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# Anti-immigrant rhetoric of populist radical right leaders on social media platforms

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**Abstract:** Social media platforms have become crucial channels for radical right populist leaders to broadcast anti-immigrant views. These politicians employ various rhetorical appeals, such as pathos (emotional language), logos (logical arguments), and ethos (speaker credibility), to sway public opinion. This study considers the anti-immigrant rhetoric of prominent European populist radical right leaders across X, Instagram, and Facebook, analysing the prevalence of these rhetorical strategies across different platforms. From the perspective of mediatization theory, politicians can adjust their messages to fit with the design and formats of various social media platforms. Party leaders often resort to emotional appeals on X, with its limited space for communication, as well as on Facebook, where emotional interaction buttons and discussion features can encourage emotional rhetoric as well. Logical appeals (logos) are common on platforms such as Facebook and X, which offer options to easily share information in the form of texts and links. Additionally, ethos, associated with speaker's credibility, is common in posts on platforms that facilitate closer engagement with the party leaders' constituents, such as Facebook and Instagram. These findings underscore the importance of considering platform design when shaping political communication strategies.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, populist radical right, social media, anti-immigration

## 1 Introduction

During a 2017 rally, Donald Trump said: “You look at what’s happening last night in Sweden. Sweden. Who would believe this?” The statement led to confusion over what Trump was talking about. Long before Trump’s mention of Sweden, Matteo Salvini had tweeted about the country at least 34 times, starting as early as 2013. In 2016, Thierry Baudet, leader of the Dutch party Forum for Democracy, raised questions about Sweden’s high number of sex crimes in a tweet. Alternative *für*

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Deutschland leader Alice Weidel used Sweden as a hashtag to mobilize voters, warning against a similar development in Germany.

Language is inherently political. Words possess the ability to trigger a frame in our brains, and with this, it can have a powerful and unconscious effect on how we perceive reality (Lakoff, 2014, p. xii). Radical right politicians use Sweden as a dog whistle, playing into the audience's existing stereotypical beliefs about the predominantly white nation being supposedly overwhelmed by immigrants, leading the country into decline. While the name Sweden itself holds no double meaning, it serves as a symbolic trigger for these preconceived notions.

Migration has become a focal point in political discourse, with radical right populist parties and politicians using persuasive language to influence public perception of foreigners. The mere mention of a single place name can therefore effectively convey a message about the perceived dangers of migrants to a specific audience of radical right-wing supporters. Rhetoric has the potential to shape individuals' perceptions regarding migrants as threats to security, the economy, welfare, and European values (Magalhães and Costa-Lopes, 2023).

Social media platforms offer new opportunities for parties and their leaders to communicate and persuade audiences. Historically presenting fewer constraints, these platforms have offered new possibilities for the radical right to communicate anti-immigrant views. Given the widespread engagement with politics through online platforms, understanding how radical right populist leaders seek to persuade audiences online is increasingly relevant.

So far, existing studies on radical right rhetoric, particularly in the online realm, predominantly focus on the emotional dimensions of communication of parties (Widmann, 2023). Many studies overlook the fact that social media platforms are not homogeneous entities, failing to recognize that these platforms possess distinct features and design elements that influence how they can be employed for political communication (Bossetta, 2018). From the perspective of mediatization theory, party leaders adapt their messages to media-specific rules and formats (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). As different social media platforms carry unique features, it is relevant to understand whether party leaders adapt their message across these platforms. Therefore, this paper poses the question: *How does the online architecture of social media platforms explain variations in the anti-immigrant rhetoric of radical right populist party leaders?*

Social media, unlike traditional mass media, offer new possibilities for communicating political ideas. Studying the ways in which platform design can influence anti-immigrant rhetoric could potentially help in understanding the larger role these platforms have, through their design, in limiting and countering hateful speech. Social media platforms' algorithms, recommendation systems, and content moderation policies can shape the dissemination and amplification of anti-immi-

grant rhetoric, potentially contributing to the spread of hate speech and intolerance (Matamoros-Fernández, 2018). Additionally, Gonçalves (2024, p. 276) claims that linguistic strategies such as metaphors are forms of “elegant racism,” forming “subtle ways in which hate speech can occur, [...] in discourses produced by the elite through language choices.” While anti-immigrant speech is not necessarily hateful speech, it can become so when it encourages discrimination, hostility, or violence towards immigrants, dehumanizes or demeans them, or promotes harmful stereotypes (Gonçalves, 2024). Anti-immigrant rhetoric can also potentially instigate hate speech online, by fueling intolerance, hostility, or discrimination against marginal groups (Wirz et al., 2018; Heiss and Matthes, 2020). Anti-immigrant posts of radical right party leaders online have been linked to stronger emotional responses, particularly anger, forming a strong motivation for political mobilization and persuasion (Gerbaudo et al., 2023). Leaders expressing anti-immigrant views online could normalize xenophobia amongst online audiences, and potentially making them feel justified in expressing hateful sentiment online themselves.

This paper presents a quantitative analysis of the rhetorical techniques of prominent European radical right populist leaders in anti-immigrant posts on X, Instagram, and Facebook. The study reveals how these party leaders use rhetorical appeals across these platforms, influenced by the unique architectural features they offer. These findings highlight the importance of taking social media platform design into account when studying political communication.

## 2 The rhetorical pillars of persuasion

The study of classical rhetoric, which focuses on effective speaking or writing, involves examining the discursive means used to convince or persuade audiences (Perelman, 1979, p. 43). Rhetoric encompasses the conscious and unconscious choices made in selecting specific linguistic forms and structures over others that were available (Verdonk, 2006, p. 202, as cited in Van Leeuwen, 2015, p. 13). Aristotle, having been influential in the study of rhetoric, argued that a persuasive message combines three rhetorical means: logic and reasoning (*logos*), the speaker’s credibility (*ethos*), and his or her use of emotional appeals (*pathos*) (Selzer, 2003, p. 280).

Ideally, speakers convince their audiences by appealing to *logic or reason* (*logos*), meaning, by including facts, statistics, and reasoning. *Logos* “means among other things: word, reason, discourse, reasoning, calculation” (Perelman, 1979, p. 26). Party leaders can establish authority, and give more credibility to, especially controversial, policy ideas by relying on research or reliable sources for support (Boswell, 2009). Reasoning alone does not convince audiences. Instead, the speak-

ers can use “irrational” means of persuasion, such as pathos, the appeal to emotions, or ethos, where the speaker relies on their own qualities and persuasive skills (Braet, 2007, p. 47).

*Pathos* can be a powerful tool for persuasion, as individuals tend to be less critical of arguments when experiencing heightened emotions (Braet, 2007). By appealing to emotions, the speaker can make the audience feel what the speaker wants them to feel. Speakers can carefully choose their words, add exaggerations, contradictions, metaphors, and a range of other strategies to reinforce their arguments. Studies on the impact of emotional appeals indicate that emotions play a significant role in shaping how voters perceive, process, and respond to messages (Bakker et al., 2021). Emotional appeals can increase participation and shift public opinion (Kühne et al., 2011).

Finally, a message is more persuasive when the speaker is perceived as credible (*ethos*). Ethos refers to the speaker’s authority, reputation, and trustworthiness (Savolainen, 2022). Ethos is a quality attributed to the speaker by the listener and serves as a potent tool; if the listener already has confidence in the speaker, they are more inclined to believe the message (Braet, 2007, p. 50).

Analysing the online rhetoric of politicians fits with the notion of politics as a performative undertaking. In the contemporary mediatized landscape, with aesthetic and performative elements gaining prominence, political discourse is highly stylized, focused on the performative and communicative aspects of politics (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014, p. 381). Political style, of which rhetoric is a crucial element, refers to the distinct way in which individuals express themselves through speeches, statements, or messages. The choice of clothing, language, persuasive techniques, and the overall presentation of ideas contribute to the political style of a speaker. Thus, rhetoric, as a form of political style, reflects not only the substance of political messages but also the strategic and persuasive elements used to convey those messages effectively within the public sphere. While all politicians use rhetoric to sway audiences, rhetoric is deemed crucial to the radical right’s political success.

### 3 Radical right populist rhetoric

Populism as an ideology is commonly understood as a “thin-centered” ideology focused on the division of society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Populism comprises two key elements, people-centrism, and anti-elitism. While left-wing populism often associates the notion of people as a class based on economic views,

right-wing populism, especially the radical right, is more culturally oriented, emphasizing the people as a nation (Kriesi, 2014). The discursive practices of the radical right are characterized by nativism, which combines nationalism and xenophobia by emphasizing one's own culture, traditions, and nationality while negatively depicting culturally deviant outgroups (Rydgren, 2005).

Rhetorically, nativism can be constructed by using tactics such as fearmongering, scapegoating, and dehumanization, fostering a dichotomy between friends and enemies (Wodak and Reisigl, 2015, p. 577). Simultaneously, positive nationalist appeals can help to evoke a sense of superiority and pride among the native population. These appeals fit well with studies emphasizing the populist radical right style as emotionalized (Bos et al., 2013, p. 192) using strategies such as irony, stereotypes, exaggerations, and neologisms (Albertazzi, 2007, p. 336). Radical right populists often use moral emotions to appeal to audiences: the “feelings of approval or disapproval (...) based on moral intuitions or principles, such as shame, guilt, pride, indignation, outrage, and compassion” (Jasper, 2018, p. 4). Such emotional appeals can help in fueling hostility, or resentment towards certain groups.

Radical right populist rhetoric is often characterized as clear, oversimplified, and straightforward (Albertazzi, 2007, p. 336). While some radical right politicians use logical arguments and facts to persuade people toward anti-immigrant ideas, others resort to deceptive strategies like lies and fallacies, creating confusion and fostering discontent (Hameleers, 2020).

To convince audiences, party leaders themselves need to be perceived as trustworthy speakers. Radical right leaders, as “entrepreneurs of identity” often identify with the people, using first-person plural pronouns, such as “we” and “us,” as well as the possessive “our,” as to signal alignment with specific groups (Condor et al., 2013).

On social media, a growing number of individuals now engage with politicians' ideas through their updates on online platforms, rather than depending on traditional political reporting in legacy media (Selzer, 2003). The upcoming section explores how social media platforms can influence rhetoric.

## 4 Rhetorical devices in the digital age

Whereas previously a handful of platforms were the dominant means on which people communicated and consumed information online, nowadays there is a large variety of platforms, many of which attract large audience bases (Chadwick, 2007). These platforms are distinct in their architecture—the “technical protocols that enable, constrain, and shape user behavior in a virtual space” (Bossetta, 2018, p. 473). How can platforms afford anti-immigrant rhetoric?

Several features of platforms make them suitable for appealing to users' emotions (pathos). As the business model of many social media platforms consists of generating data from users' activities online, it is important to keep users engaged (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Posts that appeal to negative emotions have been shown to attract more engagement (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Facebook even has emotional interaction buttons allowing users with the click of a mouse to express their discontent with a post. These buttons have been argued to incentivize radical right leaders to share harmful content, which in turn has been suggested to align with algorithmic preferences (Matamoros-Fernández, 2018).

Social media platforms have also made it easier for party leaders to substantiate their views through reason or evidence (logos). On social media platforms, users can share hyperlinks, retweets, or visuals that corroborate or support their views. With the rise of alternative media and blogs, radical right actors can access an entire range of new sources to "information launder" or legitimize their views (Klein, 2012). Sources that were traditionally perceived as truthful and trustworthy are now challenged and rejected (Reyes, 2020). In this "climate of distrust" blogs, forums and social media users compete for authenticity online with traditional media (Reyes, 2020, p. 870). Klinger et al. (2022) show how alternative right-wing media helped the German party *Alternative für Deutschland* to legitimize and mainstream an extreme anti-immigration campaign. Search engines, such as Google, make it relatively easy to find supportive sources by carrying out a simple search. Simple retweets of influencers and other opinion leaders might nowadays suffice to argue for a certain view, as online the perception of what is considered reliable and newsworthy seems to change (Newman et al., 2022).

Social media, as highly personalized and focused on the individual, have also changed how politicians can portray themselves as trustworthy speakers. Politicians often tweet in their own name rather than through official party accounts, creating a direct link between the speaker and the audience. Online, party leaders can build a trusting relationship with their audience and can more easily give messages a personal touch. Social media have made the distinction between private and public communication collapse, "resulting in a rise of self-expressive politics and the personalization of formal political rhetoric" (Condor et al., 2013, p. 266). The next section explores how variations in platform design offer distinct opportunities for expressing anti-immigrant rhetoric online.

## 5 Online opportunities for persuasion: the impact of digital architectures

Digital architectures are the “features, interfaces, and protocols,” or the “code” that is implemented by platform developers that “facilitate, constrain and shape user behavior” (Bossetta, 2018, p. 473). Digital characteristics built into social media platforms, including algorithmic filtering, network structure and functionality, carry influence over users’ interactions and the type of content they can publish.

*Algorithmic filtering* refers to “how developers prioritize the selection, sequence, and visibility of posts” (Bossetta, 2018, p. 476). Algorithms determine the rank of posts, and therefore which posts are given priority and higher visibility. Social media algorithms, whether organizing content chronologically or ranking it based on factors such as engagement, influence the content to which users are exposed online. Emotional, and angry content has been associated with being amplified and generating more attention online (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Such content has been linked with higher engagement, which is important to platforms, as their business model relies on maintaining user engagement. Studies indicate that populist radical right politicians use more emotional rhetoric online compared to other politicians (Widmann, 2021), and even strategically employ such rhetoric for higher online engagement (Matamoros-Fernández, 2018). Platforms that prioritize content based on algorithmic ranking therefore could incentivize party leaders to strategically employ emotional appeals to maximize attention amongst online audiences.

The *network structure* of a social media platform refers to how users connect with each other and discover new content. This includes features such as finding new accounts, and searching for relevant content (Bossetta, 2018, p. 479). Platforms allowing users to search content through hashtags or keywords offer greater content visibility compared to platforms lacking such features. Similarly, platforms facilitating asymmetrical connections between users, meaning that users do not need to be friends to follow each other, makes content visible to broader audiences online (Bossetta, 2018, p. 479). Research indicates that platforms offering more visibility may be less beneficial for discussing controversial topics such as anti-immigration (Stier et al., 2018). Such open platforms have a wider reach and audience diversity compared to closed or niche platforms. When politicians express more extreme views there, they risk facing backlash from a more diverse audience, including those who may disagree with or challenge their perspectives. Politicians may be more cautious about expressing such views to avoid their content being flagged by users, as well as to maintain their public image to a broader audience.

*Functionality*, as defined by Bossetta (2018, p. 476), “governs how content is mediated, accessed and distributed across platforms.” This includes the hardware,

the accessibility of the platform, and whether users can only post on the platform via app and/or desktop, the graphical user interface (GUI), such as interaction buttons, functions to create and talk in groups, and the media supported by the platform in the form of images, texts, videos, gifs, hyperlinks, and character limits. Functionality influences the available tools for politicians and parties to communicate to audiences and to distribute their messages to larger groups of people. Previous research has linked the presence of emotional interaction buttons or options to only share short posts to higher levels of emotional speech (Matamoros-Fernández, 2018; Duncombe, 2019).

The algorithms, network structure, and functionalities could influence political rhetoric by facilitating some opportunities, while making others more challenging. For instance, restricting users to only post via an app makes composing lengthy posts more burdensome, making it likely that users will share shorter posts.

## 6 Online architecture and anti-immigrant rhetoric

This study focuses on three platforms: Instagram, Facebook, and X. The research question in this paper is: How does the online architecture of social media platforms explain variations in the anti-immigrant rhetoric of radical right populist party leaders? The main argument of this paper claims that platforms, through their different architectural features, offer party leaders different opportunities for convincing their audiences of anti-immigrant views. Facebook, Instagram, and X form an interesting case for comparison due to the variation in the architectural features of these platforms. Table 1 summarizes the opportunities that the three different platforms analyzed in this study offered, at the time of study, through the features identified above.

First, the three social media platforms in this study employ different levels of *algorithmic filtering*. Facebook prioritizes content based on ranked relevance, filtering what users see based on their past interactions. X and Instagram used to prioritize posts chronologically but have since shifted to personalized ranking systems. Instagram's algorithm, introduced in 2016, focuses on the timing of the post, the relationship with the user and the engagement with the post. Despite these changes, Instagram still offers users the option to view posts chronologically.

Second, the social media platforms examined in this study vary in their *network structures*, influencing the visibility of user-generated content. First, X and Instagram feature asymmetrical user connections, allowing users to follow others without reciprocation. In contrast, Facebook allows for both symmetrical user connections and asymmetrical links between users and pages. Second, these platforms



Table 1: Features of the selected platforms.

	Facebook	Instagram	X
<b>Algorithmic filtering</b>	High	Low	Medium
<b>Network structure</b>			
Connectivity	Symmetrical (people) and Asymmetrical (groups)	Asymmetrical	Asymmetrical
Searchability	Low	Medium	High
<b>Functionality and accessibility</b>			
Accessibility	Web/App	App	Web/App
Visual features	Medium	High	Low
Hyperlinks	High	Low	High
Texts	Long	Medium	Short
Emotional buttons	Present	Absent	Absent
Share/retweet buttons	Present	Absent	Present
Group features	Many	Few	Few
Comment features	High	Low	Medium

differ in their searchability. While Facebook requires users to search for specific pages or individuals, X and Instagram enable content discovery through keyword or hashtag browsing. X offers slightly better searchability, as Instagram only displays a selection of posts related to specific keywords.

Third, the three platforms differ in their functionality and accessibility. Facebook introduced emotional interaction buttons in May 2017. Share buttons within X and Facebook facilitate content dissemination and provide easier sharing options compared to Instagram. Comments sections vary across platforms, with Facebook offering more organized discussions than X and Instagram. Additionally, users can create groups or pages on Facebook and Instagram, facilitating connections and organization. Moreover, the platforms vary in how users can access and post content, with Instagram previously restricting image sharing to mobile apps. Supported media differ across platforms, with Instagram primarily focused on images and short videos. X allows easy sharing of links and short texts, while Facebook offers more features, including long texts and videos. X and Facebook enable link sharing more conveniently than Instagram. Instagram, instead, more prominently features images with sharper visuals and filter options, whereas on Facebook and X textual features are more prominently displayed alongside images.

Given these platform features, and their anticipated influence on shaping anti-immigrant rhetoric, platforms are likely to provide party leaders with more favorable opportunities for using various rhetorical strategies to persuade audiences. These opportunities are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Hypotheses linking the opportunities of platforms to the different rhetorical appeals.

Online opportunities for:	Facebook	Instagram	X
Pathos	High	Low	Medium
Logos	Medium	Low	High
Ethos	Medium	High	Low

The different platforms have different characteristics (Table 1), that might be associated with higher use of certain rhetorical appeals (Table 2). Facebook particularly offers many features for pathos, such as algorithmic filtering, emotional interaction buttons, and easy options to engage in conversations. There are fewer such options on X, and even fewer on Instagram. On X, people have limited options to write long posts, and emotional messages can be more common than on Instagram. Logos can be common on both X and Facebook. Both platforms have more options for users to share links, to retweet, or share posts compared to Instagram. Furthermore, Twitter has other options such as an overview of trending topics and adding hash-tags to find informative posts more easily. Facebook instead also allows for posting longer texts. Regarding ethos, no clear features could be identified beforehand based on prior research. However, since ethos primarily emphasizes the credibility of the speaker, more personalized platforms, especially image-centric ones such as Instagram, could highlight this aspect more effectively.

## 7 Methods

The research focuses on the question: How do variations in platform architecture influence the anti-immigrant rhetoric of radical right populist party leaders? To answer this question, this study will compare the rhetoric of radical right party leaders across different countries on three major social media platforms: X, Facebook and Instagram. In this section, the selection of party leaders, platforms, and posts is explained, and the coding and analysis of data is discussed.

### Selection of radical right leaders

The following party leaders were included in this study: Thierry Baudet (Forum voor Democratie), Geert Wilders (Partij van de Vrijheid), Marine le Pen (Rassemblement National), Tom van Grieken (Vlaams Belang), Nigel Farage (previously UKIP and the Brexit Party), Matteo Salvini (Lega), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia), and Alternative

für Deutschland (Jörg Meuthen and Alice Weidel). Due to the practical infeasibility to cover more countries, including the linguistic restrictions for understanding the context sufficiently and for understanding the rhetorical strategies across these contexts, Eastern- and Northern-European cases were excluded from this study.

Three criteria guided this selection of party leaders. First, the party leaders were only selected from parties that were classified as populist radical right (Rooduijn et al., 2023). Second, we selected party leaders who were considered to have (had) a significant impact on the political landscape. These charismatic figures have not only gained widespread public attention but have also had substantial influence over crucial policy decisions and public sentiment, as exemplified by their role in events such as the Brexit referendum. Most of these leaders have an enduring presence as prominent actors within the European political arena and their parties have in past elections secured a considerable portion of the electorate's support. Third, to make a comparison across platforms possible, the party leaders needed to have an official, verified account on all three social media platforms included in this study.

## **Selections platforms and sampling of posts**

Facebook, X, and Instagram were the platforms selected for this study. These three platforms were at the time of study the most prominent platforms for political mobilization. They were commonly used by radical right party leaders, whereas platforms such as Telegram, TikTok or YouTube were not used by all party leaders. While having many characteristics in common, the three platforms form an interesting comparison due to their variation in their features of these platforms, which make them relevant for a comparison.

The sampling procedure of the posts on the platforms consisted of two steps. First, all posts of these politicians from the beginning of 2019 until the end of 2020 were gathered from the three social media platforms. Data were gathered in January 2021, through the official platform APIs. The data collected only represents the information that remained accessible at the time, meaning that some comments might have been removed before the data was collected. Retweets were included in the analysis only when politicians added their own message when sharing them.

All relevant social media posts were identified using a dictionary approach. For each language, search strings were constructed, based on close reading of the online posts of party leaders and dictionaries used in earlier studies about nativism (Heidenreich et al., 2020; Klein and Muis, 2019). Terms such as foreigners, aliens, or minorities are often interchangeably used, making a clear-cut distinction between anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic discourse often not possible.

All posts made by each politician on each platform were compiled into a comprehensive list. The posts were evenly distributed across the three platforms, ensuring that 50 posts were selected for each politician on each platform. Nigel Farage posted less frequently about migration on Instagram compared to other platforms, resulting in a lower frequency of such posts there. In his case, a higher number of posts were selected from Facebook and X, compensating for the lower frequency of migration-related posts on Instagram. A systematic random sampling method was individually applied to the posts of each politician across different social media platforms. Using a random number generator in Excel, each post was assigned a unique random number. Subsequently, the posts were ranked based on these generated random numbers. The 50 posts with the lowest random numbers were then selected for analysis for each party leader on each platform, resulting in a total sample size of 150 posts (50 per platform) per leader.

## Analysis

During the initial qualitative phase of the analysis, a qualitative rhetorical analysis was carried out consisting of reading through the posts and identifying recurring strategies that the different party leaders used to convince audiences of their views on migration. A systematic and iterative approach was employed to identify various rhetorical devices, which were then categorized according to the three appeals of ethos, logos and pathos (Krippendorff, 2018). Drawing from existing research on (online) rhetoric, an initial list of rhetorical strategies was compiled. Given the predominant focus of studies on radical right rhetoric on emotional language and word measures, only a limited number of strategies were predetermined, such as the use of antithesis, exaggerations, and strong language (Van Leeuwen, 2015). Fewer strategies related to logos and ethos were pre-identified, reflecting the perceived emphasis of radical right rhetoric on brevity, simplification, and emotional appeal over reasoned argumentation (Albertazzi, 2007). While reason and citation of sources as components of logos had been acknowledged previously (Savolainen, 2022), no specific strategies linked to ethos were predetermined. Throughout this exploratory phase, various strategy types were identified, and detailed notes were maintained to document these strategies.

To establish connections between party leaders' rhetorical strategies and the platforms they use, a quantitative analysis was conducted to understand how party leaders employ ethos, pathos, and logos to persuade audiences across platforms. Instead of counting the frequency of each appeal in individual posts, which is challenging for a rhetorical analysis, the coding method focused on identifying the most prominent strategy. In case multiple strategies were present, and no clear decision

could be made on the most prominent one, up to two strategies could be coded. This approach better accounted for the variations in text length across different platforms, and was more reliable than identifying all strategies. All posts were initially coded by the author; a subset was independently coded by a colleague. Krippendorff's alpha values for intercoder reliability were consistently acceptable for determining whether a post contained at least one appeal to ethos (.71), pathos (.75) and logos (.82).

To give an example of the coding procedure, the post "Refugeework insists on increasing the basic income for refugees to €1,139 for singles and €2,392 for families! Do we do that before or after fulfilling the promise to raise pensions to €1,500 for someone who contributed their whole life!?" was coded as mostly containing logos. A logical argument is presented about the allocation of resources and numbers are included. While some emotional elements are present, such as exclamation and question marks, the overall language is rather neutral. Instead, the post "Flemish people are being discarded. Moroccans are being hired. Who benefits from this?" was coded as mostly containing pathos. The post relies on a contrast, or antithesis, between the in-and outgroup, and suggests that Flemish people are being replaced by Moroccans in the workforce. The post uses emotional language (discarded, or *afgedankt* in Flemish, which could have been replaced by "laid off"). Not all posts contained one of the three strategies. Some examples, such as posts in which politicians for example announced that they would be on television to talk about migration, without addressing the issue in the post itself, were not aimed at convincing viewers, and were coded as not having any rhetorical strategy.

## 8 Populist radical right rhetoric across social media platforms: The findings

Politicians have a range of rhetorical tools at their disposal to persuade audiences of anti-immigrant views. While radical right party leaders predominantly rely on emotional appeals or pathos (80 % of posts), they also employ ethos (50 %) and logos (33 %) to convince audiences of their views on social media platforms.

Radical right-wing populist leaders commonly use emotive strategies (pathos) when expressing anti-immigrant views, using techniques such as intensifiers, humor, antithesis, metaphors, and illustrations. Intensifiers help to amplify the urgency and severity of situations, often through repetitive language, insults, capitalized letters, and hyperbolic statements. For instance, party leaders may magnify the issue of migration by listing a series of related problems, as demonstrated in a post by one party leader: "violence, threats, theft, burglary, exhibitionism, and

vandalizing buses.” Similarly, humor is often used to ridicule media depictions of migrants and highlight perceived failures of left-wing politicians. For example, the term *Einzelfall* in German, meaning “specific” or “unique case,” is used to satirize the media’s portrayal of terrorists as lone wolves, underscoring the belief that migrant violence is not isolated but widespread, yet underreported. Antithesis is employed to emphasize differences between the perceived “hardworking” ingroup and the “lazy” outgroup. Metaphors, illustrations, and visual representations are additional tools of emotional persuasion aimed at making the perceived issues surrounding migration more tangible and understandable for the average person.

In appealing to logic (logos), radical right-wing populist party leaders employ strategies focused on evidence, reasoning, and fostering scepticism. Providing evidence involves sharing statistics, graphs, expert opinions, and references to studies to substantiate claims, sometimes selectively chosen to support their arguments. Similarly, reasoning was another example of logos, to frame immigrants as burdens on public resources or competitors in the job and housing markets. Additionally, leaders may foster scepticism by questioning prevailing narratives and posing rhetorical questions aimed at challenging mainstream consensus, thus creating uncertainty, and implying the existence of a hidden reality. This strategy enhances their credibility as truth-tellers and reinforces their ethos among audiences.

In employing ethos, radical right-wing party leaders position themselves as credible advocates who advocate shared values and prioritize the concerns of their constituents. They achieve this by aligning their anti-immigrant rhetoric with traditional societal values, presenting themselves as defenders of cultural identity and heritage. By emphasizing their experience and political record on this key issue, they establish themselves as authoritative voices on immigration matters. Additionally, leaders cultivate empathy by highlighting their connections to local communities and sharing personal anecdotes, thereby reinforcing their image as representatives of the people’s interests. They also employ decisive language to convey a commitment to addressing immigration-related challenges, bolstering their perception as problem-solvers. These strategies enhance the leaders’ credibility and underscore their ethos as trustworthy figures dedicated to addressing immigration issues in the best interests of their constituents.

To determine if party leaders employ varied rhetorical approaches across different social media platforms, multivariate logistic regressions were conducted. The dependent variables represent the presence or absence of a rhetorical device (pathos in Model A, logos in Model B, or ethos in Model C) in a post. The different rhetorical strategies are the dependent variables, and the different platforms are the independent variables, with Facebook as a reference category. All analyses were adjusted to account for the influence of individual party leaders, with Baudet serving as the reference category.

Model A examines the influence of social media platforms, controlled for by various party leaders, on the use of pathos as a rhetorical appeal (Table 3). Party leaders tend to use less negative emotional appeals in posts on Instagram ( $\beta = -0.376, p < .001$ ) compared to posts on Facebook. There is no statistically significant difference in the use of pathos between Facebook and X ( $\beta = 0.022, p = .46$ ). Model B reveals that logos is more often used in Facebook posts compared to posts on X ( $\beta = -0.144, p < .001$ ) and Instagram ( $\beta = -0.180, p < .001$ ). These findings suggest a platform-specific variation in the use of logic, with party leaders having a higher likelihood of employing this rhetorical device in posts on Facebook, followed by Twitter and Instagram. The findings in Model C indicate that the likelihood of employing ethos in political rhetoric compared is lower in posts on Instagram ( $\beta = -0.040, p = .11$ ) and X ( $\beta = -0.073, p < .001$ ) compared to Facebook.

**Table 3:** Multivariate logistic regression analyses of social media platforms on rhetorical strategies of populist radical right leaders.

	Rhetorical device:		
	Pathos Model A	Logos Model B	Ethos Model C
Baudet (Ref)			
Farage	0.000 (0.051)	-0.013 (0.041)	-0.093** (0.044)
Van Grieken	0.240*** (0.051)	0.053 (0.041)	0.140*** (0.044)
Le Pen	0.033 (0.051)	-0.000 (0.041)	-0.060 (0.044)
Meloni	0.340*** (0.051)	0.053 (0.041)	0.073* (0.044)
Meuthen	0.373*** (0.051)	0.367*** (0.041)	-0.027 (0.044)
Salvini	0.287*** (0.051)	0.067 (0.041)	-0.007 (0.044)
Weidel	0.320*** (0.051)	0.167*** (0.041)	0.093** (0.044)
Wilders	0.187*** (0.051)	0.053 (0.041)	0.080* (0.044)
Facebook (Ref)			
Instagram	-0.376*** (0.030)	-0.180*** (0.023)	-0.040 (0.025)

Table 3: (continued)

	Rhetorical device:		
	Pathos Model A	Logos Model B	Ethos Model C
X	0.022 (0.030)	−0.144*** (0.023)	−0.073*** (0.025)
Constant	0.404*** (0.040)	0.195*** (0.032)	0.198*** (0.034)
Observations	1,350	1,350	1,350
Log Likelihood	−817.704	−497.614	−602.364
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,657.408	1,017.228	1,226.728

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

How could variations in rhetorical strategies be influenced by differences in platform design? Emotional appeals are prominent on Facebook and X. The concise format of posts on X may stimulate party leaders to convey brief, impactful messages, often resorting to emotional appeals when space is limited. On Facebook, platform features, such as emotional interaction buttons and easy options to engage in discussions, can encourage leaders to share content that evokes negative emotions and many responses. While both Facebook and X have algorithms that rank content, this only does not influence the presence of emotional content. Instead, the interplay between algorithmic preferences and audience interests may drive leaders to share emotionally charged posts, which in turn receive more engagement and thus higher rankings by the algorithm. Instagram’s lack of features to engage with content using angry responses or an organized place to discuss this content, might make it less conducive to sharing controversial posts.

Logos, which is mostly used on X and Facebook, could be attributed to their richer information-sharing capabilities, including features such as options to share links, retweet or share posts, and, in the case of Facebook, write longer texts. While Instagram allows users to post a lot of text, the platform has a few features that might discourage posting extensive posts. First, Instagram was late with the introduction of posting via desktop, in October 2021. It still is first and foremost an image-based platform, where the image is central, and texts are often not fully visible. Finally, its user preference for less political and more personalized content may explain the lower usage of logos.

Ethos is more dominant on Facebook and Instagram compared to X. We could think of several reasons why ethos is more common here. The textual limitations of X can make it challenging to effectively convey personal experiences, a common



strategy for signaling ethos, as personal examples may require longer explanations. The user preferences on Facebook and Instagram for more personalized content could also contribute to the higher level of personalized context compared to X, which has a stronger information function. The more closed structure of Facebook and Instagram, compared to X, could also contribute to the frequent use of ethos. Leaders find it more effective to appeal to their direct follower base on these platforms, often using inclusive pronouns, such as “us” and “we” to resonate with their audience.

In addition to differences across platforms, there are significant variations among leaders. Some rely heavily on reason, others use more neutral language, while others focus strongly on ethos. Nonetheless, all party leaders frequently use emotional language to convince their audiences of their ideas.

## 9 Conclusion and discussion

Social media platforms have offered new opportunities for parties and their leaders to communicate and persuade audiences. With historically fewer constraints, these platforms have become new arenas for the radical right to disseminate anti-immigrant ideas. Given the widespread involvement in political discourse on digital platforms, understanding how radical right populist leaders attempt to influence audiences is increasingly relevant. From the perspective of mediatization theory, party leaders likely tailor their messages to the specific rules and formats of different social media platforms. This study provided a comparison of the rhetorical techniques used by radical right populist leaders to express anti-immigrant rhetoric across three main social media platforms.

Radical party leaders appeal to ethos, logos, and pathos in various ways. When it comes to emotional rhetoric, party leaders use intensifiers, contrasts, metaphors, neologisms, illustrations, and humor. Party leaders provide evidence or use logical reasoning to convince audiences of their ideas. They also try to enhance the credibility of their messages, by signaling their trustworthiness as a speaker. This may involve asserting their authority on the issue and framing their message within the context of shared values.

The study revealed distinct patterns in the use of such rhetorical appeals across X, Instagram, and Facebook. There are a few possible explanations for these differences, but as these platforms differ on several features, it is not possible to exactly determine what influences these differences. On X, known for its concise format and limited communication space, party leaders often use negative emotional appeals for quick, impactful messages. The platform features, such as emotional

interaction buttons and discussion options, provide a suitable environment for sharing highly emotive content. Furthermore, logos is common on Facebook and X, platforms that have information sharing through features such as options to share links and posts or write longer texts. The impossibility to post content on Instagram from a desktop at the time of study may have contributed to the lack of lengthy arguments on this platform. Signaling credibility through ethos is more commonly done in posts on Facebook and Instagram, where leaders can elaborate more about their personal experiences in direct engagement with their supporter base.

The findings of this study align with the broader literature on political communication and persuasion, which emphasizes the role of emotions and affect in shaping political speech. While existing research has strongly focused on emotions in offline contexts such as campaigns, speeches, and parliaments (Pipal et al., 2024; Valentim and Widmann, 2023), less attention has been given to emotional discourse on social media platforms (Widmann, 2022). Online, rhetorical strategies may diverge from traditional speeches and party manuals, using more informal speech, such as insults, capital letters or emojis. Recent studies analysing emotive speech have primarily relied on automated methods using dictionaries, yet these approaches may not capture the full range of emotional rhetorical strategies employed by party leaders such the use of metaphors and repetitions. Additionally, strategies of ethos and logos tend to be neglected.

The contribution of this study lies in the comparison of the rhetoric of populist radical right leaders across three prominent social media platforms. Social media platforms are often viewed as homogeneous (Bossetta, 2018). This study lists variations in platform features to better understand their potential impact on the rhetorical style of radical right wing populists. Future research could employ experimental designs to better understand the role of specific platform features in shaping political rhetoric. Additionally, given the increasing visual nature of social media platforms, future studies should explore how party leaders employ audiovisual elements, including images, moving visuals, combined with sounds, to persuade audiences. Extending this framework to incorporate emerging platforms, such as TikTok will be helpful in improving our understanding the context in which most of contemporary political communication takes place nowadays.

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