction are intermingled with viscosity and persuasiveness. This study aims to examine the more linguistic side of TikTok comments, which could reveal even deeper insight into whether the comment section is seen more as a place for shallow and memetic behaviour or actual debate and discussion.

TikTok has also presented intriguing questions in the ongoing discussion on social media publics: How are publics formed in an algorithm-based environment? As a video-first platform, TikTok specifically presents an interesting case as an arena for the public because of its advantages in many different aspects of networked publics, such as imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) or 'sides', which means imagined communities revolving around various topics (Maddox & Gill, 2023). These different approaches to understanding public presence in social media are enlightening and not characteristically different from how political publics are shaped in the real and digital worlds. After all, political content is often disseminated through repetition, and political publics are created by identifying to a 'side' through parties and identities. Crowd-like reactions to political content seem to indeed be a large part of social media publics, especially if they are considered plebiscitary (Gerbaudo 2022). The latest research has theorised that TikTok has especially revolutionised the idea of networked publics and replaced them with clustered publics (Gerbaudo, 2024). Clustered publics do not revolve around users but rather around the content they consume. This is an intriguing viewpoint that places more importance on algorithms, which are a large factor in TikTok's success. Gerbaudo (2024) identifies the main consequences of clustered publics as the diminishment of the individual, the opaqueness of the logic behind algorithms and, finally, the fragmentation of the public sphere due to the interest-based logic of algorithmic suggestions.

TikTok's position as an algorithm-driven platform makes studying publics, whether networked or clustered, a complex endeavour. The publics present in comment sections of party-related accounts can be assumed to be formed by users with political agendas and interests. As algorithm-curated feeds are not an exact science, publics should also eventually clash in the arrays of TikTok. This intersection of publics and users' feeds creates a fertile ground for positional polarisation and the possibility of creating digital counter-movements through interacting with content rather than algorithms and filter bubbles.

3. Disruptive publics as an expression of polarisation in social media

Polarisation is often used as a catch-all term, making it important to define what type of polarisation is studied and how it is defined (Röllicke, 2023). In this study, polarisation is considered positional, which means that people have increasingly opposing stances on an issue (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020). In the

context of this study, positions are projected through publics: left-wing publics clash with right-wing publics (that adhere to the Finnish party lines). However, there are more layers to modern polarisation than purely positional and ideological differences. Scholars (Iyengar et al., 2012) have proposed social identity as a large factor in the development of affective polarisation. Social identity is shaped by one's own beliefs and feelings of belonging to a group, which in turn may lead to apprehension about how one approaches other perceived social groups (Tajfel, 1978). As the notion of groups and identity is a strong factor in modern polarisation with regard to positional polarisation, this study approaches the phenomenon utilising the theoretical elements of subaltern counterpublics, which are inherently connected to the identities of people in public spheres (Fraser, 1990). Even though Fraser's (1990) classic essay is over 30 years old, the concept of counterpublics and the division of the public sphere into multiple competing publics and narratives remain as relevant as ever, perhaps even more so, through the increasing agency provided to social media users. However, it should be noted that this study utilises purely observational data from social media and therefore cannot delve deeper into questions of affective polarisation, which acts as further reasoning for the positional angle.

Counterpublics usually represent marginalised and opposing voices in the public sphere, which are the consequence of losing an equal status compared with a more dominating public (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). However, in contemporary Western political discussion, right-wing parties and actors have adopted a discourse of marginalisation as a way to underline their populist solutions and station as an 'alternative' to older and more established parties. Right-wing politics have also gained much ground in Western societies, thus rendering their 'marginalisation' to not much else than a performance and a political tool. There have been suggestions that scholars should adopt defensive publics as the concept of describing the workings of the right-wing social media presence, due to their taking the focus away from the underlying power struggles of minorities and repressed voices (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023).

Moreover, mischaracterisations of hegemony limit the understanding and theoretical advancement of counterpublics (Venema, 2024). Other scholars have utilised a functional viewpoint (Reijven et al., 2020) that takes into account the self-designation of the right-wing movements as counterpublics by nature. The functional lens has been criticised for its inability to take the root ideas of opposing hegemonic cultural movements under scrutiny and for ignoring the importance of counterpublics as countercultural movements seeking to profoundly change society. Considering the valid questions and critiques, this study borrows the basics of analysing the (right-wing) counterpublic discourse while adapting the more power-oriented view of Jackson and Kreiss (2023). As defensive publics do not have the necessary analytical strength required for studying publics in a situation in which right-wing actors form an opposition and do not therefore hold governmental power, this study proposes disruptive publics as an alternative concept.

Whereas defensive publics are an extension of the right-wing's voice in the sense that they seek to impede liberal developments and hold onto power, disruptive publics aim to achieve societal change like counterpublics do, but from a much more societally powerful position. In the case of this study, disruptive publics try to advance right-wing ideologies through their presence in the comment fields of TikTok. Disruptive publics behave like typical modern social media publics: clustered and imagined more than through a networked connection. Clustered publics are formed around past user behaviour (Gerbaudo, 2024); thus, in this study, they revolve around political topics. Clustered publics mean that the network-based power structures of previous social media do not matter as much as the topics and influence exerted by popular accounts.

Some models that seek to identify counterpublic discourses have been developed in previous literature; these models are apt even after accounting for the counter-movements existing as disruptive instead. Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) and Lien (2024) utilise an effective analytic framework in their studies, which both aim to create an understanding of how counterpublics are formed through discursive patterns in social media comment sections. Reijven et al. (2020) examine discursive right-wing patterns in oratory situations. While Toepfl and Piwoni, and later Lien, posit their research to comment sections especially

related to news sites and media discourses, and Reijven et al. (2020) examine particular right-wing niches in speech situations, the current study intends to combine the multiple approaches and aims to create a framework through which populist right-wing (and other politically disruptive publics) may be studied in a deeply political social media context. Therefore, the language and discourse - oriented framework provides an excellent viewpoint for studying TikTok's elusive comments. Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) elaborate on the discursive patterns of a counterpublic through the following:

- 1) Differentiation from the 'mainstream' public and challenging power structures
- 2) Argumentation against the status quo of the overlying public
- 3) Strengthening of identity among the supporters of the counterpublic.

Lien (2024) later adds explicitly stated ideology to the framework, thus expanding it to include the broader implications of the counterpublic's motives. Reijven et al. (2020) also discover clear structural claims used by right-wing counterpublics in their discourse that more or less match those presented by Toepfl and Piwoni (2015):

- 1) Key symbols
- 2) Coherence mechanisms (which, along with symbols, signify the shared identity of counterpublic actors)
- 3) Reformation of the public (which inherently challenges power structures and presents arguments against the dominating public)
- 4) Marginalisation (which can also be viewed as differentiation from the larger public).

Combining these two discursive frameworks of analysis creates a suitable lens through which to study the comments and mechanics that seek to create a disruptive public in a social media environment. The new framework combines the most descriptive aspects of the earlier methods while maintaining the scope of identification to publics, with the added focus of the right-wing methods found by Reijven et al. (2020). The 'counter' framework is updated to focus on the disruptive aspects of right-wing publics. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the following:

- 1) Identifying mechanisms

Identifying mechanisms may be symbols used to refer to a disruptive public or language that explicitly endorses a viewpoint or actor, such as a party or a party leader. As social media data are observational, only explicit references and endorsements may be included in this category.

- 2) Reformation

Reformation entails all the ways in which a disruptive public seeks to recalibrate a hegemonic public to its whims. This includes arguments against 'mainstream' policies and politics and other activities that seek to alter the status quo of the currently dominating political system. One of the main ways that reformation can be present in comment sections is through reminders of the past governmental period and comments about its achievements (or the lack of achievements).

- 3) Counterpositioning

Counterpositioning includes the ways in which disruptive commenters seek to underscore their differentiation from the 'mainstream'. This may be done by pointing out a 'marginalised' position or underscoring the ways in which a disruptive public's policies differ from those represented by the larger public(s). One clear way of counterpositioning is to label parties and leaders with words that refer to political extremes. Counterpositioning differs from reformation attempts through a more emotional and less rationalised approach; the differences in the language used create these different discursive patterns. Even though comments naturally have overlapping categorical possibilities, each comment is categorised

only through one of the mechanisms. This was done to simplify the analysis and to better illustrate which mechanisms were most favoured by commenters.

In addition to voices belonging to the disruptive publics, the comment sections should contain voices of positivity, such as assurance and cheering, which are typical political expressions on social media (Weismueller et al., 2022). These comments reinforce the public in power and try to dissuade disruptive commenters from keeping up with their discourse. As these comments are usually direct responses to opposing views, it is also in this intersection between disruptive and dominating publics that positional polarisation is visible. Comparing the volume of disruptive and defensive comments reveals whether positional rifts exist between commenters.

Building on the contributions of Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) and Reijven et al. (2020), this study uncovers the relationship between disruptive publics and publics in power present in the comment sections, which results in the first research question:

RQ 1: Through which discursive strategies (identifying mechanisms, reformation and counterpositioning) are disruptive right-wing publics present in TikTok comment sections?

The hypothesis of the study that disruptive publics exist is elaborated upon by studying how the different discursive categories are constructed using counterpublic-adjacent language. Thus, the second research question aims to clarify the precise language that makes up disruptive vocabulary and promotes disruptive discourses. Clarifying the language used is also useful in identifying keywords that contribute to the corpus of polarised terms, which leads to the second research question:

RQ 2: How are right-wing discursive patterns enacted through the vocabulary present in the comment sections, and are they constructed through polarising language?

The second research question is answered by analysing the top word choices of disruptive publics that do not relate to identification. The identifying mechanisms in comments rely on the explicit voicing of support; therefore, the linguistic composition of such comments is more straightforward than that in the other categories.

As the study examines a platform that has not been studied in this manner using a framework tailored precisely to the right-wing context, it aims to be a pioneering study that can be used by future scholars. The final research question and perspective of the study focus on the right-wing parties' videos and their comments. As the hypothesis of the study expects the discussion to be positionally polarised to blocs according to the government–opposition divide, the composition of the right-wing comment sections should also be examined. Due to the right being the hypothesised disruptive public, the analysis must be conducted solely through a similar keyword analysis used in answering the second research question, which results in discovering the linguistic choices commenters use while interacting with the right-wing public. This results in the final research question:

RQ3: What discursive patterns are present in right-wing parties' comment sections?

4. Background of the Finnish context

This study analyses the TikTok-based communication of political parties that occurred during the Finnish parliamentary elections in 2023. The Finnish political situation at the beginning of the election campaign period was tense. The acting government, which consisted mostly of left-wing parties such as the Social Democrats (SDP), Greens, the Left Alliance (LA), the Centre Party (CP) and the Swedish People's Party (SFP), was vehemently opposed by the large right-wing opposition, which was composed of the National Coalition Party (NCP), the Finns Party (FP), the Christian Democrats (CD) and Movement Now (MN). Each governing party has a clear identity, with the SDP being the oldest and largest and having the most moderate left-wing stance. The Greens represent the typical European green party that leans towards left-wing policies. The LA represents the radical left, while the CP has traditionally been seen as an agrarian

party. The SFP particularly represents the Swedish-speaking people of Finland. In the opposition, the NCP is an economy-first-characterised party leaning towards the right, while the FP represents the populist radical right. The CD represents traditional Christian values in politics, while the MN is a small, economy-centred party.

The FP was and is the most right-wing party in the parliament, following a similar trajectory as other European far-right parties, such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (Hansen & Leino, 2024). Compared with other Finnish parties, the FP is relatively new and is known as the leading populist party (Herkman, 2024). In the interest of this study, it should be noted that the FP is also the leading Finnish party in utilising TikTok (Sakki, 2025); thus, it holds more power on the platform than some of the more traditional parties.

During the Finnish parliamentary elections, there were many discussions about politicians using TikTok as a campaigning tool, and privacy- and security-related questions were raised widely among voters and in the media. However, this did not stop politicians from using TikTok in their campaigns. About 40% of Gen Z candidates and 32% of millennial candidates utilised TikTok (Strandberg et al., 2024), which indicates that the platform is widely adapted. This is affected by the need to reach young voters, as TikTok's user base consists overwhelmingly of users under the age of 35 (DataReportal; TikTok, 2025). The parties used TikTok more sparingly, and while most of the largest parties were present on the platform, some of the older and more established parties (e.g. the CP) were notably absent, which is not unheard of in a European setting (Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022). Party TikTok differs from politicians' own TikTok in the sense that parties represent the ideological voice much more prevalently than single politicians. Even though candidates have to adhere to the parties' rules, they have much more leeway in creating content that can create a larger following. This study included comments from party TikToks only to ensure the manageability and coherence of the dataset. Party TikTok also has the advantage of being a more ideological outlet; therefore, the discussion is geared more towards the party and its ideology instead of the more personalised talking points brought up by single candidates. In the interest of this study, the ideological prevalence makes the parties' accounts the more interesting and relevant object of research.

5. Data and methods

The data analysed in this study consisted of TikTok comments received by the parties that were present on TikTok before the Finnish parliamentary elections in the spring of 2023. Data collection was conducted during the campaign period of the elections, specifically after each campaign week, starting from a month before the election day on April 2, 2023. This provided the study with a multi-faceted dataset that included only the newest comments and discussions. In total, the dataset consisted of 3,813 comments on 58 videos from five different party accounts. One of the LA's videos went viral and gathered over 2,000 comments and was thus excluded from the analysis. This was conducted to avoid the overt skewing of data towards any particular party.

As the formation of social media publics often focuses on parties and their ideological alignments, the composition of the government during the election campaign was taken into account. The government coalition in the 2019–2023 term consisted of SDP, the LA, Greens, the CP and SFP. The Finnish opposition during the elections in 2023 consisted of the FP, NCP, CD and MN. Therefore, the power scales in Finnish politics were heavily leaning towards the left, which makes the setting an ideal point in time for this study: The right-wing parties were in a position to utilise counterpublic rhetoric to try and gain back the power lost in the elections in 2019, thus making the context ripe for the emergence of disruptive publics.

A Python-based tool called TikTokCommentScraper, developed by GitHub user cubernetes (Cubernetes, 2023), was used to acquire the comments from each video. TikTok currently has an official research API available, but the data collection period took place before the research track was released in

Europe, which resulted in the use of an unofficial tool. TikTok's Terms of Service were complied with during the data collection period, and individual comments were handled anonymously with care.

The analysis phase consisted of a twofold process, with the singular TikTok comments being the first subject of analysis. The framework, built by combining the contributions of Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) and Reijven et al. (2020) in identifying the discursive patterns of counterpublics, was used to classify the comments and unveil how disruptive publics are formed. The resulting three-category framework was found to be effective. It should be noted that even though there was some overlap between the categories, a single comment could only be part of one of the categories. This made the analysis more straightforward and practical, as an average comment on TikTok rarely contained different sentiments due to its length. TikTok comments were categorised as belonging to a disruptive public if they matched any of the following discursive patterns:

- 1) Identification to a disruptive public either by voicing explicit support or utilising clear symbols,
- 2) Reformation-driven commentary that seeks to upset the existing balance of power through counterarguments or other reasonable observations, and
- 3) Counterpositioning through either expressing a stance that aims to only express opposition or attacking political identities belonging to the governing body.

The main difference in the study was between the government parties and the parties belonging to the opposition. This created ideological sides through which discourse patterns were studied. Even though the division between the government and the opposition is at best rudimentary, it aids in the core hypothesis of the study: There exist disruptive publics that are predominantly right-wing, and they clash especially with the left-driven government. The government and opposition parties also align fairly well with liberal and conservative ideologies, with the government parties having more liberal policies than their oppositional counterparts. However, to study the differences between the right-wing opposition parties, they were also analysed through the same language-based lens as the discourse analysis that focused on the governmental parties.

Intercoder reliability tests were conducted to ensure the robustness of the analysis. Cohen's kappa was used to assess the reliability of the analysis. A researcher unfamiliar with the dataset was introduced to the coding scheme and given a portion of the data that represented 10% of all the comment material. After comparing the results, the kappa value obtained was $K = 0.71$, which denotes substantial agreement.

To deepen the analysis and provide a clearer focus on the construction of disruptive publics, the comments were studied further to identify the actual language used in voicing the discursive patterns. This was achieved by analysing the keywords used by commenters identified as disruptive in each discursive category, with an emphasis on the comment categories of reformation and counterpositioning. The method chosen for studying the top word choices of defensive publics involved analysing their raw term frequency (TF), which, even though simple, works well in keyword extraction (Ushio et al., 2021). As the analysis was intended to present an approximate view of the language used, no weighted measures were used. Focusing on only the raw keyword counts made a more general analysis possible, without giving much importance to rare words or phrases and with volume acting as the guiding principle. As the dataset consisted of social media data, which had a tendency to be short and concise, a phrase-oriented approach was also discarded in favour of the words-first method. As an important note, emojis were only accounted for during the coding phase, as the script used in the TF analysis could not identify different emojis.

To carry out the TF analysis, a custom Python script utilising basic Python libraries along with some third-party utilities was created. Of the third-party repositories, Pandas (The Pandas Development Team, 2024) was used to make interaction with Excel files possible. SpaCy (Honnibal et al., 2020) was used for tokenisation and lemmatisation of the words, in addition to identifying and filtering out Finnish stopwords. This method was used to answer RQ 2 and 3, with the latter dismissing the coded categorisation present in the TF analysis of RQ 2.

6. Results

Table 1 presents the total number of datasets. Some of the governing parties evoked comment volumes that numbered in the thousands, while others remained steadily at around a hundred comments. This indicates that some parties had either a more pronounced presence on TikTok or that their content went viral more often than their counterparts. As the LA and the Greens were of comparable sizes, the LA's large TikTok presence and attention could be attributed to a number of other factors not present in the Greens' videos. The Greens and the LA posted almost the same amount of content, but the LA garnered the most comments by a wide margin, even though one video's overwhelming number of comments was not taken into account in this study.

Table 1. Volume of videos and comments per party and average comments per video.

		Videos	Comments	Avg comments/video
	SFP	11	108	9.8
Government	Greens	18	809	44.9
	Left Alliance (LA)	17	2370	139.4
		46	3287	71.5
Opposition	Finns Party (FP)	2	101	50.5
	National Coalition Party (NCP)	10	425	42.5
		12	526	43.8

On the side of the opposition, the FP posted only two videos during the campaign period that had little to do with the elections. This differs from the presence of the party in the Finnish social media scene, with FP politicians being at the forefront of TikTok politics, partly due to the party's quick adaptation of the platform (Sakki, 2025). The NCP attracted some attention, with a relatively small number of videos. However, this seems to be a consequence of the party disabling the comment sections of some of the videos.

The first research question aims to identify how disruptive right-wing publics were present in the TikTok comment sections. The results of the analysis indicate that disruptive right-wing publics formed on TikTok comments were present in all governing parties' comment sections. The analysis yielded clear disruptive patterns in the government parties' comment fields, even though the comment volumes varied greatly from party to party. It should be noted that some parties had videos that had their comment sections disabled, and the comment data were not retrievable. This was in itself a probable attempt at hindering unwanted comments, spam or trolling.

The comments that were present in the government's videos had an even distribution in the 'regular' and disruptive categories, as presented in Table 2. The largest categories were comments that reinforced the government parties' position and other discussions. These categories made up 57% of the total comment volume, which indicates that non-disruptive comments and elements were well represented in the dataset on the government's side. The comments in the 'other'-category related to more general politics or lengthy discussions between commenters that did not take a stance but focused only on debates between users. Some of the clear themes of comments in the 'other' category included comments that included users engaging in discussions not directly related to Finnish politics (or not related to any political topics), memetic behaviour and illegible comments.

Disruptive discussions were driven by commenters who took a counterpositional stance, with identifying mechanisms being used as the second most popular way of disruptive discourse. Both categories had similar comment shares, with counterpositioning having a 16% share and identifying

comments having a 15% share. Calls for reformation were less prevalent, even though policy changes are one of the main goals of disruptive movements.

In sum, the comment sections were polarised to an extent. Disruptive commenters took to the videos in large volumes, with a contingent of commenters either supporting the party directly or arguing against disruptive commenters. The large volume of discussions belonging to the ‘other’ category indicates that along with political chatter related to the parties, TikTok comments were also used in a way that did not directly relate to taking a stance. As TikTok is used widely by many users sharing content with their friends, for instance, more mundane discussions were an expected result.

Table 2. Reinforcing and disruptive comments on government parties’ TikTok videos.

		Total	Reinforcing	Reformation	Counterposition	Identifying	Other
Left Alliance	LA	2370	642 (27%)	216 (9%)	410 (17%)	464 (20%)	638 (27%)
Greens	Greens	809	274 (34%)	157 (19%)	101 (12%)	14 (2%)	264 (33%)
SFP	SFP	108	28 (26%)	24 (22%)	14 (13%)	24 (22%)	18 (17%)
		3287	944 (29%)	397 (12%)	525 (16%)	502 (15%)	920 (28%)

The LA was the most commented-on party by far, and the comment types varied, as shown in Table 2. Even though the party saw a substantial amount of support and reinforcing comments, the comment sections were also rife with disruptive discourse. Commenters identified with disruptive actors and positioned themselves as far from the party as they could, while comments that called for reformation were clearly the least common of the comment categories. This indicates that the main efforts of disruptive commenters went towards distancing themselves as much as possible from the LA and their politics. Comments categorised as ‘other’ also represented a large part of the comments LA received; these were mainly discussions between users that went to great political depths without reaching a disruptive or reinforcing tone.

The second largest comment volume was obtained by the Greens, as presented in Table 2. Similar to the LA, the Greens’ comment sections were mostly composed of either comments in the ‘other’ category, with a share of 33%, or reinforcing comments consisting of over a third of the total comment volume (34%). The ‘other’-category contained chatter that indicated that many of the videos had been shared, and thus users were tagged in the comments. A clearly different trend compared with the other government parties was that there were more comments that aimed at reforming the public, while identifying with disruptive causes was at a lower level. Counterpositioning was also a prevalent category, although less so than with the LA. The Greens’ comment categories appeared to focus more on political issues instead of identity-based right-wing activity, which acts as a foil towards the LA’s comment sections’ composition.

The SFP was the final government party included in the study. The party had, by far, the lowest comment volume, but a comparison of the percentages revealed that disruptive publics were as present on their pages as on those of other government parties. On the SFP’s videos, over half of the commenters used disruptive discursive tactics. The volume of other discussions was significantly lower on the SFP’s videos than on the other parties’ videos, while reinforcing comments accounted for 26% of the comment volume. Out of the three government parties, the SFP had the most balanced comment sections, with only the ‘other’ category remaining significantly lower than the other parties.

The second research question of the study aimed to identify the keywords utilised in different categories in the government parties' videos. This was conducted through a raw TF analysis, which yielded keyword results that were cleaned of stopwords, wrongly lemmatised words and non-functional, interjectional keywords. The results indicated some clear definitions for each of the disruptive discourse categories in the governing parties' videos. Among all the keywords, the most common keyword was 'ps', which indicates an identification with the FP, as 'ps' is the lowercase version of its Finnish abbreviation. The LA was also heavily featured in the most common keywords, with 'vas', 'vasemmisto' and 'li' referring to either the party or its chair. The results of the TF analysis for the three governing parties are presented in Table 3, with translations of the keywords provided in brackets after each Finnish keyword. To preserve both space and increase the clarity of the results, the individual comment volumes by party and category are included as an appendix with tables A1, A2 and A3.

Table 3. Keywords and their term frequency across categories in government-posted videos.

All		Reinforcing		Reformation	
ps [FP]	418	vas [left, shortened]	67	hallitus [government]	37
vasemmisto [left]	134	li	62	tehdä [do]	31
saada [get]	107	vasemmisto [left]	46	saada [get]	31
Suomi [Finland]	95	maria	35	velka [debt]	29
tehdä [do]	91	ihana [wonderful]	31	vihreä [green]	29
li	89	tehdä [do]	26	vasemmisto [left]	27
voida [can]	86	vasemmistoliitto [Left Alliance]	24	raha [money]	26
vas [left, short]	85	saada [get]	23	vero [tax]	25
vihreä [green]	82	slay	22	haluta [want]	24
Counterpositioning		Identifying		Other	
vasemmisto [left]	46	ps [FP]	394	saada [get]	39
vihreä [green]	23	kokoomus [NCP]	23	voida [can]	31
puolue [party]	21	Suomi [Finland]	14	Suomi [Finland]	29
vassari [leftie]	21	oikeisto [right]	12	ihminen [person]	27
kommari [commie]	21	äänestää [vote]	11	pitää [like]	27
paska [shit]	20	persu [FP member]	10	työ [work]	25
Suomi [Finland]	17	liike [movement]	8	tehdä [do]	24
kommunisti [communist]	14	ääni [a vote]	8	haluta [want]	20
feministi [feminist]	14	perussuomalainen [FP member]	7	puhua [talk]	19

Reinforcing keywords mostly focused on single comments that emphasised the party that they sought to reinforce. This featured many comments that consisted only of the party's name and an affirmative emoji, such as a heart. The other favoured ways of reinforcing comments included invoking the party leader's name (as most of the videos featured the leaders) and using TikTok slang, such as 'slay', to emphasise their support of the party or the ideology. Both the Greens and LA had a strong reinforcing emphasis on their party leaders, while the Greens also garnered support for feminism and the LA received reinforcing comments that campaigned actively against right-wing parties.

Calls for reformation focused on criticising the government's previous tenure, with government being the most common keyword, with debt, money and tax also being important words for commenters proclaiming their disappointment with the government's actions. Money and debt were a cause for concern for a few commenters, as economic discussions are a staple in Finnish social media discourse.

On the parties' side, the Greens received comments that focused on taxes, the LA received comments related to debt, and the SFP gathered resistance against compulsory Swedish studies in Finland. The following comments are examples of the category, with the Finnish parts of the comments translated into English where applicable, indicated by brackets.

'[There will not be a future while a party as tired as this leads. This party sucks away the prosperity of the people.]'

'[were you planning to take 140 billion in debt again during the next governing period?]'

'[maybe it's high time to let go of the Swedes' shackles of power -.- you're not needed]'

Counterpositioning was evident in the comments differentiating themselves from the left and/or the government, usually with the help of 'communist' labels. Uncivil language, such as 'shit', was also present, even though the results indicated that there was a lack of aggression in the language used. It should be noted that the language used in counterpositioning was polarising and seemed to function as hyperbolic resistance towards the governing parties and their ideologies, with labelling and hypothetical scenarios being some of the tools used to create and deepen this division. All of the government parties were different in how they were opposed in this category: the Greens received comments that seemed to focus on feminism and women, the LA attracted commenters that labelled the party as communist, whereas the language question of Swedish plagued SFP in this category as well. All of the differences adhere at least somewhat to the parties' stereotypes in Finland.

'[Communism] made me do it'

'[since you like socialism so much maybe you can move to North Korea or Cuba and see how things work there]'

'[now there was some shitty populism]'

Identification with a disruptive public was less nuanced and often led to users spamming 'ps' comments across the comment sections. This clear indicator of support for the FP was usually accompanied by an emoji, such as a heart or the Finnish flag. The other keywords related to identification were either additions to the FP sentiment, with words such as Finland and vote being in the top keywords, or other parties' supporters identifying with other parties, such as the NCP. The Greens received a very low amount of comments in this category, whereas the LA received almost 400 comments that appeared to identify with the Finns Party. Some commenters that favoured the 'ps' comments were also noticeably present in SFP's comment sections.

Keywords from the 'other' category focused more on all-around political talk, which was often a back-and-forth discussion between two users who engaged with one another. The topics handled by commenters in this category included meta-level discussions on politics and often illegible comments that had no discernible logic or reason behind them.

The final research question focused on studying right-wing parties. Analysing the keywords present in the comment sections of the two opposition parties (FP and NCP) revealed several key notions that could not have been recognised only through the disruptive lens. The comments for the opposition parties were not categorised because the analysis method focused on the discursive tactics of the right, but they were handled as a whole, which made the themes of the videos more important. The FP had comments on only one video, which had a 'woke' theme, and all the keywords were related to the theme and discussions surrounding it, such as 'university', 'professor', 'ideology' and 'speak'. Therefore, the prevalence of ps comments on other videos was disproportional compared with the FP's own presence.

Table 4. Keywords and their frequency in right-wing opposition-posted videos by party.

Finns Party		National Coalition Party	
mieli [mind]	15	kokoomus [NCP]	59
sanoa [say]	15	velka [debt]	45
yliopisto [university]	13	ps [FP]	42
woke	12	voida [can]	36
voida [can]	12	talous [economy]	30
ihminen [person]	9	julkinen [public]	29
nimenomaan [just so]	8	saada [get]	28
pitää [like]	7	valtio [state]	28
ongelma [problem]	7	hallitus [government]	24
puhua [talk]	7	pitää [like]	21
professori [professor]	7	ottaa [take]	20
saada [get]	6	tehdä [do]	18
mielipide [opinion]	5	ben	17
oikeisto [right]	5	yksityinen [private]	17
sellainen [that kind]	5	raha [money]	16
ideologia [ideology]	5	laina [loan]	16

The other opposition party, the NCP, had more videos, but the phenomenon of ‘ps’ comments emerged even in the right-wing opposition. Commenters that identified with the FP were also present on the NCP’s videos in force. The users targeted the NCP for turning off the comments because of its criticism of the FP. The other keywords present indicated clear inclinations towards financial topics, such as ‘debt’, ‘economy’ and ‘money’. This is in accordance with the party itself, as the NCP aims to profile itself through its financial prowess throughout different elections.

‘[Good joke. An even better joke is that in your newest video, you mock the Finns and shut down the comment field :D]’

‘[NCP has to take responsibility for Finland. Green socialists can’t do it. We, the bourgeoisie, care about the next generations. Pay the debts. No more debt.]’

‘[Finland has low-income people who have to be supported. If you agree, you probably wouldn’t vote for NCP...]’

Compared with the government parties, the NCP appeared to gather a similar stream of comments, both for and against. This is a probable result of the party’s longstanding tenure in the government, along with an anti-elite sentiment emanating from the FP side of the spectrum. The right-wing side of the comments did not appear to host any comparable left-wing version of the disruptive public phenomenon, as indicated by the lack of comments promoting left-wing parties or talking points. Singular comments challenged the topics raised by the right, mainly from an economic point of view, but the amount was not comparable with the comment volumes received by the left.

7. Discussion

This study aimed to elucidate the phenomenon of disruptive right-wing publics present in TikTok’s comment fields during the Finnish elections in 2023. The results indicate a strong right-leaning disruptive presence on TikTok. This was especially visible on the LA’s videos, but the other government parties were not spared from the influx of disruptive comments, either. However, there does not seem to be a concise bloc of the disruptive right-wing public, as evidenced by the presence of ‘ps’ comments on the

opposition-based NCP's videos in addition to those on the government's videos. At least the commenters who supported the populist FP utilised disruptive discursive strategies without a comparable response from the left side, as evidenced by the comment vocabulary on their own videos. TikTok's comment sections exhibit signs of positional polarisation through the division between reinforcing comments and disruptive comments, both of which interact and intermingle with each other.

The most notable finding of the study is the presence of a strong identification with the FP, even on the right-wing side, as evidenced by the large number of 'ps' comments on the NCP's videos. This shows that there does not seem to be any collective right-wing presence on Finnish TikTok but rather a strong disruptive presence of the FP. The disruptive public created by FP-identifying commenters seems to be one that is against all traditional parties, consistent with previous findings (Herkman et al., 2024).

However, unlike Gerbaudo's (2024) idea about clustered publics, clustering around political topics does not fragment discussions to echo chamber-like comment fields. Political discussion on parties' videos seems to be dominated by only one party, which also had an effect on how vehemently commenters defended against these disruptive forces. Political TikTok resembles a singular public, with the lines between parties not as deep as those between different topical interests. As TikTok publics cluster together, users who are more inclined to political commentary are bound to find themselves discussing politics from different viewpoints.

Defensive commenting created positional polarisation, which was somewhat evident in the different shares of comments. Especially in the LA's comment sections, the disruptive drive to distance oneself from the party was obvious. This was also reflected in the language used by the commenters. Counterpositioning was accomplished through labelling and aggressive language, both of which function as catalysts for polarisation visible in interactions between users. This negative sentiment does not differ from other older platforms (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020) but is in accordance with other social media. As the LA clearly represents a larger ideological monolith of the left to be opposed by the similarly monolithic right-wing (Herkman et al., 2024), it can be argued that positional polarisation increases because of this generalisation of identity and ideology rather than having firm roots in real-life dynamics.

Moreover, the advantages of TikTok seem to be affected by disruptive behaviour. The strong presence of FP-commenting users led to some parties disabling the commenting function, at least according to the right-wing commenters' own assessment of the situation. The spam-esque nature of some of the comments suggests that comment sections were indeed contested by repetitive behaviour. Although Zulli and Zulli (2022) present imitation publics mainly as a feature of TikTok's video side, the memetic advantages of the platform are also functional in the comments. Therefore, the spam-like repetition could also be a feature of an imitation public, in addition to being a cornerstone of the right-leaning disruptive public.

The parties that faced the most disruptive comments also had significant levels of reinforcing comments. This indicates that while disruptive actors find their way to the TikTok comment sections, defenders rise to hit back with more supporting comments and rebuking disruptive arguments. In addition, the language used by commenters that promoted a counterpositional stance utilised dyadic discursive patterns, with a clear split between the left and the right, with extreme labels being used en masse. As social media publics move towards these positional and affective clashes, it is worth revisiting Gerbaudo's (2022) idea of reactive democracy and low-level participation as one of the latest developments of social media. Users react to TikTok videos with partisan comments, with crowd behaviour also forming a part of disruptive publics. Therefore, it can be argued that disruptive publics and the defensive comments opposing them create a plebiscitary space (Gerbaudo, 2022) in which reactions are the most important commodity.

Another aspect of the study that mandates further consideration is whether the parties that were in a position of power received more disruptive attention due to having a government responsibility or whether disruptive commenting was meant to contest the 'ownership' of the platform and political topics. As topics are the fuel for TikTok's different sides (Maddox & Gill, 2023), the comment sections should

naturally contain political chatter. The situation that Finnish political TikTok had during the elections did not have a clear leading account on the parties' side, although the FP was clearly the pioneer in Finnish political TikTok (Sakki, 2025). Therefore, the disruptive narratives might have been an attempt to establish right-wing political stances as the underlying mainstream opinions by simulating a crowd-like presence in the comment sections and thus gaining ownership of political topics. Thus, disruptive publics resemble more of a crowd that is instigating a mob rule (Gerbaudo, 2022) than a traditional public. However, as the actions of the disruptive public also resemble a machinated campaign, the description of a public is warranted.

This study contributes important viewpoints on how political communication, publics and polarisation all converge on a platform favoured by a large contingent of users. An approach focusing on disruptive publics revealed that, from an observational lens, comment sections developed a polarised arena where disruptive comments were met with scrutiny, constituting positional polarisation and elevating negative sentiment, not unlike traditional social media platforms (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020). Identity served as a great divider, as is often the case in modern polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2012), with commenters adapting to a partisan view, focusing on the split between left and right. The right side of the comments appeared to be fractured as well, with vocabulary utilised in the government parties' videos finding its way in the right-wing bloc. This indicates that the right-wing disruptiveness that clearly emerged from the comments was not homogenic but rather divided between the right-wing parties. Polarising language was common among the comments. This supports other scholars' findings on right-wing discursive patterns, especially when taking into account the right-wing tendency to position itself as an antithesis to the traditional political order (Herkman et al., 2024), which partly explains the differences between the opposition parties. Disruptive publics are publics that are particularly reactive in their actions, constituting a plebiscitary (Gerbaudo, 2022) public, but a public nonetheless.

This study has some limitations. First, gathering data from TikTok was, at best, unreliable at the time of data collection, and some data might have been missing. In addition, some parties disabled the commenting function, which affected the total sum of comments. Second, parties operate on TikTok at a much different level than single candidates. This affected how many comments the videos could receive and the overall campaigns. If the party allows candidates to campaign on TikTok by themselves, the party account remains silent as it hands over the reins of content creation to candidates. However, a view that focused on the parties was productive through the clear presence of ideological lines and a focus on campaigning through traditional means, which directed the discussion towards a more political agenda. The structure of power and agency was also questioned throughout the study, as evoked by Jackson and Kreiss's (2023) study. The authors are confident that the study respects and develops the theory of social media publics while taking part in the larger discussion on publics and polarisation in social media. Finally, future studies could examine the elusiveness of the true attitudes behind and affected by the comments. Observational social media data do not provide insight into users' feelings and experiences; this would require a study that focuses on the users themselves.

For future studies, researchers could consider TikTok comments as a more important area of interest. TikTok research seems to focus mainly on the video content posted while disregarding the more traditional advantage of commenting. This creates a large gap in the research, as it is easier to discern attitudes and trends from how users themselves react to content. Nuanced discussions on the platform may influence political stances, and even though the algorithmic nature of TikTok inspires researchers to seek answers from feeds and videos, there is ground to be covered in the more whimsical comment sections often populated by future voters.

It should be noted that by the time this study was published, TikTok would have evolved, and the discussions surrounding the platform would have reached new levels of scrutiny towards its influence on Europeans. As platforms evolve over time, it is important to study both posted content and users' reactions and behaviour. This study shows that there is work to be done in examining how publics are formed on TikTok and how these publics inspire disruptions.

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Appendix

Table A1. Keywords and their term frequency across categories in Left Alliance -posted videos.

All		Reinforcing		Reformation	
ps [FP]	398	vas [left, shortened]	67	hallitus [government]	28
vasemmisto [left]	133	li	62	vasemmisto [left]	27
li	89	vasemmisto [left]	46	velka [debt]	26
vas [left, short]	83	vasemmistoliitto [Left Alliance]	24	raha [money]	19
saada [get]	74	tehdä [do]	22	haluta [want]	18
tehdä [do]	71	kokoomus [NCP]	20	tehdä [do]	18
Suomi [Finland]	67	persu [FP member]	18	li	15
puolue [party]	65	ps [FP]	17	saada [get]	14
haluta [want]	64	ihana [lovely]	16	puolue [party]	13
Counterpositioning		Identifying		Other	
vasemmisto [left]	46	ps [FP]	37	saada [get]	39
kommari [commie]	21	kokoomus [NCP]	21	voida [can]	31
vassari [leftie]	20	Suomi [Finland]	12	pitää [like]	29
paska [shit]	19	oikeisto [right]	11	Suomi [Finland]	27
puolue [party]	17	äänestää [vote]	10	ihminen [person]	27
Suomi [Finland]	17	persu [FP member]	8	tehdä [do]	25
vihreä [green]	14	ääni [a vote]	8	puhua [talk]	24
kommunisti [communist]	12	suomi [finland]	7	työ [work]	20
haluta [want]	11	perussuomalainen [FP member]	6	haluta [want]	19

Table A2. Keywords and their term frequency across categories in Greens-posted videos.

All		Reinforcing		Reformation	
vihreä [green]	53	mari	35	vihreä [green]	26
mari	39	ihana [lovely]	14	saada [get]	17
saada [get]	33	slay	13	vero [tax]	15
voida [can]	31	vihreä [green]	12	voida [can]	13
feministi [feminist]	25	feministi [feminist]	10	maksaa [pay]	13
Suomi [Finland]	23	Suomi [Finland]	9	tehdä [do]	12
ihminen [person]	21	voida [can]	8	suomi [finland]	9
tehdä [do]	19	saada [get]	8	hallitus [government]	8
ottaa [take]	19	feminismi [feminism]	8	ottaa [take]	8
Counterpositioning		Identifying		Other	
feministi [feminist]	14	persu [FP member]	2	miikka	11
vihreä [green]	9	kokoomus [NCP]	2	suomipop	11
nainen [woman]	7	Suomi [Finland]	2	saada [get]	8
npc	6	vas [left, shortened]	1	äänestää [vote]	6
ihminen [person]	6	äänestää [vote]	1	koulutus [education]	6

ongelma [problem]	6	jaa ['well then']	1	työ [work]	6
voida [can]	5	alue [area]	1	artists	6
mari	5	perussuomalainen [FP member]	1	voida [can]	5
feminismi [feminism]	5	numero [number]	1	vihreä [green]	5

Table A3. Keywords and their term frequency across categories in SFP-posted videos.

All		Reinforcing		Reformation	
ps [FP]	20	Suomi [Finland]	4	rkp [SFP]	9
rkp [SFP]	15	what	2	pakko [compulsory]	3
puolue [party]	7	the	2	ruotsi [Swedish]	3
kieli [language]	6	hell	2	kieli [language]	3
Suomi [Finland]	5	slay	2	puolue [party]	3
puhua [talk]	4	maa [country]	2	henriksson	2
pakko [compulsory]	4	bravo	1	irti [apart]	2
henriksson	3	main	1	puhua [talk]	2
ruotsi [Swedish]	3	character	1	pois [away]	2
Counterpositioning		Identifying		Other	
rkp [SFP]	14	ps [FP]	2	inte [not]	11
kieli [language]	9	rösta [vote]	2	leikata [cut]	11
npc	7	på [for]	2	valas [whale]	8
made	6	så [so]	1	valitettavasti [unfortunately]	6
do	6	blir [becomes]	1	pöllö [owl]	6
it	6	finland	1	laakso [valley]	6
puolue [party]	5	bättre [better]	1	sanna	6
tämä [this]	5	åt [at]	1	liikaa [too much]	5
vasemmistopuolue [left party]	5	Finländare [Finn]	1	porukka [group]	5